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# Studying the Word of God

BY STEPHEN B. CHAPMAN

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**W**hen people think of “studying” Scripture today, they often envision a process of gathering information. After all, the twenty-first century is the age of Google and Wikipedia; information is produced and gathered constantly. Internet search engines are so much a part of daily life that families access them at the dinner table. Cell phones are magic-like portals to universal knowledge. News reports rocket around the globe, minute by minute, 24/7. Even though communication technologies are a great gift, attempting to monitor the overwhelming flow of information is like trying to take a drink of water from a fire hydrant.

In this environment, the act of reading focuses more and more on expediency and becomes fundamentally opportunistic. “What can I get out of this text?” is the driving question. “How can I find the information I need as quickly and efficiently as possible?” “How can I zero in on what is important for me and use it to my best advantage?” Reading takes place so that information can be consumed, and “studying” is just one more way for consumers to locate the right product. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, has become a commodity.

The phenomenon of “Study Bibles” illustrates this contemporary situation. There is an Apologetics Study Bible and an Archaeology Study

Bible, a Catholic Study Bible and an Orthodox Study Bible, a Humanist Study Bible and a Women of Faith Study Bible, a Life Application Study Bible and a Teen Study Bible, and so on. What all of these Bibles offer is heightened attention to the user, assistance in separating the scriptural wheat from the biblical chaff, and the addition of interpretive notes to direct readers more efficiently to the particular kind of information specially geared for them—in short, streamlined delivery with reduced investment of time and effort.

None of this is wholly bad, and in fact such publications will often do some good. Christians want and need to understand Scripture, and Scripture is not always easy to understand. If merchandising the Bible in this fashion helps Christians to achieve that end, fine. But the relentless repackaging of the Bible for niche markets also communicates the idea that there will be a particular Bible “for me,” that the Bible does not do its work as well as it might just on its own, and that a more appealing form can be developed for the purpose of highlighting and enlivening its content. In this way Christians are trained to be consumers of the Bible and skeptical reviewers of its message. “If this part of the Bible is not speaking to me,” they learn to say, “then it is simply not the part to which I need to pay attention.”

Of course, some Christians do not want to read the Bible only for what they can immediately get out of it or what seems best suited for them at first glance. They want to dig deeper and learn about everything in the Bible out of genuine historical interest. So much about the Bible seems exotic and ancient, full of excitement and adventure. These Christians have a sense that the Bible beckons them to a world beyond the horizon of their hum-drum daily lives, a world of long ago in which God spoke plainly and acted directly in human affairs. Accordingly, the point of studying the Bible for them is to reconstruct this lost world. Scripture is an artifact, a transcript that relates history: what God once did and how our forebears in the faith responded.

By recovering an appreciation for what God did in the past, these contemporary Christians think to gain a fresh angle of vision on our current situation. By drawing analogies between the past and present, they attempt to re-narrate their identity and face today’s challenges imaginatively. Much of this historically oriented study is well-intentioned and faithful. The Bible is in fact rooted in history, and it does tell a story. In the end, however, this more serious mode of Bible study also fails to avoid refashioning Scripture according to contemporary expectations, norms, and presuppositions. Historical study of the Bible tends to substitute a reconstructed story behind the biblical text for the biblical text itself. The meaning of a biblical story then lies in what “really” happened. God remains quarantined in the past. Scripture is granted a role to play in revisiting God’s once-mighty acts, but Scripture itself is only a means to that end—evidence, testimony, a witness to Truth that resides somewhere else. The biblical interpreter becomes a religious tourist.

The classical Christian approach to Scripture starts from an altogether different perspective. Praying and studying Scripture were once considered two complementary modes of communication with God: in prayer humans speak to God; in Scripture God speaks to humans.<sup>1</sup> It is this sense of being *addressed* that characterizes the reality of Scripture within Christian tradition. Scripture requires study not in order to discover interesting information about the past, but to discern what God is saying for today. Discernment is still necessary precisely because God has chosen to speak in an ongoing way through words recorded long ago. That is what terms like “scripture” and “canon” indicate: that God continues to speak in these particular writings, that they *are*, and not only *were*, God’s Word.

Such discernment will be “critical” because it will involve detailed knowledge of the whole Bible and profound intellectual wrestling with the substance of faith. At the same time it will be deeply personal, since discernment always relies in part on an interpreter’s dispositions and affections. Early church theologians knew all too well that good biblical exegesis was just as much about an interpreter’s character as an interpreter’s knowledge or method. As Gregory the Great once put it: “Scripture is like a river...in which a lamb may wade and an elephant swim.”<sup>2</sup> Lamb-like readers can comfortably stay in the shallows, but there are riparian depths in Scripture for elephantine interpreters to explore.

This traditional emphasis on character or virtue undercuts modern efforts to shield knowledge from personal commitment.

Modernity’s claim to “objective” knowledge is less about fairness and dialogue, and more about a denial of any consequential relationship between knowledge and ethics. Yet some ideas, once they are accepted, in fact require us to live differently; sometimes we have to live differently even in order to understand certain ideas.

After God’s gift of the law at Sinai, the Israelites curiously respond: “we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exodus 24:7). They have realized that doing comes first; obedient knowledge is consequence of committed action rather than its precondition.

True enough, throughout history non-Christians and heterodox Christians have made significant contributions to a theological understanding of Scripture, and orthodox Christians have frequently betrayed the Bible’s

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fundamental message of love. But these cases do not negate the early church's basic insight: to study the Bible well means to stake one's entire life on it, to be a disciple as well as a reader. God's Word for today will always be heard more clearly within the context of a life exhibiting humility, purity, and chastity. Because of individual human limitations and personal frailty, this insight means in turn that biblical interpretation will be most reliable and robust in authentic Christian community, where scriptural interpreters can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, and where all are committed to the path of communal discipleship.

From this perspective many well-intentioned church Bible studies are falling desperately short of what is needed. The central question for such groups to discuss should not be "What did this Bible passage mean originally?" or "What does this text tell us about the past?" or even "What does it tell us about what God once did?" Instead, Bible study groups should be asking "What is God saying to us today through this text?" and "If our church took this scriptural word with utmost seriousness, what would we do differently this week in our local community?" and "How is God using this part of the Bible to show us what it means to be disciples of Jesus right now, right here?"

It might be that the whole idea of Bible "study" has become tainted and misdirected within the Church: too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic. Perhaps churches should start calling their Bible studies by another name: "Bible action groups" or "Bible implementation squads." The new name would help make the point that what is at stake in consulting the Bible is not only what Christians are to know but how they are to live. The endless modern debates about the Bible's relation to history and science, not to mention the critical debates in academic scholarship over the history of the Bible's literary formation, have all too conveniently served to deflect attention away from the gospel's call for transformed lives. In this regard it is difficult to improve on the comment attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." So much of what passes for Bible study these days, in the Church as well as the academy, is finally a straining after gnats (Matthew 23:24).

The best way to prevent getting off track comes from the biblical text itself. Discussion leaders need above all to keep on asking "But what does it *say*?" While there is much to be gained from more creative approaches to the Bible, speculating about the psychology of biblical characters invariably leads away from serious reflection on the ways of God. Speculating about history ("maybe back then...") not only leaves the text behind but winds up in a cul-de-sac of undecidability ("maybe...I just don't know"). By contrast it is crucial to be alert to the Bible's own distinctive interests and also to its silences. To paraphrase the Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, good biblical interpretation involves not only speaking when the Bible speaks but keeping silent when the Bible is silent.<sup>3</sup>

When reading the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, everyone always notices how three days pass by without a word of dialogue being mentioned (vv. 3-4). Things are tense; God has commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son. But to respond to this information gap by observing “Well now, they must have talked about *something* in the course of those three days, so I wonder what they said” is again to substitute a “real” story, somewhere behind the biblical story, for the biblical story itself. The biblical story *is* the real story. If no dialogue is provided, it means that for the purpose of this story no dialogue exists, that Abraham and Isaac are silent as they trudge along toward Moriah. Their silence heightens the tension literarily, even as it reminds readers that the heart of the story is not about Abraham’s internal struggle but God’s uncompromising call. This is a story about external actions rather than inner emotions. God has no intention of killing Isaac; we are told right at the beginning of the story that the divine command is a test (22:1). God does not want a dead Isaac but a faithful Abraham. Through Abraham’s example we learn that faith is not only about what we say or feel but what we are prepared to do.

Becoming a sensitive and alert reader is therefore of paramount significance. Young people preparing for the ministry should be English majors. The theologian Nicholas Lash has said that the Church should be “an academy of word-care.”<sup>4</sup> Linguistic and literary skills are crucial not only because the careful use of words is one

of the primary ways that the Church maintains and deepens Christian identity (in worship, prayer, preaching, and so on), but also because being imprecise or sloppy with words is sure to provide sin with an entry-point into Christian community. Yet literary sensitivity is not exclusively theological; it can be learned and used in secular contexts just as effectively. At their best, literary tools illustrate how reading

the Bible well sometimes means reading it “like any other book.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than approaching the Bible as if it is a pious tract, literarily informed readers look for the same rhetorical strategies and effects that they might find in novels and sonnets.

Another way to think about the importance of the Bible’s literary dimension is to invoke the modern distinction between “story” and “discourse.”<sup>6</sup> If we

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take “story” to mean something like “plot,” then “discourse” can stand for the way in which that story gets told. So, for example, the basic story of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens is well-known. Many people are familiar with Scrooge and the three ghosts who visit him by night. But this story has in fact been told in many different versions, in film as well as in literature. The Victorian setting of Dickens’s original tale is far removed from the television-studio retelling featuring Bill Murray.<sup>7</sup> In theory the same “story” could even be re-narrated from the perspective of Bob Cratchit or Tiny Tim. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard retells the story of Hamlet from the perspective of two minor characters in Shakespeare’s play.<sup>8</sup> In these examples the “story” may ultimately be the same, but the “discourse” is quite different. The point is that “discourse” is the *how* of the story rather than the *what*, and yet this *how* contributes substantially to the story’s meaning.

The Bible is discourse as well as story. Perceptive readers pay loving attention to how the biblical story is told because they understand that the Bible’s meaning also lies in that *how*, that the Bible does not only wish to report things that happened but also convey a point of view about them. This point of view can be recognized most readily in the way in which the events of the plot are shaped and unfolded. The narrator of Genesis 22 does not have to begin that story by observing how what follows is a test, but he does—and it completely changes the way the story works. In fact, sometimes when people talk about Genesis 22 they seem to think that Abraham did kill Isaac or that God actually wanted Abraham to do so! But at the *discourse* level of Genesis 22, both of these judgments are actually ruled out. What God tells Abraham to do is a horrifying test, and we should still squirm and marvel at how God seemingly believes that what will be gained from this test is worth Abraham’s agony. But Genesis 22 is not only a plot sequence that can be told and re-told, it is a particular literary presentation of that plot, told in a certain way for a theological purpose.

We could extend this idea to the format of the Christian Bible as a whole. Basic to Christian tradition is the idea of a single Bible containing two testaments.<sup>9</sup> Early on, of course, the only Bible known to Christians (all of whom at first were Jews) was what is now called the “Old Testament.” Only gradually were other Christian writings produced and assembled, and added to the Old Testament as a new literary collection with its own integrity and focus. On the one hand, early Christians apparently came to feel that the Old Testament was no longer enough for them. On the other hand, they retained it as it was and did not seek to “Christianize” it or harmonize it with Christian realities through editorial revision. For this reason each testament has its own character and deserves its own careful investigation. It remains important that Jesus is not named in the Old Testament, nor does he explicitly appear. The Old Testament is a pre-Christian witness to God.

Yet the gospel message is not only that God gave Jesus to the world but that God sent him in the form of the long-promised Jewish messiah, within the context of Israel's divinely appointed vocation to the world. In interpreting the Old Testament, Christian realities can only be "bracketed" to a point. Reading the story forward without inserting Christian teachings can be a helpful way to read Israel's story more carefully – but only so long as the story is still read as culminating in Christ. Jewish interpreters and secular scholars may not wish to read the two testaments together at all. But for Christians, the two-testament format of the Christian Bible is basic because the gospel proclaims Jesus as the messiah of the Jews, and not only the redeemer of the Gentiles. It is hard to do justice to both of these truths at once. One way may be to engage in both "prospective" and "retrospective" reading. Reading "prospectively" or "forward," one can trace the story of Israel from creation, through Exodus, Exile, and Return, peering ahead to a coming divine act that will finally exceed the temporal boundaries of the Old Testament. At the same time, reading "retrospectively" or "backward," one can re-read the various events and figures of the Old Testament as foreshadowing and gesturing toward Christ.

David Steinmetz has described this traditional manner of reading as something like what happens in a good detective story, in which a concluding drawing-room revelation customarily causes the reader to re-read the whole story with new understanding.<sup>10</sup> In this re-reading, certain seemingly trivial details take on new importance and many things that once appeared as if they might be highly significant ("red herrings") are no longer of interest. Having all the information from the outset would spoil the story; not thinking back through the story from the perspective of its conclusion would exhibit a lack of regard for the truth. Karl Barth thus described the Old Testament as a witness of "anticipation" and the New Testament as a witness of "recollection."<sup>11</sup> In the center is Christ, and both testaments point to him – each in its distinctive way.

Accordingly, Christian study of the Bible has always concentrated on comparing both testaments with each other. To return to the example of Genesis 22, many modern commentators have objected to its portrayal of a God who would demand that a parent sacrifice a child – even as a test. This deficient deity, they say, is that wrathful "Old Testament God" who was later replaced by the "New Testament God" of love. Yet Jesus also says that "whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37) and Paul teaches how God "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us" (Romans 8:32). Reading the two testaments together in fact reveals that their "Gods" are the same God, and that Genesis 22 not only depicts God's call for radical obedience but discloses the possibility of God's self-sacrifice.

We do and do not study the Bible "like any other book."

## NOTES

1 For example, see Jerome, *Letters* 3.4. Cf. his *Letters* 22.25, "If you pray, you are speaking to your Spouse; if you read, he is speaking to you," as cited in Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 16.

2 Gregory the Great, *Epistle to the Most Reverend and Holy Leander*, 4, prefixed to his *Morals on Job*.

3 See Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 135-136.

4 Nicholas Lash, "Ministry of the Word or Comedy and Philology," *New Blackfriars* 68 (November 1987), 472-483, here citing 477.

5 This phrase has an important history in modern biblical studies; see R. W. L. Moberly, "'Interpret the Bible Like Any Other Book?' Requiem for an Axiom," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4:1 (Spring 2010), 91-110.

6 Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

7 *Scrooged*, directed by Richard Donner (Mirage Productions, 1988).

8 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1968). The play was also released as a film with the same title, directed by Stoppard (Brandenburg/WNET Channel 13 New York, 1990).

9 Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

10 David C. Steinmetz, "Uncovering a Second Narrative: Detective Fiction and the Construction of Historical Method," in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 54-65.

11 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1956), 45-121.



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