



UNDERSTANDING
SCRIPTURE

AN OVERVIEW *of the* BIBLE'S ORIGIN,
 RELIABILITY, *and* MEANING

Edited by

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* Psal. 33. 6.
 and 135. 5.
 acts. 14. 15.
 and 17. 24.
 hebr. 11. 3.

* 2. Cor.
 4. 6.

† Hebr. be-
 tweene the
 light and be-
 tweene the
 darknesse.
 † Hebr. and
 the evening
 was, and the
 morning was
 &c.
 † Psal. 136.
 5. Jer. 10. 12
 and 51. 15.
 † Hebr. Ex-
 pansion.

* Deut. 4. 19
 psal. 136. 7.
 † Hebr. be-
 tweene the
 day and be-
 tweene the
 night.

† Hebr. for
 the rule of
 the day, &c.

* 1er. 31. 35

READING THE BIBLE THEOLOGICALLY

J. I. Packer

To read the Bible “theologically” means to read the Bible with a focus on God: his being, his character, his words and works, his purpose, presence, power, promises, and precepts. The Bible can be read from different standpoints and with different centers of interest, but this chapter seeks to explain how to read it theologically.

THE BIBLE: THE CHURCH’S INSTRUCTION BOOK

All sixty-six books of the Bible constitute the book of the Christian church. And the church, both as a whole and in the life of its members, must always be seen to be the people of the book. This glorifies God, its primary author.

God has chosen to restore his sin-spoiled world through a long and varied historical process, central to which is the creating—by redemptive and sanctifying grace—of what is literally a new human race. This unfinished process has so far extended over four millennia. It began with Abraham; it centers on the first coming of the incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ; and it is not due for completion till he comes again. Viewed as a whole, from the vantage point of God’s people within it, the process always was and still is covenantal and educative. *Covenantal* indicates that God says to his gathered community, “I am your God; you shall be my people,” and with his call for loyalty he promises them greater future good than any they have yet known. *Educative* indicates that, within the covenant, God works to change each person’s flawed and

degenerate nature into a new, holy selfhood that expresses in responsive terms God's own moral likeness. The model is Jesus Christ, the only perfect being that the world has ever seen. For God's people to sustain covenantal hopes and personal moral ideals as ages pass and cultures change and decay, they must have constant, accessible, and authoritative instruction from God. And that is what the Bible essentially is.

This is why, in addition to equipping everywhere a class of teachers who will give their lives to inculcating Bible truth, the church now seeks to translate the Bible into each person's primary language and to spread universal literacy, so that all may read and understand it.

THE BIBLE IS CANONICAL

God's plan is that through his teaching embodied in the Bible, plus knowledge and experience of how he rewards obedience and punishes disobedience in a disciplinary way, his people should learn love, worship, and service of God himself, and love, care, and service of others, as exemplified by Jesus Christ. To this end each generation needs a written "textbook" that sets forth for all time God's unchanging standards of truth, right, love and goodness, wisdom and worship, doctrine and devotion. This resource will enable people to see what they should think and do, what ideals they should form, what goals they should set, what limits they should observe, and what life strategies they should follow. These are the functions that are being claimed for the Bible when it is called "canonical." A "canon" is a rule or a standard. The Bible is to be read as a God-given rule of belief and behavior—that is, of faith and life.

THE BIBLE IS INSPIRED

Basic to the Bible's canonical status is its "inspiration." This word indicates a divinely effected uniqueness comparable to the uniqueness of the person of the incarnate Lord. As Jesus Christ was totally human and totally divine, so is the Bible. All Scripture is

witness to God, given by divinely illuminated human writers, and all Scripture is God witnessing to himself in and through their words. The way into the mind of God is through the expressed mind of these human writers, so the reader of the Bible looks for that characteristic first. But the text must be read, or reread, as God's own self-revelatory instruction, given in the form of this human testimony. In this way God tells the reader the truth about himself; his work past, present, and future; and his will for people's lives.

THE BIBLE IS UNIFIED

Basic also to the Bible's canonical status is the demonstrable unity of its contents. Scripture is no ragbag of religious bits and pieces, unrelated to each other; rather, it is a tapestry in which all the complexities of the weave display a single pattern of judgment and mercy, promise and fulfillment. The Bible consists of two separate collections: the Old Testament, written over a period of about one thousand years, and the New Testament, written within a generation several centuries after the Old Testament was completed. Within such a composite array one would expect to find some crossed wires or incoherence, but none are found here. While there are parallel narratives, repetitions, and some borrowings from book to book, the Bible as a whole tells a single, straightforward story. God the Creator is at the center throughout; his people, his covenant, his kingdom, and its coming king are the themes unfolded by the historical narratives, while the realities of redemption from sin and of godly living (faith, repentance, obedience, prayer, adoration, hope, joy, and love) become steadily clearer. Jesus Christ, as fulfiller of Old Testament prophecies, hopes, promises, and dreams, links the two Testaments together in an unbreakable bond. Aware that at the deepest level the whole Bible is the product of a single mind, the mind of God, believers reading it theologically always look for the inner links that bind the books together. And they are there to be found.

THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE BIBLE: A QUEST FOR

GOD

Reading Scripture theologically starts from the truths reviewed above: (1) that the Bible is a God-given guide to sinners for their salvation, and for the life of grateful godliness to which salvation calls them; (2) that the Bible is equally the church's handbook for worship and service; (3) that it is a divinely inspired unity of narrative and associated admonition, a kind of running commentary on the progress of God's kingdom plan up to the establishing of a world-embracing, witnessing, suffering church in the decades following Christ's ascension and the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit; and (4) that the incarnate Son of God himself, Jesus the Christ, crucified, risen, glorified, ministering, and coming again, is the Bible's central focus, while the activities of God's covenant people both before and after Christ's appearing make up its ongoing story. Theological reading follows these leads and is pursued theocentrically, looking and listening for God throughout, with the controlling purpose of discerning him with maximum clarity, through his own testimony to his will, works, and ways. Such reading is pursued prayerfully, according to Martin Luther's observation that the first thing one needs to become a theologian through Bible reading is prayer for the illumination and help of the Holy Spirit. And prayerful theological Bible reading will be pursued in light of three further guiding principles.

First, *revelation was progressive*. Its progress, in its written form, was not (as has sometimes been thought) from fuzzy and sometimes false (Old Testament) to totally true and clear (New Testament), but from partial to full and complete. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days [the concluding era of this world's life] he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). In the Gospels, the Epistles, and the books of Acts and Revelation, readers are now faced with God's final word to the world before Christ comes again. Theological Bible reading maintains this perspective, traversing the Old Testament by the light of the New Testament.

Second, *the Bible's God-language is analogical*. Today's

fashion is to call it “metaphorical,” which is not wrong, but “analogical” is the term that makes clearest the key point: the difference involved when everyday words—nouns, verbs, adjectives—are used of God. Language is God’s gift for personal communication between humans and between God and humans. But when God speaks of himself—or when people speak to him or about him—the definitions, connotations, implications, valuations, and range of meaning in each case must be adjusted in light of the differences between him and his creation. God is infinite and flawless; people are both finite and flawed. So when everyday words are used of God, all thought of finiteness and imperfection must be removed, and the overall notion of unlimited, self-sustaining existence in perfect loving holiness must be added in. For instance, when God calls himself “Father,” or his people in response call him their “Father,” the thought will be of authoritative, protecting, guiding, and enriching love, free from any lack of wisdom that appears in earthly fathers. And when one speaks of God’s “anger” or “wrath” in retribution for sin that he as the world’s royal Judge displays, the thought will be as free from the fitful inconsistency, irrationality, bad temper, and loss of self-control that regularly mars human anger.

These mental adjustments underlie the biblical insistence that all God’s doings, even those that involve human distress, are glorious and praiseworthy. This doxological, God-glorifying tone and thrust marks even books such as Job and Lamentations, and the many complaint prayers in the Psalter. The Bible writers practice analogical adjustment so smoothly, unobtrusively, and unselfconsciously that it is easy to overlook what they are doing. But the theological reader of the Bible will not miss this point.

Third, the one God of the Bible is Trinitarian and triune. God is three persons in an eternal fellowship of love and cooperation within the one divine Being. Each person is involved in all that God does. God is a team no less than he is a complex entity. In the New Testament this concept is apparent, but in the Old Testament, where the constant emphasis is on the truth that Yahweh is the one

and only God, the truth of the Trinity hardly breaks the surface. God's triunity is, however, an eternal fact, though it has been clearly revealed only through Christ's coming. Theological Bible readers are right to read this fact back into the Old Testament, following the example of New Testament writers in their citing of many Old Testament passages.

THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE BIBLE: THE QUEST FOR GODLINESS

Theology is for doxology, that is, glorifying God by praise and thanks, by obedient holiness, and by laboring to extend God's kingdom, church, and cultural influence. The goal of theological Bible reading is not just to know truth about God (though one's quest for godliness must start there) but to know God personally in a relationship that honors him—which means serving Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, the world's real though unrecognized Lord, who came to earth, died, rose, and ascended for his people, and has given them the Holy Spirit. To have him fill believers' horizons and rule their lives in his Father's name is the authentic form—the foundation, blueprint, scaffolding, and construction—of Christian godliness, to which theological Bible reading is a God-intended means. So, three questions must govern readers of the inspired Word:

First, in the passage being read, what is shown about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? What does it say about what the holy Three are doing, have done, and will do in God's world, in his church, and in lives committed to him? What does it reveal about God's attributes, that is, God's power and character, how he exists and how he behaves? One reason, no doubt, for God's panoramic, multigenred layout of the Bible—with history, homily, biography, liturgy, practical philosophy, laws, lists, genealogies, visions, and so on, all rubbing shoulders—is that this variety provides so many angles of illumination on these questions for theological Bible readers' instruction.

Second, in the passage being read, what is shown about the

bewildering, benighted world with all its beautiful and beneficial aspects alongside those that are corrupt and corrupting? Discerning the world's good and evil for what they are, so as to embrace the world's good and evade its temptations, is integral to the godliness that theological Bible reading should promote.

Third, in the passage being read, *what is shown to guide one's living, this day and every day?* The theological logic of this question, through which the reader must work each time, is this: since God, by his own testimony, said *that* to those people in their situation, what does it follow that he says to readers today in their own situation? The Holy Spirit answers prayer by giving discernment to apply Scripture in this way. Those who seek will indeed find.