

The Art of Reading the Bible

Reading is a complicated, multifaceted process.¹ I am not referring to the technical aspect of sounding out words, what is called “decoding”—this is relatively simple, especially in Hebrew. Nor am I referring to resolving the types of ambiguities that exist in any dead, or literary, language. These ambiguities can be quite significant in translating the Bible. For example, should the first sentence of the Bible be rendered “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” or “In the beginning of God’s creation of heaven and earth”? Should the root *q-n-* (קנן) when describing God be translated “jealous” or “zealous”? Lack of punctuation in the earliest biblical texts raises additional reading problems: should I read Isaiah 40:3 as “A voice rings out: ‘Make clear in the desert a road for the LORD!’” or as “A voice rings out in the desert ‘Clear a road for the LORD!’”? As theologically significant as these issues may be for reading or translating the Hebrew Bible, they pale in comparison to the reading challenges caused by the fact that the Bible was written in an ancient society that had fundamentally different literary conventions from ours.

Especially if we know only one language, and live mostly in one society or social group, we may not be aware of the extent to which convention guides so much of what we do and how we behave. Conventions, however, by definition have particular meanings in particular groups. Anyone hitchhiking in Israel using the American hitchhiking sign, which is considered an obscene gesture there, will quickly appreciate the importance of convention.

Conventions combine with the meaning of words to determine how a text should be understood. Words alone do not determine meaning; we interpret them based on the context that they are in, namely their genre. The same words will be interpreted differently if they are found in a different genre or context. For example, the words “slow children” will be understood one way if they are found as part of a report dealing with special education in a school district, and another if they are found on a yellow, triangular street sign. The words are the same; their context, which determines their genre (school report vs. street sign),

will ascertain whether they are descriptive of children with below-average IQs, or are prescriptive, telling the driver to slow down because a large number of children live in a neighborhood. The proper interpretation of the same two words differs based on their genre.

Reading and the Biblical Text

There are many ways of reading the Bible. My interest, however, is in reading the Bible like an ancient Israelite,² what is often called reading the Bible from a historical-critical perspective. As noted in chapter 1, “historical-critical” is an unfortunate term; much more than history is involved in this type of reading, and the term “critical” incorrectly suggests that the “critic” is interested in somehow dismantling the Bible or any faith-based commitment with the Bible at its core. This is not what I am attempting here. Instead, I am assuming that the Bible, like any ancient text, has been read differently in different periods, because readers read the Bible using their own conventions or rules. James Kugel, for example, has shown how readers in the early postbiblical period understood the Bible; their readings are often very strange from our perspective, because these interpreters lived two thousand years ago and worked within a religious and cultural system that is so different than ours.³

Whether a particular biblical interpretation is right or wrong in an absolute sense is usually impossible to say, because the validity of any reading depends on its time period and the conventions of that period. Everything depends on what rules the reader uses when reading the biblical text.

The Rules of the Game

Those who play the board game Monopoly® might know the official rules (printed on the box), but they might also be familiar with alternative sets of rules. Nowhere do the official rules suggest that \$500 must be added to Free Parking after anyone lands on that space and collects the money, nor do the rules deal with the special cases of the player who rolls double ones or double sixes. Yet almost all Monopoly players have *conventions* that determine how these situations should be handed. What is crucial is that before the game starts, all participants agree on the rules governing that particular game; otherwise, chaos ensues.

Similarly, the way of reading suggested here—which emphasizes what the

Bible meant when it was written—is not intended to disparage other “rules” that might be used for reading the Bible. I do not mean to argue that these methods, whether based on certain religious or literary principles, are fundamentally wrong. Instead, this book develops, explores, explains, and justifies a different set of rules. In the afterword, I will argue that these rules do work for religious use—although for now this might seem unlikely, or even impossible.

The importance of proper rules or genre for understanding the Bible is most easily illustrated through the following examples. They presume, for illustrative purposes only, the existence of someone from a wholly different culture who is perfectly proficient in the English language, having mastered the grammar of English and an English dictionary. This individual (let me call her Marta) would be comparable to the modern scholar who has complete mastery of biblical word use and grammar (which incidentally is impossible). Marta will illustrate three situations that indicate how mastery of lexicon (word use) and grammar alone are insufficient for reading in the most comprehensive sense.

Let’s imagine that Marta arrives at my house as I am reading some poetry. I happen to turn to a poem called “Subway,” translated from Japanese. It begins: “Every day I step into a coffin / with strangers.”⁴ Reading even this first line, I sigh in pleasure—after all, I grew up in New York, and traveled on many trains during rush hour, unable to breathe, feeling like I was buried alive with strangers for an hour. Marta, however, has no comprehension of this experience, for at least two reasons. She has never experienced the subways. Just as significantly, she has never encountered poetry, and thinks that these initial eight words about entering coffins with strangers describe either a strange ritual or a kinky practice. Though she understands the words, by reading them literally, she misunderstands their meaning in this particular context.

Only after Marta learns about subways, and more importantly, about genre conventions—for instance, that literature presented in short lines is poetry, that poetry uses metaphors, and that metaphors should be interpreted in a particular way—will she understand those eight words. Reading that line of poetry thus extends far beyond a phonetic process, or even looking up each word in a dictionary.

Another scenario, from later in the day. Marta is looking over my shoulder as I sort the day’s mail. I sort into two piles; one with notices (typically in red) such as “Urgent: Open Immediately,” the other lacking such notices. But then I trash everything from the “Urgent: Open Immediately” pile. Marta is bewildered. She knows how to read, but nothing in her technical language preparation taught her about genres of mail. Had she learned that the words “Urgent: Open Immediately” (combined with other markers such as third class postage) typify

a genre that we call “junk mail,” then she would understand. But this lesson, which has to do with *social* aspects of reading and writing and how we as readers pick up on clues (what biblical scholars call “form-critical markers”), is typically only learned through experience within a particular social group.

For the final example, imagine that Marta watches as I read the *Sunday Boston Globe*. She clearly observes that the newspaper is comprised of various sections with different layouts, but doesn’t know the significance of these differences. Specifically, she doesn’t know that Doonesbury, printed on the first page of the comics, must be read differently than the first page of the first section. Though both sections contain the same words, even the same personal names, we know through experience that they convey different information or have different goals. The first page means to convey facts; the comics are intended to amuse. Marta, however, has no developed awareness of contexts and genres, how they might inform what something really means, or how it should be read, so she likely would use Doonesbury as a source for news in the same way that she uses the first page.

The Challenge of Reading like an Ancient Israelite

If Marta is smart, she will eventually figure these things out. She will learn based on experience what junk mail is, how to read the comics, even the nature of poetry. (Indeed, this is what each of us has learned to do.) It will take her awhile. Yet in learning to read (in this broad sense), Marta will have an advantage that we Bible readers never have: she has what linguists and anthropologists call “informants”—real, live people who can lead her down the right track. We have no informants from ancient Israel, so we must use other, less reliable criteria to determine whether we are reading the ancient texts correctly.⁵

When it comes to reading the biblical text within its original context, most people are hardly better than Marta. Those of us who have spent years reading biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts, and trying to figure out their conventions, engage in a difficult and always somewhat speculative venture. There is no certain way of knowing that we have the convention right, other than the fact that it allows many texts to make sense, which is a partly subjective criterion. That begins to explain why this type of reading, which we call the historical-critical method, is so common in the university, but so rare outside of it. The historical-critical method makes two assumptions: that biblical society is discontinuous with our society, and that the Bible should be read according to its original social context, not anachronistically. The Bible must instead be understood

only after its ancient conventions and genres are understood, but because there is so much discontinuity, this is a most difficult task.

Not only literary conventions are important. The Bible is the product of a particular society living at a particular time. Before we can begin exploring the issues of convention and genre, it is important to offer a schematic history of ancient Israel, so that biblical texts, genres, and conventions may be understood in this light. Accordingly, history is the subject of our next chapter.