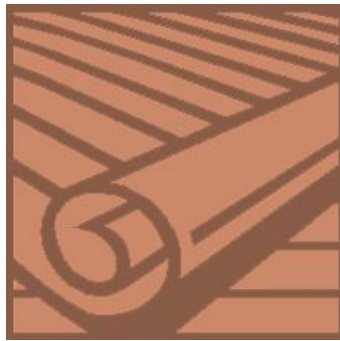


READING SCRIPTURE, HEARING GOD: INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

SESSION ONE



GETTING STARTED: INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

1. The Path Ahead: Where Are We Going and Why Are We Going There?
2. The Plan: How Do We Expect to Get There?
3. Engage and Explore
4. For Further Reading

1. THE PATH AHEAD: WHERE ARE WE GOING AND WHY ARE WE GOING THERE?

This curriculum is, more than anything else, an invitation and an introduction to reading the Bible well, so that the message comes through, together with some direction on what that entails. Specifically, as the title suggests, this is a study that tackles the challenge of reading the Bible in such a way that in that reading *God's* voice is confidently heard, not some other voice, including our own, or no voice at all. The material you are about to consider aims to put in place a helpful foundation for that worthy prospect.

1.1. Obviously, behind such a study with such a title lie certain convictions, including certain assumptions about what the Bible is. We will explore some of these in more detail later. For now, no conviction exerts more influence on the path ahead than the belief that *when God speaks, nothing is more honorable than that people listen, and, of course, nothing is more determinative to their own fate.* This means listening not merely for what we perceive to be important for our own interests and purposes, as if it were up to us to control the conversation, but because in listening, more than in any other activity, we display the true character of our love and worship. Further, it is in listening that we come to understand our very being and the issues of destiny in terms defined by the Creator and Savior himself. In that process we encounter the transcending and transforming voice of the God to whom this world belongs, whose purposes matter and who can deliver us from sin and restore us to our created meaning and mission as image-bearers. Accordingly, because God has chosen the revelatory medium of *scripture*, or *writing*, we could say that reading Sacred Scripture and listening to its message is our most identifying activity as God's people. This probably explains why "hearing" matters so much in the sermons of Moses that we read about in the first part of the Bible—the Pentateuch* (see, for example, Deut 4:1; 5:1;

6:4). Obviously, if the Scriptures are what they claim to be, then what we are about is of no small consequence; and how we respond to the invitation extended may say a great deal about our ultimate values, including our estimate of and devotion to the God we claim to know. Behind this conviction, of course, stands the prior assumption of an intrinsic relationship between the biblical text and the Word of God, and between reading the former and hearing the latter—the assumption that in the Bible "God wants to talk with us!" (Maier 1994, 19). Or in the words of Yale philosopher Nicholas

The basic criterion or determinant for what counts as reading the Bible well depends...on *what the Bible is* and *how it expects to be read.*

Wolterstorff, "If God said or is saying something by way of this text, it is presumably important for some or all of us to find out what that was or is; it's hard to imagine God engaging in small-talk" (1995, 182).

1.2. A second conviction contends that not all approaches count equally in the matter of reading the Bible. This idea challenges one of the major tenets of a postmodern culture, where sensitivities are aroused whenever one particular view (on almost any subject nowadays) is held up as preferable to another. Still, for reasons that will become apparent as we proceed, some ways of going about reading and understanding the Bible may be judged more appropriate and responsible and ultimately beneficial for all parties concerned than other ways. This study proceeds on the conviction that approaches to interpreting the Bible should be measured first and foremost by the extent to which they allow the actual nature of the biblical material itself to influence how we go about reading it. In other words, the basic criterion or determinant for what counts as reading the Bible well depends more on *what the Bible is* and *how it expects to be read* than on the various uses of the Bible readers happen to find interesting or on the methods readers bring to the task from who knows where. To put this in other words, the

decision as to which shoes we wear or by what rules we play varies vastly depending on what game it is we are playing, whether tennis, for example, or ice hockey. In a similar way, how we are to go about reading depends in considerable measure on exactly what it is we are reading. Just any old approach may not work so well if the Bible is not just any old book.

1.3. Third, by now it should be apparent that such an engagement belongs properly in what the church considers, or *should* consider, foundational to her life and ministry, not merely on the periphery and certainly not relegated to the academy. As “the household of God” and “pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), the church, including her satellite ministries, becomes the proper residence and most appropriate host to the engagements and explorations that follow. The church that is content to leave these matters in the classroom “where they belong” is a church at least half way toward losing her faith. There may be some things which the community of God’s people can

How we go about reading Scripture—whether well, poorly, just okay, or not at all—defines everything about us, including what we think of God.

safely leave to specialist scholars to worry about, but clearly the question of what it means to read Scripture so that in the reading we hear what God has to say is not one of them. Of course, there is no implication here that the church cannot or should not benefit from the academy in these matters; only that if these matters are left in classrooms and textbooks and are not made the real business and the absorbing preoccupation of the church, there may be serious reason to wonder how long the church may confidently refer to itself as a community of faith and worship.

At this point, you may be thinking that there is a great deal at stake in how we go about handling the Bible. There is! *Everything*, in fact—the gospel, faith, hope, love, life, worship, glory, the church, the church’s mission, family, ethics, God’s vision for the world, God himself!—high stakes indeed. Those who ponder the implications will appreciate that how we go about reading Scripture—whether well, poorly, just okay, or not at all—defines everything about us, including what we think of God.

2. THE PLAN: HOW DO WE EXPECT TO GET THERE?

2.1. Like most invitations, this one too has certain recipients to whom it is extended, a desired response for which it is intended, and an appropriate medium by means of which it seeks to achieve this goal. Unfortunately, there are no convenient labels by which to identify those learners and leaders I have in mind except that they count themselves as belonging to the people of God, people who recognize themselves as being addressed in Scripture. I anticipate that they will be serious-minded and willing to think, but that most will fit the category of “responsible generalist” rather than “scholarly specialist.” In other words, this is not a textbook for seminarians or their professors, which work

would look considerably different.¹ The people I envision will be adults, or at least they will think about things the way grown-ups should, who wish a better understanding of the Bible and of how to read it for the glory it renders to God and for the blessing it brings to life, church, and world. *My supreme objective is that by learning to handle the Scriptures well we may hear the message clearly, so that the God of Scripture who speaks from the page will be known and*

¹The present study actually represents an adaptation of a more extensive, technical volume in preparation under the same title, which work, Lord willing, will serve the interests and needs of the academic community.

worshiped and served more fully in the church and in the world.

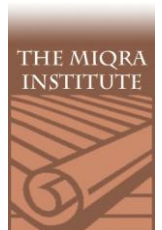
2.2. For this diverse readership and this ambitious goal I have chosen what I hope will be an appropriate medium, namely, a middle-range presentation which deliberately sidesteps no essential issues but which engages them in a manner that is at once reverent, responsible, and readable (see further on this point sections 2.3. and 2.4. below). In this connection I have prepared and attempted to present these units of study with a profound sense of calling to construct a bridge between the academy and the church, bringing the fruit of scholarly research to bear on the needs and interests of God's people. On an intensely personal note, users of this material deserve to know that I grow equally weary of the academy on the one hand, when it forgets that the church remains an important context of accountability and the ultimate proving ground of knowledge (where the proverbial pudding is eaten); and of the church on the other hand, when it asks questions of the Bible (or of those who give their lives to its study) that are inappropriate to the material, or when it makes dismissive and uninformed and arrogant pronouncements on the results of scholarly study, or when it construes the role of biblical study and research as defensive and its main purpose apologetic (as if the academic agenda should consist in furnishing the church a supply of ammunition in order to hold its present line of understanding, or fortifications for maintaining its identity around its own voice [too often confused with that of Scripture], or reinforcements for propping up the theological and denominational *status quo*).² If the reading of Scripture by all who undertake such an enterprise does not consciously pursue the goal of hearing God speak, in a manner or tone of voice that communicates a fresh and transforming message into the life of those who read and those who hear, then let us call it by

²I am conscious that the mutually distrustful and sometimes adversarial posture of church and academy is not quite this simplistic, but my experience working on both sides of the tension has confirmed to me that the issues broadly presented here lie at the heart of the matter.

some other name, for we can hardly speak of that kind of activity as the actual reading of Scripture.

2.3. A word about documentation. In keeping with the bridge imagery above, these studies attempt to put "average" readers and students in touch with some of the larger issues and wider discussions without overwhelming them in technicalities. At the same time I have considered it responsible and necessary to anchor certain points in the relevant published literature and to expand here and there on items that are pertinent to the discussion but with details that seemed more appropriate downstairs in the footnotes. I do not know that my judgments will always have been the best ones on which parts call for elaboration and which do not, which details belong upstairs and which downstairs. Generally, I have tried to keep footnotes to a minimum, sometimes resorting to an in-text system where only a reference is called for (e.g., Kort 1996, 47). In most of these latter cases, the full bibliographic data will be found in a highly selected list of resources for further study at the end of each unit. Those familiar with the enormity of the subjects considered will appreciate that exhaustive documentation and a comprehensive bibliography would be unwieldy. I wonder if the world itself could hold such a volume. Finally, in this connection, I have aimed throughout to maintain appropriate Christian charity and godly humility toward any authors and positions with which I have interacted, being especially attentive to this point where my own conclusions do not align with theirs. Should this material land in their hands, I hope they will find me to have succeeded in that aim, and, of course, that they will return the favor.

2.4. I fully expect that some users of this material will encounter words here and there which are not part of their daily vocabulary RAM (ready access memory). This situation will not be unsettling or discouraging to those who expect that to be the case, who understand that learning to read the Scriptures well entails developing a stock of terms appropriate to scriptural material and its study. Those who shut down because of a few unfamiliar words simply



demonstrate how ready they are to shut themselves off from God and Scripture, since very often the Bible does not use the *easiest* word in human vocabulary, but always the *right* word and the *best* word.

We must dwell on this point a little longer. Some people know their Bible the way they know their bodies. They know when it feels good, when it hurts, when it works well, when it doesn't, and so on. But knowing *how* it functions is another matter, on which few of us know much at all. And so we rely on medical experts, usually with enough respect and confidence in their knowledge that when they try to help us with this or that we listen, even if we do not understand some of the large words in their medical vocabulary. We might even have enough decency to accept that doctors use those words not to impress us but because no other words serve as well. These are the best words, with no suitable substitutes. If we listen with teachable humility, we can even learn what they mean and be the better for it. And so, when a team of surgeons who specialize in heart medicine—let's call them cardiovascular surgeons because that's the best term—convene to perform a heart surgery, we do not expect the conversation around the surgical table, on which lies our loved one with opened chest cavity, to flow as follows, and our confidence would be shaken if it did:

“Hey, Doc, think we oughtta check this whatchamacallit?”

“Nah, that doodad over there on the other side seems to be the problem.”

“Okay, hand me that thingamabob.”

“The what?”

“You know, the doohickey on the tray.”

“This?”

“No, the gizmo beside it!”³

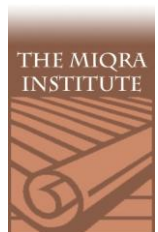
³Adapted from D. A. Black, *It's Still Greek to Me: An Easy-to-Understand Guide to Intermediate Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 19. Black envisions a team of automotive mechanics so speaking.

We expect more precision than this, and our confidence depends on it, especially where so much is at stake. Oddly, when it comes to talk about the Bible and how God speaks and how to go about discerning that—where eternal matters are at issue!—many would-be readers apparently feel that shoptalk or garage lingo will work just fine. God is under obligation to come down to our level, or so they assume. But clearly that is not the case. The Scriptures are abundantly clear that the One who speaks there feels no pressure at all just to be our good neighborly friend, with all sense of foreignness and unfamiliarity removed.⁴

Our discussion along these lines could continue; but this much will suffice to clarify why the present materials are not written in the first or every instance with a view to lessening the theological distance between us and God, or easing the responsibility of advancing from nursery to maturity in reading God's Word, or relieving the fact that knowing God may actually be intellectually demanding. There is an old cliché to the effect that teachers and authors must always put the cookies on the lowest shelf—a suitable motto indeed if the objective is to produce hunchbacked students and to perpetuate generations of would-be learners forever confined to a stooping posture when they could be reaching new heights instead. Talk about the Bible, *because of what the Bible is*, raises deep and challenging questions of a theological nature about the suitability of the current cultural drift toward a “dumbed down” society. The church, as custodian of the knowledge of God, has a higher calling.

This said, I have included a glossary at the end of the manual which offers short glosses

⁴Sometimes, for example, we learn that the God of Scripture does not want everyone to understand (Isa 6:8-13), that he speaks in ways almost no one can grasp (the Prophets), that the pursuit of understanding is hard-won and demanding (Prov 2:1-4), or that Jesus speaks in parables that reveal, appeal, and yes, conceal (Matt 13:10-13).



or definitions for many of the words with which users may be unfamiliar. The inevitable guessing game as to which words should be included is on display here, of course. Each included word is indicated with an asterisk (e.g., canon*) in its first occurrence in each unit.

2.5. The plan of these studies is as follows. “Introduction to the Bible” (Biblical Foundation Series 1) is the first of a three-part curriculum project under the title *Reading Scripture, Hearing God*. Here we try to sharpen our focus on our principal subject matter—the Bible. What exactly is the Bible, how does it come to us, and how are we to think about it so that we receive it on the right wavelength? The projected Biblical Foundation Series 2, “Interpretation of the Bible,” will build, as the title suggests, on volume 1 and will carry the course further into praxis or application. How then should we go about reading or interpreting Scripture so that we come to understand what it means to say? Biblical Foundation Series 3, “Proclamation of the Bible,” will pursue the concepts of volumes 1 and 2 toward their outworking in public ministry. Given what the Bible is and how it expects to be read, how shall we engage in preaching/teaching its message to others?

Beyond this opening discussion, Series 1 proper includes five units:

UNIT 1
THIS PHENOMENON WE CALL THE BIBLE: WHAT IT IS

The Bible Is Authored Writing—Text
The Bible Is Divine Discourse—
Revelation
The Bible Is Biblical Scripture—Canon

UNIT 2
LANGUAGE AND LITERACY: PREREQUISITES IN THEIR PLACE

The Invention of Writing and
Why God Chose It
The Evolution of Writing and
a Providential Marvel
The Scripts of Scripture and
What They Sound Like

UNIT 3
AUTHORS AND COMPOSITORS:
A BOOK IS BORN
Old Testament Books
New Testament Books

UNIT 4
CANON AND CONSOLIDATION:
THE SELECTION OF BOOKS AND THE SHAPE OF SCRIPTURE
Introduction to “Canon”
The Old Testament Canon
The New Testament Canon
Canon as Heritage: Scripture as Sacred Tradition

UNIT 5
TRANSMISSION AND TRANSLATION:
HOW GENUINE ARE THE CONTENTS INSIDE THE COWHIDE COVER?
Transmission of the Bible: The Hebrew Old Testament
Transmission of the Bible: The Greek New Testament
Translation of the Bible: Early Versions
Translation of the Bible: Modern Versions

2.6. Finally, I pray that our incomparable Lord, supremely worthy of unqualified devotion and unreserved glory, will be pleased to bless these reflections on Holy Scripture, supremely worthy of reverent contemplation and responsible interpretation, and that his glorious purposes in church and world will be faithfully served as a result.

These studies are humbly dedicated then to “the household of God, which is the church of the living God, pillar and support of the truth,” for the sake of the “mystery of godliness” which she confidently confesses as “undeniably great”:

Who was manifested in flesh,
vindicated in Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,



believed in the world,
taken up in glory.

(1 Timothy 3:15-16)

3. ENGAGE AND EXPLORE

Each unit that follows will conclude with a set of “E & E” (Engage and Explore) items for further pursuit, numbered in such a way as to correspond to the sections covered in the main body of the discussion. The items below correspond in this case to sections 1 and 2 above. Throughout the course, readers and study leaders may decide for themselves which of the items presented will provide the most appropriate and fruitful points of further engagement and exploration.

3.1. E & E items on section 1 above

- Discuss the implications of the conviction expressed in 1.1.: When God speaks, nothing is more honorable than that people listen. Relate this to everyday interpersonal conversation between spouses, parents and children, friends, business associates. How are listening and honoring related, and what are the implications for worship?
- It’s too early to engage this in depth, but why might we say that the basic criterion or determinant for what counts

as reading the Bible well depends more on *what the Bible is* and *how it expects to be read* than on the various uses of the Bible readers happen to find interesting or on the methods readers bring to the task from who knows where?

- Respond to the thought that serious and responsible attention to how we go about reading Scripture is an activity the church cannot afford to relegate to, say, seminary professors and classrooms, and yet it is one where church and academy can learn from each other.

3.2. E & E items on section 2 above

- Respond to the conviction expressed in 2.4.: Talk about the Bible, *because of what the Bible is*, raises deep and challenging questions of a theological nature about the suitability of the current cultural drift toward a “dumbed down” society. The church, as custodian of the knowledge of God, has a higher calling.

4. FOR FURTHER READING

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