



# Born to Win

## How to Read the Bible

by Ronald L. Dart

I forget where I first saw the book title *How to Read the Bible*, but I recall a certain...what shall I say... 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, but I came across a short review by the features editor of *First Things* magazine, and it was very useful in understanding what at least one of the authors 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.

*R.R. Reno - The Bible Inside and Out*

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. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. He said:

In the world of modern biblical study, he rose to rarefied heights, becoming Starr Professor of Hebrew at Harvard (a position he recently left to live and teach in Jerusalem). But he never really worked as a normal biblical critic in the modern mode. 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.

*R.R. Reno - The Bible Inside and Out*

He went on to say:

Immersed in the work of early interpreters, Kugel 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.

*R.R. Reno - The Bible Inside and Out*

Now, as I said, I have 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 that 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.

*R.R. Reno - The Bible Inside and Out*

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 at the time. I think it's the function of the way academia works and the necessity of getting published. Reno went on to say:

[...] James Kugel identifies four assumptions that all ancient readers implicitly adopted, none of which find welcome in the modern approach.

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Now, I want to pull out and examine these four assumptions because they really do relate to how one reads the Bible. The first and most important assumption was that the Bible taught "lessons directly to readers in their own day." The second assumption is that ancient readers

[...] "believed that the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text." Call it inspiration or infallibility or whatever you want, but the point is again 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.

*R.R. Reno - The Bible Inside and Out*

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. And I'd like to beg your indulgence to talk about these assumptions in a little more detail.

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? And 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 a thousand years later, much less 2,000 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 own 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:

**Matthew 26**

*AKJV*

<sup>2</sup> 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 6, verse four, says:

## John 6

AKJV

<sup>4</sup> And 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 it again and again in John—“the passover, a feast of the Jews”; “the feast of the Jews, the feast of tabernacles” [John 7:2]. So that 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—a pretty 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 say, it's fair to say they didn't think about you and me. So it's often 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, say, 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. I mean, 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.

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—as the tiny, little printer on the screen suggests if you click on this, you will start the process of printing your document.

Well, 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 it. The prophet Zechariah, chapter 5...beginning in the first verse, he says:

## Zechariah 5

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<sup>1</sup> I looked again-and there before me was a flying scroll!

<sup>2</sup> He asked me, “What do you see?” I answered, “I see a flying scroll, thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide.” [*This thing is huge!*]

<sup>3</sup> And 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, everyone who swears falsely will be banished.”

He's talking about a scroll. When you roll a scroll out, it has two sides. You write on one side, you flip it over, you can 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 [*The Minor Prophets #25–30*], in particular, which is *loaded* with these verbal icons, but 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 if this thing is flying, it isn't going to take long to get there. And you also know, intuitively, based on the *size* of the thing that what's 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. And you can enrich your own Bible study, if you've got a good concordance, when you come across some of these verbal icons to, kind of, track them down—all the places they're 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.

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 says, "Call it inspiration or infallibility or whatever you want, but the point is again 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." And, in fact, unless we *do* take the books of the Bible in 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, too often, do not do that, and they end up with no foundation for belief.

So how does one lay this foundation? Well, 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, the burial, the resurrection of Jesus. You have all these laid out in the words of four witnesses. And when you get through reading these men, you have to decide whether you believe them or you don't believe them. If not, then he should call himself an agnostic and give it up. Perhaps later, God will address his ignorance in a way that he can finally understand. And that's not an insult; ignorance just 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 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 its 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 about his life.

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, well, then we can deal with those.

Professor Reno cites Baruch de Spinoza, a European Jewish theologian of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and I'm 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. Does Scripture have lessons for us today? On the contrary, Scripture can

be understood only in the context of its own time, and presumably some portion, perhaps most, of what it says was never intended as “eternally valid” but only applied to people living then (or even just *some* people living then—“a few”). 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 the Bible says contradict 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 belief in divine inspiration as a pious impediment to genuinely critical attitudes.

*R.R. Reno - The Bible Inside and Out*

One throws up one’s hands and says, “Good Grief!” Spinoza states this rather baldly, 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 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, verse 4:

**Deuteronomy 25**

*AKJV*

<sup>4</sup> You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn.

A big image just pops to mind, all of a sudden, of this animal wandering around in a circle, turning the threshing things around, and walking out...and you’ve got a muzzle on him, so he doesn’t eat the corn as 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 1 Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 8. Paul says:

**Deuteronomy 25**

*AKJV*

<sup>8</sup> Say I these things as a man? or said not the law the same also?

<sup>9</sup> For it is written in the law of Moses, You shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treads out the corn. [...]

Now Paul asked the logical question:

**Deuteronomy 25**

*AKJV*

<sup>9</sup> [...] Does God take care for oxen?

<sup>10</sup> Or said he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that plows should plow in hope; and that he that 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, they might not apply to anyone 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 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, it 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 a people continue reading the Bible, they themselves become a kind of leaven to the society they inhabit. As Jesus said:

### Matthew 13

AKJV

<sup>33</sup> [...] The kingdom of heaven is like to leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

Now, I would like to give one more illustration to make this point. In Deuteronomy 22, verse 10, is this law:

### Deuteronomy 22

AKJV

<sup>10</sup> 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. But 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.

Not a few of the laws and principles in the Bible are stated as *aphorisms*—you take them 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.

Kugel's fourth assumption kind of interests me. It is that the Bible has hidden meanings that must be ferreted out by all sorts of creative interpretive strategies. That seems to be true enough, and 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 is okay to bring common sense with you when you read the Bible. At least one poor soul, that I've heard about, who followed this Spinoza principle, followed Jesus instructions to the letter. When Jesus said:

### Matthew 5

AKJV

<sup>30</sup> And if your right hand offend you, cut it off, and cast it from you: for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body should be cast into hell.

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. 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 in Matthew 11, verse 13. He said:

### Matthew 11

AKJV

- <sup>13</sup> For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.  
<sup>14</sup> And if you will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.  
<sup>15</sup> He that 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:

### Matthew 13

AKJV

- <sup>9</sup> Who has ears to hear, let him hear.  
<sup>10</sup> And the disciples came, and said to him, Why speak you to them in parables?  
<sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, Because it is 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, because my Sunday school teacher told me that Jesus taught in parables to make his meaning *clear* to his audiences. But here's Jesus 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.

Now, we have following an explanation of how parables work and what this parable meant, in Matthew 13. And 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 simpler just to step up and say what 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. But 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 in 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.

If your worldview is based on a systematic reading of the Bible, you will understand the parable in a way you just wouldn't be able to understand it 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 lifestyle, 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 against *your* life. God allows this because he wants us to be free to choose.

So Kugel'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? 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.

Until next time.

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