

# How to Read the Bible

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

I forget where I first saw the book titled, "How to Read the Bible," but I recall a certain amusement. I thought, well find a comfortable chair, open the book and read. I think there may be a dozen books in print with that title.

I came across a short review by a features editor of "First Things" magazine. It was very useful in understanding at least one thing that the author was driving at. The article was titled: "The Bible Inside and Out" by R.R. Reno. Professor Reno noted that to this day modern Biblical scholars ignore all interpreters of the Bible except other modern Biblical scholars.

Now I had noticed that but I had never put my finger on it quite like he did. What caught his interest was the book by James L. Coogel "How to Read the Bible, a Guide to Scripture, Then and Now". He said "In the world of modern Biblical study, Coogel rose to rarified heights becoming a star professor of Hebrew at Harvard University, a position he recently left to live and teach in Jerusalem, but he never really worked as a normal Biblical critic in the modern world. Early on, he cultivated an expertise in the old readers of the Bible. The interpreters who were so crucial in the origins of Judaism and Christianity". He went on to say: "Immersed in the work, early interpreters", Coogel noticed a strange feature of modern Biblical study. "The critics today seem to have a great appetite for any new piece of evidence or striking theoretical insight that promises a fresh approach to the Bible".

Now as I said, I noticed this a long time ago, that what really turns scholars on is some new angle, some fresh approach, some off the wall idea, that will get them published. That of course is the bottom line for scholars.

Reno went on to say "That quite literally no stone has been left unturned except one. To this day, modern Biblical scholars ignore all interpreters of the Bible except other modern Biblical scholars".

Now I first noticed this myself when I was doing research into the higher criticism of the Old Testament. I was living in England and teaching there for a time. I think it's the function of the way academia works in the necessity of getting published.

Reno went on to say: "James Coogel identifies four assumptions that all of the ancient readers implicitly adopted. None of which find any welcome in the modern approach". Now I want to pull out and examine these four assumptions because they really do relate to how one reads the Bible.

## **Assumptions**

The first and most important assumption was that "the Bible taught lessons directly to the readers in their own day".

The second assumption is "that ancient readers believed that the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text. Now call it inspiration, call it infallibility, call it whatever you want, the point is fairly obvious, ancient Jews and Christians wanted to live in accord with God's will, which could hardly be done by way of old books, unless they took them to be divinely authorized for that purpose". That was the end of that quotation.

The third assumption is, "that the Bible has no contradictions or mistakes".

The fourth assumption is that "it has hidden meanings that must be ferreted out by all sorts of creative interpretive strategies".

Now these are the four basic assumptions of all the ancient readers of the Bible, be they Jews or Christians. I would like to beg your indulgence to talk about these assumptions in a little more detail.

### **First Assumption**

First, the Bible taught lessons directly to readers in their own day. Now to me this seems fairly obvious. When Paul wrote his two letters to the Corinthians, who can argue that they weren't intended to be understood by the Saints at Corinth at the time. When you read the gospel accounts, the same thing appears if you read carefully. Each of the writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had a readership in mind. I have no reason to believe that they expected their readers to appear one thousand years later, much less two thousand years later. There is every indication, frankly, that those men really thought it was possible that Christ would return and set up His kingdom in their lifetime. They certainly had no idea that it would be so long and that you and I would be struggling with their writings all this time later.

Now to illustrate what I am talking about, I submit two passages. First Matthew 26 verse 2, Jesus is quoted saying: "You know that after two days is the feast of the Passover and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified." John, speaking of the Passover, in John six verse four says: "The Passover, a feast of the Jews was near." Did you notice the difference? John frequently does this regarding the customs of the Jews, assuming his readers were not familiar with them. You see this again and again in John. "The Passover, the feast of the Jews", "The Feast of Tabernacles, the feast of the Jews". He is clarifying for a Gentile audience, what he is talking about, which Matthew doesn't do, because Matthew was assuming his audience was Jewish.

I think that's pretty good. It is an obvious example of a case where they wrote lessons to the people of their own day. The writers of the gospel were keenly aware of who would be reading their work. As I said, it's fair to say they didn't think about you and me.

So it's also helpful to at least ask how a given passage was understood by those who first read it. Now, this is a little more obvious in the New Testament than it is in the prophets. But even in the prophets it's important to know how the people who heard these men preach, understood what they were saying. After all, we know that Jeremiah from his own account went down to the city gate and preached to the people that were there. So they understood what he was saying, at least in their own context.

## Icons

By now, nearly everyone in the world is familiar with Icons. If you use a computer at all, you find your screen loaded with these little images. Each of them is designed to call up a whole series of commands that are needed to accomplish a task on the screen. If it weren't for them, computers would be far more difficult to use and the instructions would be insufferably complex, and the icons need to be intuitive, that is they need to suggest to you whatever it is that they do. There is a tiny little printer on the screen which suggests that if you click on this, you will start the process of printing your document.

There are no pictures in the Bible. However, there are icons nonetheless. I call them verbal icons. Now let me show you what I mean by this and suggest how you might enrich your Bible study by knowing this.

The prophet Zechariah in Zechariah chapter 5, beginning in the first verse says: "I looked again. And there before me was a flying scroll. {2} He asked me what do you see, I answered, I see a flying scroll, 30 feet long by 15 feet wide" This thing is huge. {3} "He said to me, "This is the curse that is going out over the whole land for according to what it says, on one side, every thief will be banished and according to what it says on the other side, everyone whose swears falsely will be banished". He's talking about a scroll. You roll a scroll out and it has two sides, you write on one side, you flip it over and then you write on the other side.

Now I talk about this in much greater detail in my series of programs on the minor prophets where I go through Zechariah in particular, which is loaded with these verbal icons. What I take from this is, that the first people who read this, knew that a scroll was an icon for judgment. Here it is called a curse, and intuitively you know that this thing is flying, it is not going to take long to get there, and you also know intuitively based on the size of the thing that is described here is going to be big.

Zechariah goes on to explain, what it is and how big it's going to be and what it's all about, but for his initial readers when he said a flying scroll, BINGO, they knew in some degree what he was talking about. Now if you are into the language and the culture, you would not have to be told this. The scroll is a curse, so when you come to the book of Revelation and you encounter a scroll sealed with seven seals, you should immediately think of some really bad news in that scroll and some bad times are ahead.

The verbal icon calls images and ideas to mind that don't have to be explained in any great detail. The reader is then prepared for what is to follow. So for me, I think this addresses and validates

the first assumption. The Bible taught lessons directly to readers in their own day, and it's really helpful to keep that in mind.

You can enrich your own Bible study if you've got a good concordance and when you come across some of these verbal icons you can try to track them down, in all of the places where they are used in the Bible, and see if you can get a feeling for what images they invoked in the minds of the people and what the thought process was, that they suggested to those people.

### **Second Assumption**

The second assumption is that ancient readers believed that the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text. Professor Reno summarized it well when he said "Call it inspiration, call it infallibility, whatever you want to call it". He said "Ancient Jews and Christians wanted to live in accord with God's will, which could hardly be done by way of old books, unless they took them to be divinely authorized for that purpose". In fact, unless we take the books of the Bible that way, we have no idea how to live in accord with God's will. Your guess is as good as mine. Never mind all the arguments about the method of inspiration, the ancient readers read the Bible as a divinely given text. Modern readers, to often do not do that, and they end up with no foundation for belief.

How does one lay this foundation? I would suggest that the person who wants to decide how to take the Bible should start, not with Genesis, but with Matthew. Then he or she should read Mark, then Luke, then John. Well, aren't they all telling basically the same story? Well yes, but you see, that's the point. You have four witnesses here to the life, the message, the teachings, the doings, the miracles, the death, burial and the resurrection of Jesus. You have the life of Jesus laid out in the words of four witnesses. When you get through reading the writings of these men, you have to decide whether you believe them or you don't believe them. If not, you should call yourself an agnostic and give it up. Perhaps later, God will address this ignorance in a way that you can finally understand. That is not an insult, ignorance means "you don't know".

Once a person has addressed the four witnesses of Jesus' life, works, message, death and resurrection, he is then ready to read the rest of the Bible, because Jesus affirmed it.

Then the question is as one reads is, How does this text speak to me? What does it tell me about God? What does it tell me about myself?. What does it tell me about relating to God? This is really a crucial thing. It isn't that anybody has to do the Bible's work for it, the Bible does it own work. To the person who systematically and regularly and consistently reads the Bible, the Bible will work its way into his consciousness like leaven works its way into bread, and it will affect everything in his life.

### **Third Assumption**

The third assumption is that the Bible has no contradictions or mistakes. This kind of follows naturally from the second assumption. If the Bible is a divinely given text and if we have a desire to live within God's will, then we can trust His revelation to us of that will. If there appears to be

contradictions that grow out of our own limitations or out of some faulty assumptions, then we can deal with those.

Professor Reno cites Barruk Spinoza, a European Jewish theologian of the 17th century, and I am going to read what he said because of it's important to understand. According to Spinoza, and I am citing Reno here: "Scripture should always be assumed to mean, unless clearly proven otherwise, exactly and literally what it says. The Scripture has lessons for us today, on the contrary, Scripture can be understood only in the context of its own time" says Spinoza, "And presumably some portion, perhaps most of what it says was never intended as eternally valid, but only applies to people living then or even just some people living then. Is Scripture perfectly harmonious and without error? Hardly! Prophets contradict one another, and seem to agree only on a few essentials. Moreover, some of the things that the Bible says contradicts our current understanding including modern science. Is all Scripture divinely given or divinely inspired?" Spinoza was cagey in answering this question, "But the subsequent tradition has clearly come to view beliefs and design inspiration as a pious, impediment to genuinely critical attitudes". End of quotation.

One can throw his hands up and say "Good Grief!" Spinoza states this rather boldly and there are oddly any number of fundamentalists, Jewish and Christian, who take a similar tack, along with many scholars. What do I mean? I mean those people who insist on taking the Bible literally in all of its parts.

### **Literalism**

Literalism is a great enemy of understanding the Bible. Shall I give you an example? Glad to. Here is a simple commandment from the law of Moses. Deuteronomy 25 and verse 4: "You shall not muzzle the ox while he treads out the grain". A big image pops to mind of an animal going around in a circle, turning threshing things around and walking and you got a muzzle on him so he doesn't eat the grain, because he is beating it out. Now I don't have an ox and there is an entirely different way of threshing grain today. Spinoza might conclude that this law is not eternally valid, but was applicable only to the people living then and at that level of technology and agriculture.

Okay, that is one way of interpreting it. Up to a point that sounds reasonable, but then there's a fly in the ointment. It comes in the New Testament when the apostle Paul, when he is trying to make a point to the Corinthians in his letter to them, cited this very Scripture as an authority. You will find in first Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 8: Paul says: "Now am I telling this as a man or doesn't the law say the same thing also? {9} For it is written in the law of Moses. You shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox while it treads out the grain". Now Paul asked the logical question, "Does God really care about oxen or does He say it for our sakes?" For our sakes, no doubt this is written, "that he that plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope." Now this is a remarkable statement that he makes here and it blows to smithereens the idea that Spinoza advanced that these prophecies were only for their own time, only for those people, that might not apply to anybody else and they should be taken literally. Paul doesn't take it literally. He takes it in a figurative sense, and when he says, "It is written for our sakes", what does he mean? He means for our sakes, as human beings living in

the world, and living in covenant with God. He is citing the Law of Moses as an authority for teaching the church that they should fairly compensate their ministers. So for Paul this limited way of reading the Bible is not correct. He takes the principle of law as applicable in all generations to all men.

### **What Should You look for First?**

What one should look for first in reading the Bible is the principle that underlies it. The truth is, that in generations past, the Bible was a part of the cultural DNA of this country and of all the English-speaking countries. The Bible informed our conscience, shaped decisions without even realizing that it was shaping those decisions. The Bible, if it's read consistently has its own way of penetrating the heart and the mind and influencing behavior. And to the degree that people continue reading the Bible, they themselves become a kind of leaven of the society they inhabit. As Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman takes and hides a small measure of it in a larger measure of flower, kneads it and works it and finally the leaven penetrates the whole lump of dough" (Matthew 13:33).

### **An Ox and an Ass**

Now I would like to give one more illustration to make this point. In Deuteronomy 22 and verse 10 is this law: "You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together". Now I had to wonder when I read this, why anyone would ever have to be told anything like this. Have you ever looked at an ox? Do you realize how big those things are compared to a little donkey? How could you possibly make that work? In fact, I have my doubts that anyone in the entire history of the world ever did.

One day I was walking across the campus in England with a fellow teacher and we saw a young man and a young lady walking together. I remarked to my friend, "I don't know why but I just don't think that combination is going to work". Without missing a step my friend replied: "Oh that's easy, You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together". Since the young man resembled one of those animals, we had a good chuckle, but my friend had put his finger on the point of that law.

### **Aphorisms**

A few of the laws and principles in the Bible are stated as aphorisms. If you take that literally you miss the whole point. The first people who read Deuteronomy probably had this aphorism in their cultural heritage. Moses pulled it into the law to make his point. There are some differences that are so great, they should never even be attempted. Paul borrows this theme when he writes that we should not be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 6:14). He didn't cite the scripture, he didn't need to, his readership knew it.

### **Fourth Assumption**

Coogles fourth assumption kind of interests me in that the Bible has hidden meanings that must be ferreted out by all sorts of creative interpretive strategies. That seems to be true enough. Jesus' parables are a case in point. The last thing you want to bring to a study of the parables is the Spinoza principle of literal interpretation. I would add, it's okay to bring common sense with you when you read the Bible. At least one poor soul that I heard about, who followed this Spinoza principle, followed Jesus instructions to the letter. When Jesus said "If your right hand offend you, cut it off" (Matthew 5:30). So he used a band saw and did exactly that. In fairness, I think he may not have been quite right before he read that, but nevertheless.

### **He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear**

Eight times in the gospel accounts Jesus adds this caution. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". For example, Jesus identified John the Baptist as Elijah and in Matthew 11 verse 13, He said "All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. {14} And if you will receive it, this is Elijah who is to come. {15} He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Now this is a caution and a suggestion that there will be some people who will not get it. Of course it isn't possible to take this identification of John literally. Elijah was dead and buried and he had not been resurrected in the person of John. Jesus is speaking in figurative language. John is fulfilling the role of Elijah, he isn't Elijah in the flesh.

After the parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus added this warning again. Matthew 13 verse 9: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" {10} "And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" {11} He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given".

Now that came as a jolt, when I first caught on to what Jesus had said here. My Sunday school teacher told me that Jesus taught in parables to make his meaning clear to his audiences. But here Jesus is saying precisely the opposite of that.

If you don't have ears to hear, if you aren't tuned in, you just aren't going to get it.

### **Allegories**

Now we have an explanation of how parables work and what this parable meant in Matthew 13. There is an interesting aside, parables are like allegories. An allegory is a story in which people, things and happenings, have a hidden or symbolic meaning. Allegories are used for teaching and explaining ideas and moral principles, etc. But what if you are not in on the hidden or symbolic meaning. Isn't it simple to just step up and say: What do you mean? Well, yes, but the interesting thing about an allegory is that it may mean one thing to you and something else altogether to me. Why in the world would Jesus do that? Well the reason is that we bring our own selves to the allegory and we interpret it in terms we can relate to. Isn't that dangerous? Yes it is, so are tornadoes, earthquakes and tidal waves, but we live in a world where we have to deal with dangerous things. It is allowing each of us to bring ourselves to the allegory that God allows one person to get the point while another person misses it completely.

### **Read the Book**

If your world view is based on a systematic reading of the Bible, you will understand the parable in a way that you just would not be able to understand without it. And if your current lifestyle includes an adulterous affair, then you will tend to interpret the parable in such a way that it will not condemn you.

The truth is there, but only for those who are willing to accept it. It may be a little hard to get your mind around this but try your best to do it. Your life style, your sins, the way you go about business, all these things are in you and the temptation when you read a parable of Jesus is to interpret the parable in terms of what makes it work in your life. God allows this, because he wants us to be free to choose.

So Coogler's fourth assumption that the Bible has hidden meanings that must be ferreted out by all sorts of creative interpretive strategies appears to be a valid assumption.

My advice is to read the Bible with an open mind, get that comfortable chair, sit down, open the book and read it. Read it often, read it carefully, stop and think about what it is you're reading. When you need it, the Bible will be there for you, but only if you read it often.

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*The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit [RLDEA.com](http://RLDEA.com) where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.*

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How do you read the Bible?
2. What Bible study tools do you use to help with understanding the Bible?
3. Do you think it is important to read through the Bible?
4. Have you ever experienced learning something new when you reread a book, a chapter, or a verse that you didn't notice the other times you have read it?
5. Do you believe the Bible is divinely inspired, the Living Word of God? If so, can you give examples in your life that you knew God was speaking to you through the Bible? If not, why?
6. Have you ever encountered someone who took the Bible too literally? Give some example.
7. Have you ever meant someone who took it too figuratively? Give some examples.
8. Can you think of other examples of "Icons," symbols or descriptions that would have been understandable then but are not easy to follow now, since we are thousands of years from the writing of the Bible?



9. Have you ever had to encounter someone that tries to disprove the Bible's authenticity with examples of "contradictions or mistakes?" How did you handle the situation?
10. Is it possible to go too far with trying to find the "hidden messages" in the Bible?