

How to Read the Bible

Ask Jack series

I want to ask you some personal questions. Do you enjoy the Bible? Do you love it or are you, perhaps, ambivalent in relationship to it? Do you think its possible to read the Bible honestly with integrity so that God speaks to us through its pages?

The “Ask Jack” question for today is, “How can we read the Bible.” How can we read it so that it offers us life? What will it take for us to do so? For starters, to read it this way, it will probably be necessary to be open to the possibility of loving the Bible maybe once again, or maybe for the first time.

I have a confession to make. This “Ask Jack” question is my question. I wanted to talk about this issue. In addition, how we read the Bible will be foundational to several of my sermons this summer in response to your questions.

The Bible is our text. We as Christians share it with Judaism and with Islam. It is an ancient document that can sound somewhat strange to our modern ears. The Bible is our text, but what does that mean? It means something very different than what liberals and fundamentalists are fighting about all the time.

Some insist, and believe the tradition necessitates, that the Bible is a literal and inherent message from God dictated to scribes and intended as instructions to be obeyed. There are many others whose belief, while not quite that extreme, still hold out that the Bible has some version of historical accuracy. In response to the oppressive ways and immoral practices often condoned with reference to the Bible, many people of faith deny that the Bible has much of value to offer us, especially in light of its misuse over the centuries. The truth lies with neither extreme. I also believe that the Bible is still our text. So, I invite you to join me in taking a candid look at how to read the Bible and see just what it says.

According to Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, the Bible as text means some very specific things. It means that its text is “at some distance from the reality” (raw facts) it describes. The Bible is a “stylized, artistic act of imagination that transposed history into artistry.” The “artistic transposition from factual happening (to which we have no access) to text (which we have in our hands) is accomplished by the imaginative work of real agents who intentionally [wrote the] text” (*Brueggemann, Inscripting the Text*)

The text of much of the Old Testament was actually composed between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. That was long after many of the events described, during and following the time of Babylonia exile when there were no kings and few prophets among the Jewish people. The Bible represents remembered stories, events, and confrontations interpreted by scribes who were, in many ways, the true authors of the faith. Their efforts produce a canon of scripture, a real community of Judaism, and the practice of textual interpretation. Similarly, the *texting* of Jesus’ life produced a New Testament canon, a community called the Church, and a continuing practice of textual interpretation. The purpose and result of this text is to tell the stories, remembered events, and confrontations so that God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- is the focal point.

The New Testament text developed gradually for at least 100 years. It was not fully embraced until almost 400 years after Jesus. Even today, it is continually being re-translated. The Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, is a work of art rather than a historical narrative. It is the making of meaning and the expression of deep theological truth. Probably the closest to

historical documents in the Bible are the authentic letters of Paul and even they have been compiled, re-copied, and edited many times.

How should we read the Bible as text? The first thing to keep in mind is the big picture – what scholars call the meta-narrative – the over-arching story. The second thing is our search for certainty.

The overarching story, the meta-narrative, of the Bible is Jerusalem and the Temple. It is the fulfillment of God's promise and the tangible sign of a chosen people. The expectations connected to Jerusalem and Temple are "how it is" and also "how it's not" regarding Israel's experience of God. The exodus from Pharaoh's Egypt to the Promised Land is the journey from slavery to freedom and from scarcity to abundance. Jesus' message is very much the same: freedom for captives, sight to the blind, and hope for the hopeless. His message is the movement from scarcity to abundance and from death to life. His harshest criticism was reserved for the Temple and its leadership.

The search for certainty is often part of our relationship with the Bible. What's the truth? What really happened and what's really happening now? A lot of people are disappointed looking for certainty in the Bible. A lot of people are also disappointed looking to debunk the Bible regarding the issue of certainty and historical reliability. Remember that the text is "at some distance removed from the historical facts." It is an interpretation and provides us a perspective. If you, for example, have experienced divorce in your life some time ago and someone asked you to tell the story of how it happened, how much would your story be a telling of the facts and how much would it be an interpretation of the meaning of those events?

Crossroads Church formed because of a split with Broadway Baptist Church in Westport. We are more likely with time to talk about the meaning of that story than to relay facts. The facts might even be different depending on who's telling the story.

The Biblical book 1 Kings (8: 10-13) describes the dedication of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and that critical moment when God takes up residence in its Holy of Holies. A few verses later, however, Solomon admits (1 Kings 8: 27) "not really." God doesn't really live there.

How can we read the Bible? It needs to be read with what can descriptively be called a *thick interpretation*. The Biblical text contains statements of certainty and also the loss of that certainty. An example of this was the certainty of Jerusalem and God's eternal protection of the Temple.

God promised to protect Jerusalem and the Temple, and to bless the chosen people. Eventually, however, the Temple was destroyed and the people were exiled. There was great suffering. Even the new temple, Herod's magnificent temple, was destroyed in 70CE and has not yet been rebuilt. Expectation of a Messiah was a way to re-interpret God's promise and project it into the distant future with the return of Jesus and the creation of a new Jerusalem.

The Law given at Mt. Sinai seemed to promise certain rewards and punishments from God. But when the people disobeyed, God relented and eventually forgave them. In the wisdom tradition, some people are seen to deserve blessing and others punishment. Success and failure were understood to be signs of God's approval or disapproval. And yet sometimes, bad things happen to good people.

Instead of certainty and a simple, clear explanation of the nature of God, the Bible challenges us to stand up on our own two feet. "Be a man!" "Be a woman!" "Be a growing human being!"

Was Jesus divine? Was he human? Jesus wept then he raised Lazarus from the dead. The two natures were in dialogue in Jesus – in tension – as they are in us. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup to pass by him. His story was not less than the stories of countless martyrs facing death, yet somehow his story is much more also.

The Bible represents God as an anthropomorphic “big guy upstairs” – a theistic deity with a nasty temper, a capacity to rage, and an consistent nature of love. The Bible also represents God as spirit, the ground of all being, and the context for our living, moving, and existing.

Salvation is a big Biblical topic. It is reward as opposed to punishment. It reflects our eternal disposition, but is also about the here and now – a present reality. It is earned by belief or action and it is a free gift and all are saved. I’ll have more to say about that next Sunday when the *Ask Jack* question is about *salvation*.

Meaning emerges in the dialogue of the text with itself. In that conversation, God can be heard. A thick interpretation has many facets, uncertain meaning, and deep and sacred meaning. A thick interpretation incorporates and respects contradictions.

How can we read the Bible for ourselves and find comfort, insight, hope, and truth? How can we read it and experience transforming power? That meaning is found by entering the Bible’s own conversation. Jesus taught using in parables with meaning available only as one entered found herself in the story. The meaning we find is not clear doctrine, but the ambiguous and multi-layered truth of life and God. In the Gospel, a rich young ruler asks Jesus for eternal life. Jesus tells him, “Go sell everything you have and give the money to the poor, then come and follow. The man went away sadly. He was very rich, but it’s not money alone that binds us and keeps us from abundance.

A woman recently widowed told the story about how her life felt meaningless. She decided to give of herself by promising, after her own death, to donate eyes to the local Institute for the Blind. Subsequently, she was invited to dictate some textbooks for translation into Braille.

The first impact was a shock. Two children came to get the papers. They were twins and both were blind. They were not born blind; they became blind through being in an incubator with the wrong temperature after they were born, and this had burned their eyes. One boy was dark and the other fair – very, very beautiful.

I hoped they wouldn’t come anymore. It was too much. What struck me about these kids was their cheerfulness. All the blind people there were cheerful

I felt like a queen because I had eyes. I realized that I was lucky in spite of all that has happened to me. It was good for me to meet them. They even had a sculpture class working with clay. Once I saw them making vases with faces on them. The teacher would say, now touch your own chin, now touch your own nose. The next day I saw the most wonderful series of vases, one better than the other, each with a different face on it. I thought, what wouldn’t we who have eyes accomplish if these people can do all this without eyes?

During the first days I remained shocked. I would close my eyes for a while an imagine what it is like to be blind. Then I began to feel rich. If you do something which you know from the start will not earn you anything, you feel extraordinarily rich. I don’t think I do a great deal for them, and yet what I do feels good to me in my whole being. (quoted in Piera Ferrucci’s *What We May Be*)

Come, everyone who is thirsty; come to the waters
And you that have no money,
Come, buy and eat.
Why do you spend your money
For that which is not bread? (Isaiah 55: 1-2)

Meaning is found in the Bible as we enter into its internal dialogue with the story of our own lives. In that conversation, we can find the Word of God. It is not a Word of intellectual certainty, but of presence, relationship, fidelity, and love. Neither conservative nor liberal interpretations are thick enough for Biblical meaning. How to read the Bible? Read it with eyes open to Mystery. Read it with your life!