

The Holy Scriptures

THE WESLEYAN THEOLOGY SERIES

The Holy Scriptures

Stephen G.
Green



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*To my children: Stephanie and Michael
I love you both!*



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Acknowledgments

It takes more than a single lifetime to read the Bible well. Therefore, we must read these sacred stories and poems with others. I began the journey of reading the sacred texts before I was able to actually read. My parents placed at the center of our lives the family Bible. My father, who was also my pastor, would read long passages of Scripture to us every night, and then we would all add our words of interpretation, confession, and prayer to these sacred words of witness. These practices narrated my brothers and me into the strange world of God's story. That story-formed world was not simply long, long ago and far, far away, but it was our world. It was a world we would wake up to every morning and move about during the day. It was a good world of creativity, love, faithfulness, mercy, and redemption. I really did not choose this world, but this world seems to have chosen me. Don't get me wrong—I attempted to flee this world, but I was as successful as a fish fleeing the water. It was in the air I breathed and in paths I traveled.

These paths carried me on a quest to read these ancient words with clarity and integrity. This pathway guided me to graduate school, where I learned ancient languages, philosophical methods, Christian heritage, theological arguments, and the critical methods of biblical exegesis. A quandary developed: What is one to do when one's world is confronted by the historical-critical method? Clearly, re-

sistance is one option. But a person can never unlearn what was learned. Must a person then give up the old story? That is like asking the question, Can a human being develop gills and breathe in the water? Or can a person sprout wings and fly like a bird? This predicament is actually asking, How is one to believe in the inspiration of Scripture and still understand the Scriptures historically? The chapters in this book form an argument attempting to answer this question.

As you can see, I've read texts in a variety of communities: the church, the academy, and with the great cloud of witnesses who have lived in both of these communities of memory. I have many to thank for this journey. Most notably are the teachers who have patiently walked with me in times of confusion and uncertainty. Many of these mentors I have mentioned by name in my commentary on Deuteronomy. But there are two groups I want to acknowledge in this opening statement: the many authors I have read and the many students I have taught. The bibliography at the end of this book is but a small sampling of those who have shaped my journey of reading the Bible Christianly. I do not use many quotations in this book, other than those from the Scriptures. Yet the ideas and concepts of great thinkers have crept into my consciousness. Some of these thinkers I would call exemplars of all I hold dear and attempt to do as a faithful reader of the Bible; others hold many ideas of which I disagree. Disagreement does not mean I do not cherish their scholarship; all helped me understand the gracious disclosure of God and the history of that disclosure. Therefore, I consider them all friends.

Teachers, writers, and saints are not the only people I owe a debt of gratitude. I also am indebted to my students. For twenty-one years I have occupied the W. N. King Chair of Theology at Southern Nazarene University. In addition

to this privilege, I have taught in various relationships with five other institutions of higher learning. Students not only are the recipients of my work but also are, in their own way, shapers of my thinking. Their questions, comments, and even papers have been a means of grace to me. Thank you for the honor of being your guide down the pathway of reading the Bible Christianly!

There are two other persons I would like to thank: Drs. Al Truesdale and Alex Varughese. Al was my faithful editor, and Alex is the person who invited me to undertake this writing project. Thank you, my friends.

The young people with whom I trust I have modeled faithful Bible reading best are Stephanie and Michael, my children. They have seen me with the Bible in my hands, and I hope they have seen the Word in my heart. My own children now have children. The task of faithful reading is a life-consuming charge. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 says it well:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.
You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep
these words that I am commanding you today in your
heart. Recite them to your children and talk about
them when you are at home and when you are away,
when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as
a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your
forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your
house and on your gates.

Faithfully reading the Bible is a multigenerational journey. It takes more than a single lifetime to read the Bible well, but it is done on a day and at a time by each of us. May our children and their children catch us reading these ancient and life-giving texts. And may they interpret all of our stories as episodes in HIS.



Introduction

The author considered titling this book “Reading the Bible Christianly: A Narrative Approach to Scripture.” This is an audacious title for a book on how to read the Scriptures. One might ask, “Does this author not understand the diverse ways the Bible has been read across the history of interpretation by Christians?” One can arguably say that even the early church differed on the readings of the sacred texts. What about the differences in the reading of these hallowed passages between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria? Does this author not realize that there have been Christians reading these texts for almost two millennia? The answer to these legitimate and justifiable questions is yes. Yes, this title is both overconfident and disrespectful. It is overconfident of the approach and disrespectful of all that has occurred in the history of interpretation. Nevertheless, this book is not an attempt to say that all approaches to reading Scripture have been illegitimate, but that there are too many readings of these sacred texts that are foolishly uninformed and detrimentally malformed.

As this book is being written, a great debate is being waged in the United States concerning how the Bible is used and understood. The attorney general of the United States, in defense of a White House policy on immigration, referred to Romans 13 as a warrant for Christians to accept and support the administration’s policies: submit to the

government. Pundits from the right and the left quoted Scripture in support of or in defiance to the attorney general's use of Scripture. Most of these persons were using the Bible for their own purposes or, as this book will eventually name them, their own narratives. Persons and communities may have various readings of events, but this does not mean that every interpretation of an event or text is accurate or even truthful. A postmodern world, the world of the early twenty-first century, is revealing the unstable condition that any interpretation of events and texts is acceptable as long as it supports the already existing belief and value system of the interpreter. Text-jacking, alternative facts, and the conviction that all beliefs are justified cry out for a book to investigate and scrutinize both the reader of texts and the texts that are read.

Are words simply sounds made by a human voice with no real connection to the way people live, or are they a part of a larger background or matrix within which all human activities find their meaning? This is the guiding query that will inform all of the investigations of this book on how to read the Bible. There is a conventional childhood chant that goes something like this: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Is this saying true, or are words the reason sticks and stones are used to bully, injure, and even kill people? Take for examples the prophets of the Old Testament, the disciples of Jesus, and even the Lord himself. It seems that words were used to oppress and eventually execute the Lord, his disciples, and the prophets. The good news is that words are used not only to bring about the abuse of others but also to equip the imagination of people who do scientific research, plan for the future, and even make sense of the past. Questions that need answering include the following: Where do the words used by individuals come from? How do they shape the values and

intuitions of human beings? Are these values and intuitions active in people who read the Bible? And are they active in the very formation of the Bible?

Most books written on the subject of how to read the Bible go immediately to exegetical procedure and take the reader through each step of this technique. They explore the historical and literary contexts of the passage; then they help the beginning exegete understand structure and genre. Next these texts move through the analysis of words and concepts and finally to a consideration of the theological and ethical implications of a passage. If this is what the reader is looking for, then this book will cover these categories of exploration in its latter half. But before the journey is made to these important and key categories, the mystery of reading needs investigation. Reading with understanding is never simple, and it is especially difficult when one is reading an ancient text, written in a different language, with a radically different understanding of the world.

The premise of this book is threefold. First, the Bible is a collection of manuscripts that were developed across a long period, yet with precise messages that were for particular people at specific times. These messages were shaped by a combination of factors: the circumstances within which these words were spoken or written, the worldviews of the people that received these words, and the divine inspiration of these words for the specific space and time of the people to whom these words were written. The second assumption of this book is the belief that these words continue to possess the inspired/inspiring word of God disclosing his character and therefore his will for the being-saved people of God. The final presupposition is that the Bible is both stable (canonical message) and dynamic (incarnational message) in its composition and application.

Should readers of the Bible search for a stable meaning of a biblical passage, or is the significance of a text only the sense that is supplied by the reader? To answer this question of textual stability, this book will use the Bible itself to explore possible solutions. In early Christianity there was an oral text—the gospel—that was handed down by the community of believers. Evidently, the meaning of the gospel was stable enough for the apostle Paul to write these words in Galatians 1:6-9:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

The answer to the earlier question concerning the stability of meaning is that at least this oral text of the gospel had an unwavering substance. If this is the case for the gospel, is there a stability of meaning for the Bible as a whole? Can twenty-first-century persons know this meaning? Is this message still of great significance for contemporary persons? In order to begin to answer these questions, the ideas of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur will be used. He describes the life-changing process of understanding a sacred text as a threefold development: a precritical stage, which he calls *naïveté*; a critical stage, where the reader understands the worldviews involved in the texts and in reading itself; and finally, a postcritical moment, which

he calls a second naïveté.¹ This threefold understanding is what this book on reading the Bible is attempting to develop for the twenty-first-century reader who craves to take the Bible seriously as sacred and authoritative for faith and practice and yet understands that it is fashioned through a long pilgrimage in time. Ricoeur's reflection on sacred texts, such as the Bible, undertakes the goal of so reading these texts with new eyes that the biblical world comes alive with its main character, God, in all of his mystery, glory and vulnerability. As the enigmatic character of God becomes discernible in the text, the reader begins to recognize that the world is none other than God's world. A second naïveté is acquired, and one's eyes are opened and ears unstopped to the footprints, fingerprints, and whispers of the unfathomable character of God. So how is it possible to read the Bible Christianly, which always means responsibly? This question demands a thoughtful response by present-day communities of faith and practice.

The Bible's long history of development and interpretation is both dynamic and stable. It is stable because it cannot mean what it never could have meant, and yet it is dynamic because its message always must be recognized and applied in a brand-new way for the people of God. This long history of composition and interpretation, as well as the history of each reader of the Bible, needs to be recognized and examined. If not, understanding a text from long ago and far away lacks stability, and the text will mean only what the reader already subconsciously believes and expects it to mean. Once a critical distance is acknowledged, then the present-day people of God have the possibility of being read by the biblical text itself. As this takes place, a new way

1. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 351.

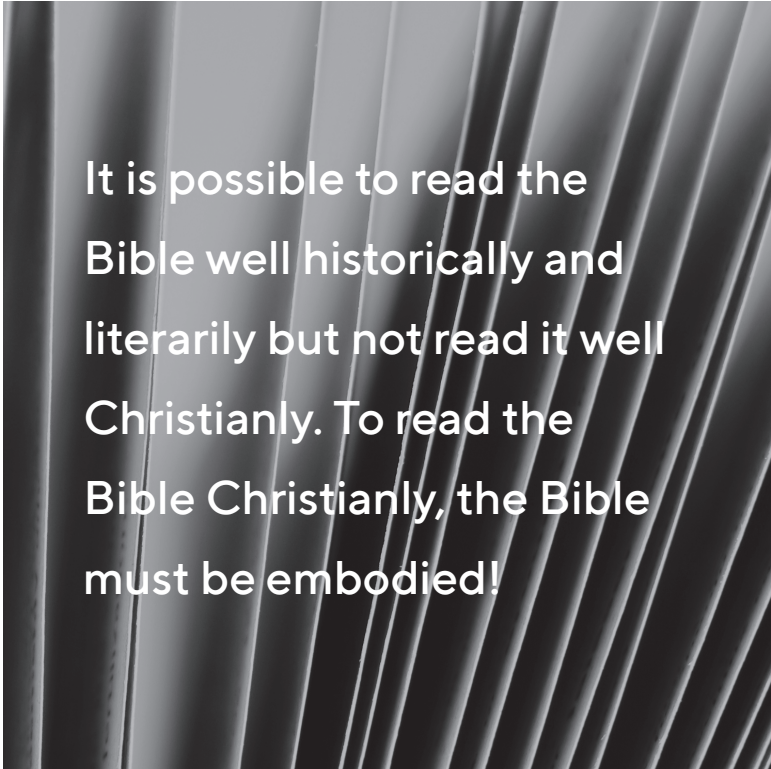
of both seeing and being in the world emerges. The goal is not an unsophisticated geocentric model of the earth, but a critical realism where worldviews are acknowledged and critically assessed. It is then that a second naïveté has the possibility of occurring, when the God whose story is narrated in the Bible is recognized in the ongoing story of the reader's "real world."

Facilitating this gift of grace compels the reader of the Bible to understand the various historical contexts of the Bible, as well as the present-day context of the reader. These historical contexts are maneuvered by worldviews that create perceptions of the way the world works, what words and concepts mean, and what is to be valued and disdained. One could say that a worldview is what a culture believes to be true about reality and how members of that culture conduct themselves in the world. All worldviews are story formed—that is, they can be narrated. This idea is not simply that each worldview has stories within it but also that it is an extended story. It is a story with a beginning and an end—a long story of a journey toward a goal, a good to be practiced. This story-formed world is also able to articulate what is wrong with the world and how this violation is overcome. Worldviews have symbols that reflect the values and derisions implied by their larger grand narratives. The performers within these narrative worlds come to an understanding of who are the good people, the heroes, and who are the bad people, the villains. These grand narratives even shape the way individuals experience and tell their own life stories. Intuitions are not neutral and similar for all people in all places and at all times. They are shaped by the stories people find themselves participating in.

To understand both the story of the Bible and the stories of readers of the Bible, this book will proceed from the analysis of story-formed worlds to the procedures of how to

approach the Bible's development of its own story-formed world to finally how communities can develop an imagination equipped to participate in the story-formed world of the God to whom Scripture witnesses. In the first chapter, the reader will be introduced to the idea of multiple worldviews, which must be recognized if one is to read the Bible well. These worldviews will include the multiple linguistic worlds within the Bible and the worldview(s) of the reader. The second half of this chapter will explore how persons are formed within these linguistic worlds. This linguistic formation of persons takes place within both ancient and contemporary societies. Human beings were and are shaped by language and experience. The second chapter will explore the faith inquiry of how to understand the inspiration of Scripture in the light of the long, long development of the Bible. This chapter will outline a dynamic understanding of the formation of Scripture and inspiration. It will also examine three major ways of approaching Scripture in the light of understanding its dynamic inspiration. Does the Bible want the reader to read it as a collection of propositions, as a diary of experiences, or as a lens through which the world can be appropriated as God's world? The third chapter will ask the question, given the distinct worldviews of the ancient world, What is the Bible wanting to communicate to its readers?

For the reader who is primarily concerned with the how-to of reading the Bible, the fourth and fifth chapters will be of greatest interest. In the fourth chapter, the reader will explore how to interrogate the Scriptures. This chapter will focus on the major procedural questions involved in exegesis. The fifth chapter will investigate theological hermeneutics. Building a theological bridge between the ancient world and the present will be the focus. This chapter will explore not only how a reader can read the ancient



It is possible to read the Bible well historically and literarily but not read it well Christianly. To read the Bible Christianly, the Bible must be embodied!

passages within the Bible but also how these sacred texts can read their readers. The final chapter will consider how the Scriptures can be embodied in present-day communities and persons. It is possible to read the Bible well historically and literarily but not read it well Christianly. To read the Bible Christianly, the Bible must be embodied!

All of these investigations into how to carefully read the Bible have one purpose: for readers to be shaped by the message of the biblical witness. The hope is that little by little the readers of these sacred texts will be transformed by the mystery of the One whose story is narrated within their pages. The anticipation is that readers of these sacred texts will begin to see the world and its endowments as God's world and his grace. In the words of George Lindbeck, "the ancient practice of absorbing the universe into the biblical world" is the goal of reading the Bible Christianly.² When the Bible is read well, the Spirit that inspires its pages brings about the inspiration and transformation of God's treasured creation.

2. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 135.

The Worlds We Live In

Worlds Apart

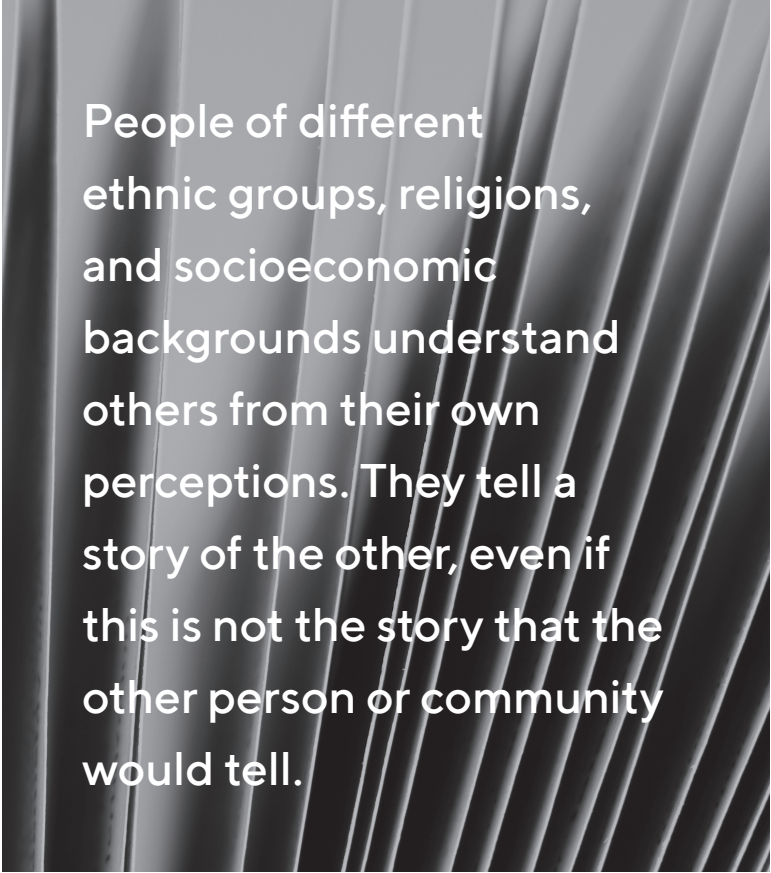
All too frequently on a Sunday morning following the pastor's sermon, parishioners say to themselves and sometimes to their pastor, "This is a very good sermon, but in the real world . . ." Does this hypothetical statement mean that the preacher's sermon is a fabrication? Hopefully not, but what it does mean is that the narrative world of the parishioner and the narrative world that the sermon arises out of are distinctive understandings of what is real. If the sermon emanates from the biblical text, then all too often the text produces the perception that it is fictitious and a misrepresentation of reality. The world of the text and the world of the parishioner seem as if they are worlds apart.

N. T. Wright writes, "When, therefore, we perceive external reality, we do so within a prior framework. That framework consists, most fundamentally, of a worldview; and worldviews . . . are characterized by, among other things, certain types of story."¹ People, all people, are story formed. What is meant by this statement is not simply that people tell stories but that they are a story. Young adults often speak

1. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 43.

about finding themselves. What they mean is not that they are physically lost, but that they are attempting to understand a truthful story of who they are. A person's history, as it actually happened, is something that can only be grasped by telling stories about the events themselves. These events are understood from a point of view, not from some disinterested watchtower on high. They are not fabricated out of thin air, but they are an attempt to make sense of events by means of an already existing value system. An example of how this works can be seen in asking a friend, "What did you do today?" The first thing that she does is to look back across the day from a standpoint that includes a spatial, temporal, social perspective. Real events, in the light of a social-linguistic perception, will compose the story that is told of the day's activities. This story is not fiction, but perspectival. Not everything that occurred in the course of the day will be included, but only what is of value. It is the already existing system of values, purpose, and world picture that allows a person to make sense of life. When an individual becomes aware of the world picture that shapes his or her values and perspective, that person categorizes this awareness as a worldview; the same is so for a community.

Getting to know another person is the effort to make sense of his or her life story. A life story is not every occurrence that has taken place in the life of a person or a people group, but those events that are significant for understanding personal or communal identity. What is intriguing about getting to know the identity of other persons and groups is that most human beings interpret others from their own perspectives. In other words, people describe other people from their own story-formed worlds. Others are considered good or bad, right or wrong, successful or unsuccessful from the story-formed worldview of the person or community that is getting to know another. People

The background of the page is a grayscale image of vertical blinds, with the slats creating a series of parallel, slightly curved lines that run vertically across the frame.

People of different ethnic groups, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds understand others from their own perceptions. They tell a story of the other, even if this is not the story that the other person or community would tell.

of different ethnic groups, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds understand others from their own perceptions. They tell a story of the other, even if this is not the story that the other person or community would tell. When a person reads the Bible, the same operation takes place. The biblical world is comprehended by the story-formed world of the reader. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all who read, especially the Bible, to recognize and attempt to understand the story-formed worlds that shape both their own life stories and the storied worlds within the Bible. Until this is at least acknowledged, a person or community is trapped in a linguistic prison.

An example of perspectival confusion can be understood from one of the aphorisms that Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, pens in his *Philosophical Investigations*. He writes, "If a lion could talk, we would not understand him."² Many people who read this aphorism verbalize to themselves, "Of course we can understand him; he is using words that are familiar to us." Wittgenstein is not declaring that human beings cannot recognize the words used by the lion, but that the decisive meaning of the language of a lion comes from the world of lion. The lioness, if she could talk, would perceive the operations of the world in a particular way, would value and undervalue certain things in the world, and would even experience certain things or events in very different ways than do those who live in a linguistic world different from that of the lion. Wittgenstein's statement implies that lions are shaped and controlled by a world picture different from that of human beings. Lions are worlds apart from human beings, even though both inhabit the same planet.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1953), 223.

What this means in reading the Bible is that there are many worldviews at work in the biblical texts and in the readers of those texts. Another Wittgenstein aphorism from *Investigations* is as follows: "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."³ World pictures are language systems. This does not mean that they are simply the surface grammar of a language such as English, where the language user understands the relationship of subjects, objects, modifiers, and verbs, but a depth of grammar where the relationships of what is believed to be real, what is to be valued, and how people live in the world are located.

What is interesting is that the Bible itself is an ongoing struggle to understand the story-formed world that is given a unique fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. One could say that there are worlds in conflict throughout the Scriptures. Abram (Abraham), as an old man, is called, in Genesis 12, to leave the story-formed world of the Sumerian Empire in order to become a new person, with a new name, a new story, and a new worldview. Jacob finds himself in a struggle with God within the story-formed world of promise; he emerges from this struggle as a new person named Israel. The old story of promise begins to narrate even the life of Jacob, who constantly grasps and overreaches in order to control the outcome of existence. Later in this mysterious story of God, Moses warns the people in the opening eight chapters of Deuteronomy to forsake the gods of Egypt and to reject the gods of the land that they are entering into. Even though these gods are not gods at all, they do have the power of their story, which forms a world. These story-formed worlds are filled with exemplars,

3. Ibid., sec. 115.

practices, symbols, values, and meaning. To pursue these gods or even to practice the Yahwistic faith in a way that other gods require would make Israel a different people, with a different story, values, and purpose. Israel would no longer be Yahweh's people because they would be living a very different story and would be shaped by a very different picture of the world.

Two of the most challenging times in ancient Israel were the Babylonian exile and later the hellenization of the world (i.e., the spread of Greek culture and influence). The Babylonian exile took place over a fifty-year period in the sixth century BC, 587-537. Israel's story seemed to fail it at a time when it needed a story-formed world the most. The symbols of Israel's identity were taken: it was ripped out of the land of promise, the house of Yahweh (the temple) was destroyed, the city of David was also obliterated, and the Davidic dynasty was demolished. How was Israel to interpret/narrate this horrific event? One possible way was to give up on its story of promise and therefore Yahweh. Another way was to believe that the stories of the majority of the world were true. These stories articulated a polytheistic world, and in that world Marduk (the Babylonian king of the gods) defeated Yahweh. A new way of narrating the old story of promise needed to be articulated. This new enunciation became a confession; it was none other than Yahweh who brought about this devastation! The people of Israel accepted this pronouncement as the judgment of their God.

The poets and storytellers of Israel were responsible for formulating this development of the plot in the story of Yahweh and his people. It should be noted that this is a dynamic turn in the plotline of Israel's story. Israel was corrupt, and injustice permeated the land of promise. Judges failed to judge rightly, and the kings failed in their leadership to enforce justice; therefore, the judge of all of the

earth would judge his own people. The Babylonians and their story-formed world did not destroy Israel; they were simply a tool in the hands of Yahweh. They were a part of Israel's story, not the opposite. The story of Yahweh, narrated this way, envelops the Babylonians and the whole world. Israel's God and his story keep hope alive. If it is Yahweh who judges, then there is hope!

The story of Yahweh and his people expanded to eventually eliminate any other gods from their belief system. These inspired intuitions were already active in many of the storytellers and poets, but with exile and eventually the return of the people to the land, these theological insights were solidified. The exclusive claim of Yahweh upon his people developed into the singularity of God. Israel confessed not only Yahweh alone but also that God is one. Soon Israel's story-formed world would be narrated as follows: There is but one God who created the world and elected a people to represent him to all of creation. In the flow of history, this people became enslaved by the most powerful empire on the planet, but the Creator rescued his people from the land of Egypt and gave them a land that was promised. This land flowed with "milk and honey," and the people were to live in this blessed land as a blessing. They were given a political order that reflected the Creator's will for their life together. This Torah was to prosper and protect all of the people, but they failed to live out this political order by pursuing other gods and their alien forms of life. The result of this was a broken covenant and injustice. The Creator, their God, judged them for the purpose of making their world right and then in due course rescued them from the horror of their second bondage. This is the story that informs the second half of the book of Isaiah and the narrative world that began to configure the consciousness of Israel during the Second Temple period. What

should be obvious is that the story-formed worlds are not stagnant but elastically reshaping themselves to make sense of the phenomena they encounter.

For ancient Israel, the hellenization of the world by the Greek empire was another great challenge to participating and practicing the story of Israel's God. Alexander the Great conquered the majority of the known world. A major technique of control that this empire used was to enculturate various people groups with the Greek way of life: practices, values, and institutions. The Hellenistic empires far outlasted Alexander the Great and spread Greek culture through Europe, west Asia, and northern Africa. There were two choices for response to this enculturation: embrace or resist. Hellenistic Judaism combined Jewish religious tradition with elements of Greek culture. This synergism produced great people and effects. Philo of Alexandria and even Saul of Tarsus were influenced by hellenization, and the remarkable accomplishment of hellenization was the Septuagint.⁴ Two of the major centers of Hellenistic Judaism were Alexandria in northern Egypt and Antioch in southern Turkey.

Not every Jewish person or community capitulated to the appeal of Hellenism. Most of the Jews in Judea offered an obvious example of defiance to the universalizing forces of Greek culture. Those who disdained enculturation resisted the common elements of Hellenism: its language, philosophy, and art. They believed this assimilation was deeply immoral and threatening to their beliefs and form of life. Ultimately, this resistance led to a full-scale armed revolt, headed up by the family of the Maccabees, in 167-160 BC. Much of the understanding of this period can be ascertained in the intertestamental material known as the Apocrypha.

4. The Septuagint is the earliest extant Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the course of history, the Greeks gave way to the Romans, but the Roman Empire was also shaped by hellenization. First-century Judaism's responses to the merging of cultures and the empire were multifaceted and generated four major groups within Judaism: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. Each of these groups had a way of preserving its understanding of what was required to be a faithful Jew in a time of Roman dominance. Though Judaism was diverse, it had a common narrative: it believed in one God who created the world, who elected Israel as his people, who entered into covenant with Israel and gave Israel his will in the Torah, and that the people of Israel broke the covenant with their God and each other. The differences between Judaism's four major groups can be perceived in their different interpretations of how the covenant was to be lived out.

It was into this confrontational narrative world that Jesus appeared in history. He also shared the basic story of Judaism and moreover proclaimed a message that was completely Jewish when he preached the gospel of the kingdom of God. This gospel that Jesus announced of the kingdom was anticipated by other first-century Jews, but Jesus's understanding of how God was bringing in his kingdom differed from the understandings of the other groups. Even though each of these groups shared the same initial plotline, each had a different conclusion to the story of how God would be King. As every reader knows, to change the ending of a story is to change its meaning.

With a change of meaning, there are also changes to values and practices. Hopes and dreams are comprehended and even experienced differently. Even though these five groups within first-century Judaism shared a common plotline, they were worlds apart! Jesus and his story-formed people were a threat and had to be eliminated. The other groups

believed Jesus and his people to be antithetical to the purposes of Yahweh. For the other groups, the cross became the answer to what they perceived to be a malevolent embodiment of the story of Israel. In the end, the stories that other first-century Jews participated in would cry out in capitulation, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15, NIV).

Perhaps this is what twenty-first-century parishioners mean when they say, "This is a very good sermon pastor, but in the real world . . ." What is understood as real is nothing less than the story-formed worlds within which each person interprets, experiences, values, and acts. The vocabulary of Christian faith is not the nucleus of the Christian language; its core is its story. When an alien story is used to read the biblical story, the reader understands the biblical story in the light of the alien story. This was the case with the syncretism with Baalism in ancient Israel, and it was the case with Hellenism toward the end of Second Temple Judaism. It was the case with the attempted reconciliation of opposing principles and practices of the Roman Empire and Christianity in the fourth century and with the creation of Christendom, and it is the same with readers today.

To read the Bible Christianly demands that readers become aware of the critical distance between themselves and the text. Reading the Bible through the lenses of race, ethnicity, nationalism, economic status, and even gender is to read the Bible for the sake of another story-formed world. The Bible is a story with a beginning and an ending. It is a story that weaves itself through history and shapes a people capable of seeing everything through its storied lens. These people value differently, because they believe differently. They come to recognize that their way of understanding everything is a new language, a new story. They believe that they are new creatures, the new humanity, born again, filled with the last-days presence of God. They constitute a

new people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. They are the new-covenant people of God, where every value is turned upside down: the last are first, leaders are servants, the poor are blessed, power is made perfect in weakness, and enemies are loved! As the Johannine community reminds the readers of its texts, the world will hate them because it hates their Lord and Savior (see John 15:18). Readers of the Christian Bible belong to a different language group, a different community; they are learning the language of the man from heaven.

Inhabiting a World

Everyday life shows itself as a world shared with other human beings. Individuals do not interpret the world apart from interaction with others. Intuitions are not unique to each person but correspond to the basic perceptions of other people who live in the same linguistic world. As an example of how this shared understanding works, a community may consider an individual to be abnormal if he or she perceives the world differently from the way the community does. Sometimes this means that the community will recognize such a person as mentally challenged or even as malevolent. At other times, the community may identify the person as special, with unique gifts. Either way, such a person is considered outside of the norm. The majority of societies do not allow divergent people to remain in the social order as if they are ordinary. Abnormal people think outside of the linguistic lines of conventional certitude.

There is no doubt that this has caused enormous pain and anguish in the history of the world. People who believe or see differently are often considered evil or ill. Communities have segregated them, burned them at the stake, locked them away in institutions, demonized and exorcized them, and even nailed them to crosses. What this means is that an

individual's experience is unique to the individual, but never is it considered to be entirely private. Personal experience has a public linguistic framework. This shared framework allows persons not only to be in meaningful relationships but also to interpret their own perceptions and feelings. This framework is so embedded in the community and individual persons in that community that quite often the first place of judging actions and perceptions is in the self-talk of each individual. Guilt and pride, dread and hope, are responses of individuals to situations understood in the light of the linguistic world within which they participate. When a person is not able to self-assess, then often the community steps in to clarify, correct, or incarcerate. People who inhabit the same linguistic world bring intelligibility to individual experiences, even if the linguistic world is completely wrong about the phenomena being interpreted: the world is not flat, the sun does not revolve around the earth, and there are no witches.

What brings about this kind of exclusion of privatized experience and interpretation? It is nothing less than the linguistic worlds or grand narratives that constitute communities of memory. Everyone participates in a linguistic community, with its values, symbols, and practices. The meanings that are given to everything are located in these linguistic communities with their narrative worldviews. In other words, languages and value systems are manifestations of particular communities of memory and do not exist outside of the social imagery in which they are used.

It is important to understand how people are habituated into a particular worldview with its beliefs and values. It is also vital to examine how the conversion of individuals and even communities takes place. In order to explore these themes, the reader needs to be mindful of a few questions: What does it mean to be a particular kind of person? How

is character formed? How are persons enculturated into a particular linguistic world? And how and why does transformation take place with persons and communities?

Persons become a part of a particular community of memory and share its narrative worldview principally because they are born into this relational network. These systems are much more than simply arrangements of defense and care. They are structures that bring organization and classification to beliefs, values, and desires. They allow persons to perceive, understand, aspire, and dread. These networks are linguistic! Perhaps one could describe them as W. V. O. Quine does as “web[s]-of-belief.”⁵ They are not only places where answers are found, but they form the background of human questioning and judging. Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*, “I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.”⁶ He also writes in *Culture and Value*, “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.”⁷

Individuals enact the linguistic worlds they are born into because they observe the performance of exemplars, participate in communal practices, hear stories that reinforce some aspect of these worlds, and adhere to symbols that mediate the values of these story-formed worlds. The beliefs and values of these linguistic frameworks have an

5. W. V. O. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

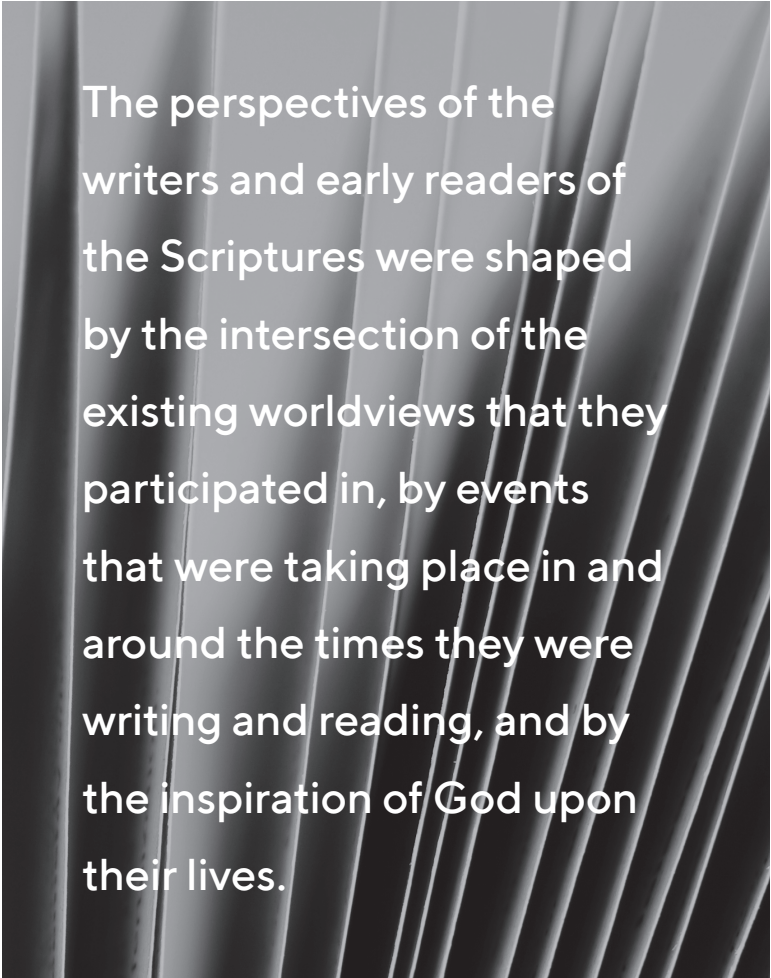
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1969), sec. 94.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. P. Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 16.

underlying grand narrative that gives an interpretation of where reality comes from and where it is going, its ultimate meaning and worth. As individuals participate in a narrative world, they come to recognize the story of their own lives in its light. Understanding oneself as a success or failure, a hero or a villain, a saint or a sinner, is determined by the way one's own life is identified in the light of the larger narrative. This understanding of the self is what shapes the ethical life: how one sees, acts, and even feels in the world. People do what seems natural to them, and what seems natural to them is the story-formed world they participate in.

Concrete examples of this can be described in the way racial and gender perceptions take place for communities.

When toddlers of racially and ethnically diverse groups are placed in a room together, they do not discriminate based upon the color of their skin or even gender. They may grab the toys of other toddlers, but they do not do this based upon ethnicity. Something happens to these toddlers as they become language users in the course of their lives; they become biased based upon a variety of factors. These factors include the families that raise these children, the institutions they participate in, and the media they are exposed to. In other words, the stories that they are told by family, friends, and their culture; the exemplars, considered both good and bad, that they observe; and the practices that habituate them through the institutions that bring order to their social context will shape the point of view of these toddlers becoming adults. If a person grows up in a very racist family, with racist friends and no exposure to people who are racially different, hearing racist stories, the chances are very probable that this individual will be a racist. People are habituated into a way of life with all of its beliefs and values.



The perspectives of the writers and early readers of the Scriptures were shaped by the intersection of the existing worldviews that they participated in, by events that were taking place in and around the times they were writing and reading, and by the inspiration of God upon their lives.

What this means for reading the Bible is that people who are racist or misogynistic will understand passages of Scripture differently than will people who have been shaped in a linguistic community that values people of different races, ethnicities, or genders. If a person is raised in a linguistic community that is very prejudice against women, then that person will read texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:34 as a validation of their point of view: "Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says." Such a person will also disregard the baptismal assumption that Paul uses in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." These selective ways of reading will not necessarily be deliberate on the part of the reader, but it will seem natural to focus on one text and ignore the implications of the other.

What this also means about reading the Bible is that the perspectives of the writers and early readers of the Scriptures were shaped by the intersection of the existing worldviews that they participated in, by events that were taking place in and around the times they were writing and reading, and by the inspiration of God upon their lives. The inspiration of God's Spirit upon the writers and readers of the Bible took place in the world they participated in. Worldviews and historical events were not eliminated because of the inspiring activity of God. For example, early Christians believed that they were entering through baptism into a new reality with its own values and social categories. This new reality is the kingdom of God, which was announced and embodied by Jesus, inaugurated by his crucifixion and resurrection, and enabled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they understood that they

were raised in newness of life and that their citizenship and language were regulated by the man from heaven.

It is important for the interpreter of Scripture to be continually aware of both the perspectives of the modern-day readers and the perspectives of the writers and ancient readers. Perspectivalism is not an opinion, but a form of life. In other words, the way a person sees and understands the world and the events within it is shaped by the milieu of communal life. When the communal activities are examined historically, they reveal a collective way of performing or living in the world. One might say that communities of memory are what they practice. These socially embodied narratives habituate the convictions and values of those who participate in them. The conflicts between narrative worlds are obvious within the Bible: Abram (Abraham) and the Sumerian Empire, Moses and the Egyptian Empire, Baalism and the story of Yahweh, and many other conflictual narrative worlds. Worlds in conflict are obvious between Jesus and the Judaism of his day and between Paul and the “men from Jerusalem” (see Acts 15; Gal. 2). Twenty-first-century readers are also participants in story-formed worlds. If the reader of Scripture is not aware of these various narratives and their embodied ways of living, then the reader will be imprisoned by these worlds.

Perhaps the question for anyone who is beginning to realize the implications of a habituating form of life is, How is it possible to choose a different worldview? What would be the motivation or desire to pursue a different way of believing and valuing? Perhaps the answer to this question is that no one on his or her own can choose a different set of beliefs and values. It takes a miracle from outside of an individual to bring about a crisis that begins the process of transformation. Christians call this miracle the work of God’s grace. The question is, How does this transformation

begin? There are many examples in the Scriptures of how this conversion takes place, with most of these examples sharing some sort of family resemblance with one another. For the purposes of this chapter, three instances in the Bible that describe this alteration of linguistic worlds will be explored: the call of the prophet in Isaiah 6, the Damascus road experience of Saul of Tarsus, and Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3.

Isaiah 6 is a vision of the mystery of God's manifestation: the prophet sees God. This vision takes place during a time of great crisis, "the year that King Uzziah died" (v. 1), which was a period of disorientation for Judah. It was in the midst of this revelatory event that the prophet comes to realize his own orientation toward reality, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (v. 5). What is of great importance for the reader of this vision is that the prophet acknowledges his inability to operate within the linguistic understanding of the divine King he has just seen.

This realization of uncleanness also includes his linguistic community. They share the same fate of "Woe!" Divine grace not only initiates this conceptual change for the prophet but also calls the prophet to the work of being a divine messenger to the people. What is fascinating is that Isaiah is told that his message will fail. The natural response to this news of failure is, "How long?" (v. 11). Yahweh gives what seems on the surface to be a cryptic reply:

Until cities lie waste
 without inhabitant,
 and houses without people,
 and the land is utterly desolate;
 until the LORD sends everyone far away,
 and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
 Even if a tenth part remain in it,

it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled. (Vv. 11-13)

What can this reply possibly mean? Perhaps there are many implications to this judgment oracle, but this much is for sure, it is a description of an epistemological crisis.⁸ Because of Judah's destruction, its old way of knowing and being in the world no longer is able to account for the phenomenon of the community's existence. A new way of perceiving is necessary, and this new way is understood in this oracle as a purification that orients the community toward the divine life. The remains of the community are considered the "holy seed" (v. 13). The destruction of the people suggests that only disorientation allows for the possibility of a new orientation. The structures and symbols of the old way of living are destroyed. It is out of utter befuddlement that a new way of knowing and being is possible: "The holy seed is its stump" (v. 13). Israel will reflect the Holy One, which at least means that they will share in the Holy One's conceptual point of view. Isaiah does not believe that the people will be omniscient, but they will share in "the knowledge of the LORD" (11:9). Because the Holy One is none other than the creator of the world, this new orientation of God's people will correspond to the way reality is created to function.

A second description of an epistemological transformation is taken from the Damascus road experience of Saul of Tarsus. Acts 9 describes the event of Saul traveling toward Damascus to threaten the people of the Way. As he journeyed toward the area, a light from heaven struck him

8. An epistemological crisis is a turning point in the way that a person or a community understands or knows something to be real or of value.

down and blinded him. In this state of disorientation Saul was confronted by both the divine voice of the exalted Lord and eventually his servant Ananias. This disorientation and reorientation describe the phenomenon of seeing and interpreting reality in radically new ways. Saul is transformed into Paul with a new language, the language of the man from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47-49). Paul believes that those who are transformed will bear the “image of the man of heaven” (v. 49), which at least means that they will share his values and language. It is impossible to experience this newness of life without bearing witness to this new life. Old ways of seeing, believing, and valuing have passed away; all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17). To be a new creature is to have a language that is able to narrate both the new life and the old life in the light of the new understanding.

A third description of this linguistic transformation is discovered in Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. In this passage Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night and addresses him as “Rabbi, . . . who has come from God” (v. 2). Jesus immediately responds to Nicodemus by saying, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (v. 3). The kingdom of God, being born again, and awareness are brought into a synergistic relationship in this passage. This Johannine statement of new birth corresponds to Paul’s conception of newness of life. To “see” in this context is to discern and experience the new reality that God is creating. This new existence is given from “above,” the place and perspective of God. Again, it should be noticed that a new orientation is necessary to perceive the kingdom of God. The mystery of this new orientation is the inspiration and creativity of God’s own Spirit. The disorientation of Nicodemus in this conversation is a reminder that old ways of perceiving do not comprehend the new way that God is creating.

What do these three passages of Scripture have in common when it comes to the transformation of linguistic worlds? First, a new orientation is possible only when an old orientation is challenged and eventually removed. The elimination of an old way of perceiving is usually brought about by an epistemological crisis, some phenomenon that challenges old ways of interpreting and understanding. In Isaiah's vision it was the loss of the king, who was the security of the nation, that allowed for the real king to be seen high and lifted up. In Saul's experience, it was his blindness that brought the soon-to-be apostle to a place where he could see the ascended Lord. In the encounter with Nicodemus, it was his utter confusion about becoming born again that brought on his crisis in understanding. A new way of knowing is possible only when an old way of knowing is challenged. This challenge is brought on in the three texts by the inability to narrate the phenomena with the old story-formed worlds. A phenomenon must either be interpreted by the longstanding narrative framework of a person or community, or the phenomenon will create an epistemological crisis that will reshape the old framework into something new. Jesus says it this way, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved" (Matt. 9:17).

A second commonality of these passages is that a new narrative understanding is introduced. This new narrative includes both the ability to interpret the phenomenon that causes the epistemological crisis and also the ability to narrate the old narrative understanding in the light of the new. Isaiah was not only able to see God as the King "high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1, KJV) but also to understand himself and Israel as "a people of unclean lips" (v. 5). Saul was able not

only to hear the exalted Lord but also to narrate his old life as a persecutor of the church. The Nicodemus encounter was able to reorient the reader of John to the reality of life in the kingdom. It also enabled the reader to narrate life outside of the kingdom as the old decaying way of humanity.

Converts to early Christianity went through a process in their attempt to learn the language that would allow them to interpret and experience the world differently. George Lindbeck describes this when he writes the following:

Pagan converts to the catholic mainstream . . . were first attracted by the Christian community and form of life. The reasons for attraction ranged from the noble to the ignoble and were as diverse as the individuals involved; but for whatever motives, they submitted themselves to prolonged catechetical instruction in which they practiced new modes of behavior and learned the stories of Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. Only after they had acquired proficiency in the alien Christian language and form of life were they deemed able intelligently to profess the faith, to be baptized.⁹

In all of these cases the old is understood in the light of the new.

A new way of perceiving the world is not something that is easy for individuals or communities to experience, much less accept. If something has always been interpreted one way, then to be told it is another seems like nonsense to anyone who is held captive by a particular conceptual picture. It is only when a person or community is enabled to interpret the phenomenon differently that a new lens to understand the world becomes a reality. In this dawning, the old way of seeing is still recognized and understood as a former way of

9. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 132.

interpreting the world and phenomena in that world, but it is done from the vantage point of the emergence of a new way to interpret the phenomena. The tendency for most communities and individuals is to hold tightly to the established ways of believing and interpreting the world. Transformation is not as simple as saying to oneself, "I'm going to change my way of understanding the world."