



Becoming a Spiritual Reader of Scripture



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Scripture is one of God's most fascinating gifts. It is both wonderfully uplifting and – on occasion – deeply troubling. Sometimes it points us directly to Christ. Other times it is hard to see how it is pointing us to Christ at all. On the one hand: anyone can read it. On the other: it is clear that some people seem particularly gifted to read it well, and to teach it and preach it for the benefit of others. It can be comfortingly familiar and strangely challenging, a little like a deeply committed friend who will be with us through thick and thin.

Then there is the obvious observation: this strange and wonderful gift of Holy Scripture can sometimes cause more trouble and dispute in the Church than almost anything else. Hence the familiar question: 'How should we interpret it?' What is the right way of handling it? And so we turn to hermeneutics, only to end up arguing over who has the right hermeneutic; so that now there are competing views over how we should interpret Scripture. Let us be honest: no matter how many good books there are on hermeneutics, the prospect of everyone in the Church agreeing any time soon on how to read the Bible seems remote.

Reading and the spiritual life

So what is to be done? Should we just give up on hermeneutical thinking and let everyone read as they wish? As the apostle Paul would say: by no means! I suggest that one way of making real progress through the interpretive maze is to turn the question around. Rather than asking 'how should one interpret the Bible?', we might ask instead '*what sort of reader should one be in order to read the Bible?*' In general terms, this makes

hermeneutics – at least in part – a question of *character*. More specifically, it gives us a framework for thinking about how broader questions of spirituality relate to the practices of Bible reading.

One's spiritual life makes a difference to how one reads the Bible. However, the basic significance of this simple point has been obscured in the modern era, as all the attention has been given to questions of method. For as long as Bible reading has been parsed out in terms of technical practices of assessing meanings, structures, contexts, motives, and so forth, it has been hard to see what real difference one's spirituality can make. Does the devout person of prayer have a better grasp of Greek grammar than the spiritually disinterested expert in languages? Clearly not.

Against examples such as this, it became common to concede that Bible reading is really a matter of technical competence. What space is then left for the relevance of the spiritual? In practice, all that is left is the realm of personal appropriation or 'application'. Christian X and Unbeliever Y can both see that Paul is saying 'Practise hospitality' (cf Rom 12.13), and X ponders transformatively on how to do so, while Y writes a learned dissertation on social structures and generosity in the Graeco-Roman world.

Two equal and opposite responses to this line of argument should be resisted. We should not say that there is no merit in cultivating technical expertise on all matters linguistic, contextual or historical, as if there were nothing to be gained from careful critical reading of Scripture. But neither should we say that

these matters are the one thing needful for good Bible reading.

Instead, we should recognise that there is a much more complex relationship between one's character and spiritual life on the one hand, and what one is able to see in the text on the other. The example of 'practise hospitality' is relatively straightforward, especially since it is a direct injunction in a New Testament epistle. Hence it seems to offer the two possibilities described above. But really there are always many factors of insight and perception at work in the act of reading, and thus who we are as readers makes a difference, not merely in terms of personal application, but on the fundamental level of what we can see or comprehend in the text in the first place.

This is not a new insight. One finds it in Proverbs: 'The hearing ear and the seeing eye – the LORD has made them both (20.12).' Or in other words: the ability to see (and indeed to understand) is itself a gift of God. When it comes to reading, the result is that different readers see the text – or more precisely the very content of the text – differently. Interpretive methods have their place, but they operate within a context that is inseparable from the person of the interpreter.

Despite the prevalence of the modern 'competence' model in 'How to Read the Bible' books, it should be entirely plausible to Christians that the spiritual life is one key factor in how one reads Scripture. How we interpret is not a completely separable activity from how we live more generally. Reading the Bible well is thus one part of the Christian's spiritual discipline, which puts Scripture reading right alongside so many other aspects of the Christian life: part of the life-long pursuit of wisdom, or holiness, or – to put it in its most general terms – of God.

Becoming spiritual readers

The question, then, is how to proceed with thinking this through in a constructive way, rather than leaving it at the level of a general observation. How may we become appropriately spiritual readers of Scripture?

I am sure there are as many answers to this question as there have traditionally been understandings of how to grow in the spiritual life. However, one answer which has perhaps been relatively under-explored concerns the scriptural resources which lie to hand in shaping our understanding of how to read Scripture well. Of course, this sounds at first like a circular argument. But the point is not to develop some sort of scriptural proof that Scripture must be read in a certain way. Instead, more modestly, the point is that Scripture does offer models for and insights into the spiritual life. It even models reflection upon the Word of God. As such, Scripture offers pointers to the kinds of spiritual practices and qualities which might serve to inform our Bible reading. One approach to this topic which is currently gaining renewed attention is by way of a return to the long tradition of thinking of the Christian life in terms of the cultivation of virtues.¹

What sorts of virtues might help us to read Scripture? We can begin to answer this by looking at how our reading could be characterised as wise, sensitive, humble, obedient, charitable ... It would be an interesting exercise in self-reflection for any preacher or teacher to

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ask themselves what sort of character is at work in their acts of reading the Bible. Do we read with trust or with suspicion? Do we read charitably or with hard hearts? Is our manner of reading itself informed by our Christian faith? And is it appropriate then to talk of the spirituality of our Bible reading?

This last way of putting it suggests that we might with profit consider a particular kind of virtue which is relevant to the task of interpretation: an 'interpretive virtue'.² An interpretive virtue is a disposition of the heart and mind that arises from the desire to achieve good interpretation. In other words, a wise reader desires to offer a wise interpretation, a faithful reader desires to offer faithful interpretation, and so on. We need to say – what should be obvious – that this is not a mechanical operation: wise interpreters will make mistakes, and will misread or misinterpret on occasion, but they will still be worth listening to in general. Down this path lies a whole new way of characterising 'good interpretation', alongside more familiar concerns with technical precision and accuracy. To be specific: one key part of what makes an interpretation good is that it *contributes to the cultivation of virtue* among the text's readers and hearers. Reading the Bible well, on this understanding, is inseparable from the broader spiritual questions of life and its goals. In certain important ways this is an understanding of reading Scripture which is not a million miles away from Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, sometimes called (I think rightly) the first great Christian discussion of hermeneutics.³

One critique which is often made of this whole 'virtue' approach to biblical interpretation is that it seems to reverse what might be a standard way of looking at the issue. In the past, so the argument goes, we have understood that Scripture speaks to our moral and ethical concerns and shapes the kind of person we should be. But on this virtue understanding, it seems as if the moral and ethical qualities once thought to flow out of the reading of Scripture have mysteriously become 'entrance requirements' to reading Scripture well in the first place. Where is one supposed to come upon these virtues in such a way that one is then ready to approach Scripture? It all might seem back to front.

Character and virtue

Certainly there are Christian traditions throughout history which have been uneasy with the notion that Christian character can be cultivated in virtue terms.

NOTES

1. See more generally my *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

2. See *The Virtuous Reader*, pp. 18–21. I have developed the idea from the work of Kevin Vanhoozer.

3. See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Teaching), especially book 1.

4. I summarise here my reading in *The Virtuous Reader*, pp. 71–101.

5. See further my "'I Perceived in the Books": The Portrait of Daniel as a Spiritual Student of Scripture', in Andrew T Lincoln, J Gordon McConville and Lloyd K Pietersen (eds.), *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), pp. 111–27.

6. An earlier version of some paragraphs in this piece appeared as 'Reading the Bible Well: A Question of Virtue? Biblical Narrative and Interpretive Virtue', *The Reader 107/3* (Autumn 2010), pp. 6–7, which focused on the test-case of reading the Bible with humility.

One thinks of the apocalyptic strand of early Christianity, or perhaps especially the Lutheran tradition. These approaches might rather emphasise the disruptive grace of God which works in and through precisely those who do not match up to our understandings of who is good, noble, righteous, and so forth. This is an important point and there is obviously truth in it.

In response, I would say that in practice God's gracious action and human virtue should be understood as working together. There is no need to set this up as if it were an either/or option: where we either derive virtues from Scripture or bring them already fully formed to Scripture. My own view is that Scripture has much to say to the subject of what constitutes a virtue. As a result,

reading Scripture is a spiritual discipline both like and unlike any other

we must consider a kind of 'virtuous circle' or 'virtue feedback loop': I learn from Scripture the desirability of *humility*, let us say. I seek to approach Scripture humbly. As I do so I find the portrait of the humble life becoming clearer (or, at least in theory, I might realise I am on the wrong track – Aristotle, for example, thought that magnificence was a virtue and that humility was the failure to attain magnificence, but in this case I think we would find that Scripture commends humility to us, somewhat counter-culturally for its day, and that it is a Christian virtue). So in turn my own practices of humility develop in a more informed and potentially disciplined way. Which clarifies yet further my insights on humility as I read.

Many who are interested in virtue suggest that the clearest way to grasp how a specific virtue is understood is to see how it plays out in some narrative context. A story which exemplifies a virtue in action may well reveal to us more clearly what that virtue actually is.

At this point, clearly, we have opened up a massive field. To work out 'how to be a spiritual reader of Scripture', I am suggesting, we might want to consider a range of virtues in the Christian life, and in each case explore narratives in Scripture which exemplify how those virtues work so that we can better grasp what they are. That is (appropriately enough) a lifetime's project. In practice we can only make a start with particular narratives and particular virtues and let the bigger picture emerge.

Let us consider briefly the core issue of wisdom, enjoined upon us in many texts including, memorably, Proverbs 4.7: 'The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.' Well, yes – who is going to dispute that being a wise reader is a good thing? But what does it mean? If we are on the right track, one way ahead is to look for narratives which offer exemplars of wisdom in practice, which will thereby allow us to refine our notion of what counts as wise reading.

The famous story of Solomon with the two prostitutes in 1 Kings 3, each alone with their baby, and asking

him to adjudicate whose baby has died and whose has lived – this story, 1 Kings tells us, demonstrates to 'all Israel' that 'the wisdom of God was in him [Solomon]' (3.28). There is no space to go into a full analysis of this memorable tale,⁴ but I suggest that it shows us Solomon as a man who recognises that the way to get to the heart of a matter is to think about its ongoing implications for the future, rather than directly to worry about what happened in the past. Is there here a lesson for us as Bible readers: a wise reader can balance the quest for what happened (in the world back behind the biblical text) with a serious consideration of what will happen as a result of this or that interpretation. It is when Solomon proposes cutting the baby in half that he forces at least one of the two mothers into acknowledging the awfulness of this consequence, and this is the wise response to this awful suggestion. Thus it is a focus on the future which actually unearths the relevant details of the past. Should we take seriously this notion – this scripturally shaped notion – that wisdom is about navigating into the future as much as understanding the past?

If so, then one key aspect of being a wise reader of Scripture, according to this Old Testament passage, is to think ahead: what fruit will our interpretations produce? Of the many truths and insights which are always possible from any biblical text, which ones will provoke wise and godly behaviour? Here, then, a particular Old Testament text plays its part in shaping our vision of what it means to be a wise reader.

There are rare occasions when one can pursue this approach with texts which themselves focus on the act of reading. Psalm 1, strategically placed at the front of the Psalter as a kind of hermeneutical guide to reading the psalms which follow, reflects on a portrait of reading as being like a tree planted by a stream of water, producing fruit in season. Daniel 9 shows us Daniel reading Scripture and turning to prayer. Interestingly, the book of Daniel has much to say about Daniel's spiritual life, and nothing to say about *how* he read the text. Is that because it thinks that reading Scripture well is a spiritual matter?⁵

Conclusion

We have had space to consider only a few brief Old Testament examples of scriptural passages that can inform our understanding of being a spiritual reader of Scripture. This is an exciting way to see afresh how Bible reading is one integrated aspect of discipleship. Reading Scripture is a spiritual discipline both like and unlike any other. It does have its own particular technical demands, as we have noted. But like other disciplines it requires an engagement of heart and soul and mind and strength all together, which is as it should be. There will be no short cuts to becoming a spiritual reader of Scripture.⁶