

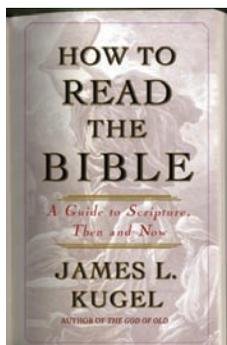
The four ways of reading

Louise Staley reviews

How to Read the Bible

by James Kugel

(Free Press, 2007, 848 pages)



Who wrote the Bible and how should it be read? Christians, like Muslims with their Qur'an, are increasingly signing up for a literalist belief in the good book as not merely divinely inspired, but as a set of instructions direct from God. The rise of fundamentalism in religion is a topic of our time and often the response has come from atheists and secularists, determined to 'prove' religion is bunk—Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* and Hitchen's *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* have been heralded as representing a 'new atheism'. James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible* is not an atheist manifesto—the author is in fact an observant Jew—yet Kugel may yet strike the most telling blow against fundamentalism.

This is a beautifully written, erudite book. To discard it because one is not religious is to miss a reading treat; to refuse it because one is religious is to admit a profound shallowness of faith.

Kugel sets out to compare different traditions in reading and understanding the Jewish Bible, but his arguments are just as relevant for the Christian Bible. Kugel does more than merely pit traditional interpretations against modern biblical scholarship, although indeed that is part of his aim. But more crucially, he argues that the current literalist interpretations of the Bible are just as out of step with traditional religious interpretations as they are with modern biblical scholarship that sets out to 'prove,' in an archaeological sense, where the bible came from.

Kugel steps the reader through four methods of Biblical exegesis: that of the ancient interpreters, early Christians, modern

scholars and modern fundamentalists. The ancient interpreters understood the Bible through a set of assumptions which dictated to them what it 'meant.' Foremost among those assumptions was that the Bible was a cryptic document, full of hidden meanings which needed interpretation to be understood. The remnants of this approach are alive today in the Jewish Kabbalah. Another assumption was that the Bible as a divinely given text contains no mistakes. As a result where the Bible presents God in a poor light, as with the story of Abraham and Isaac, the ancients argued it could not actually mean God expected Abraham to slay his only son, and to do so without expressing any sorrow or misgivings.

Early Christians modified the ancient interpreters' approach in three important ways. Firstly they saw the Bible's stories as allegories; as representations of abstract ideas or virtues and vices. This took away any need to believe everything in the Bible actually happened. Next, early Christian writers saw the Jewish Bible as primarily important as a precursor of the New Testament so went looking for biblical predictions that come true in the New Testament. Like the allegorical approach this way of reading the Bible sees the details of the Bible as representative of something else. Early Christian writers made a final change to traditional Jewish ways of reading the Bible when they chucked out observance of most of the 613 rules listed in the Pentateuch. Saint Paul wrote at length in Corinthians that Christianity required only faith in God and His grace, not keeping to the letter of Jewish law.

This way of reading the Bible remains orthodox for Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians and is antithetical to Kugel's third way of reading the Bible—as a literalist text. *Sola scriptura*, (by scripture alone), became a rallying cry for the Protestant reformation as it meant the Pope and Catholic Church had no divine right to be the arbiter of what scripture meant. This has morphed into what is now seen as Christian Fundamentalism—the use of highly selective Bible verses to support political or ideological positions because 'the Good Book says it's so.' Such a literal approach to the Bible would not be recognised by early Protestants such as Martin Luther, let alone by those in traditional Christian and Jewish traditions.

Modern biblical scholarship, through extensive use of archaeology and the discovery of various ancient manuscripts, has demolished many of the traditional ways the Bible is understood. For example, there is no evidence of the exile from Egypt or that the walls of Jericho came tumbling down (Jericho, it appears, had no walls). Modern scholars believe the Bible was written by at least four people, with very different motivations for doing so. No wonder, as any casual reader of the Bible knows, there are multiple and unrecognisable differences at every turn.

Much of the commentary on Kugel's book has concentrated on what it means for the religious now that modern scholars have shown that the Bible is not a single, divinely dictated, document. Without doubt, the way Kugel presents the conclusions of modern biblical scholarship is deeply interesting, learned and yet accessible to even a person outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. For anyone with even a skerrick of inquisitiveness, this book delivers in spades. But to merely read it for evidence Judaism and Christianity are false because now there's proof that large chunks of the Bible are definitively man made is to miss the point of faith and the point of this book.

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