

Preface

Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today. And because of the importance of Christianity in the culture of the United States, conflict about the Bible is also central to what have been called "the culture wars."

The conflict is between two very different ways of reading the Bible. In language I will use later in the book, it is a conflict between a "literal-factual" way of reading the Bible and a "historical-metaphorical" way of reading it. The former is central to Christian fundamentalists and many conservative-evangelical Christians. The latter has been taught in seminaries of mainline denominations for the better part of a century. Most clergy have known about it for a long time. In the last few decades, the historical-metaphorical way of reading the Bible has become increasingly common among lay members of mainline churches.

This book represents the historical-metaphorical side of the debate. In its pages, I describe a way of seeing and reading the Bible that flows out of my life within two communities: the academic community of biblical scholarship and the scholarly study of religion, and the religious community of the church.

For over thirty-five years, I have been studying and teaching the Bible in private and public colleges, universities, and graduate schools. From the beginning, my special area of study has been Jesus and the gospels. But I have always had an abiding interest in the Hebrew Bible and have consistently taught it as well

as the New Testament at the introductory and more advanced levels.

This book contains the most important and illuminating insights that I have learned about the Bible from this experience. It has three parts. Part One (three chapters) analyzes the present conflict and lays the foundation for a historical-metaphorical approach to the Bible. Parts Two and Three apply this approach and introduce the reader to major parts of the Bible. In Part Two, I treat portions of the Hebrew Bible in four chapters: creation stories, the Pentateuch, the prophets, and wisdom literature. In Part Three I explore major portions of the New Testament in three chapters: the gospels, Paul, and Revelation.

Because much of the book comes out of the experience of teaching at the undergraduate level, I trust that it may be of use in college and university courses. But I am also writing for a Christian audience, and I hope that this orientation will not get in the way of non-Christian readers. Readers in the latter category will sometimes find themselves listening to an intra-Christian conversation (and may perhaps find it interesting).

My desire to relate the book to Christianity flows out of the other community in which I live. For an even longer time than I have lived within the academy, I have lived in the Christian world. I was nurtured in the Lutheran church and remained Lutheran until about age thirty. Then, for almost a decade, my involvement with the institutional church was minimal. My reentry into its life was through a Presbyterian congregation in which I was a "kindred spirit" for a few years. That experience was very nourishing, but I realized that I desired a more liturgical and sacramental form of worship, and so I joined the Episcopal church, a denomination and tradition that I am very happy to call home. I describe myself as a nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic Christian, committed to living my life with God within the Christian tradition, even as I affirm the validity of *all* the enduring religious traditions.

Thus, in addition to treating historical and literary matters, I have sought to explore the religious significance of the Bible—in

particular, its significance for Christians. One of my central purposes in this book is to address the present conflict about the Bible within the church and to provide Christians with a persuasive way of seeing and reading their sacred scriptures, a way that takes the Bible seriously without taking it literally.

As I develop a historical-metaphorical approach to reading the Bible, I also offer an interpretation of the biblical tradition. What I present here is a way of seeing and reading the Bible that flows out of my total life experience: my education as a student of the Bible, my vocation as a teacher of biblical and religious studies, my journey as a Christian, and what I have learned from the journeys of others.

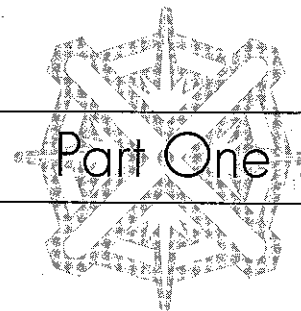
To say the obvious, the book reflects my own subjectivity. There is no point in pretending objectivity, as if I (or anybody) could have a vantage point outside of one's own personal and cultural history. The test of our subjectivities—whether they are primarily provincial, individualistic, or even narcissistic—is whether they make sense to others. And so I invite you into a way of seeing and reading the Bible that has made sense to me and encourage you to use your own discerning judgment about how much makes sense to you.

I am grateful to many people for what I have learned about the Bible. I am thankful for my socialization within the church. Though it included much that I have had to unlearn, it also instilled in me a love of the Bible and an abiding sense of its importance. I am indebted to professors from my past. In my undergraduate years, Paul Sponheim and Rod Grubb (both then professors at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota) were most responsible for generating my adult interest in religion and the Bible. In my graduate education, George B. Caird, my primary professor at Oxford, was immeasurably important.

I am also indebted to authors of books on biblical scholarship from the last few centuries and contemporary colleagues within the academic guild. Some are acknowledged in footnotes, but some are not. Because this book comes out of over thirty years of teaching, I can no longer remember the source of many of the

insights that I report. In virtually every case, I learned them from somebody; a completely original insight is a rare bird. I apologize for not being able to credit each contributor by name.

I conclude with a comment about the dedication of this book to Tom Haller and the community at Ring Lake Ranch, an ecumenical retreat center near DuBois, Wyoming. There my wife, Marianne, and I co-led a retreat for two weeks in late August, during which I also finished this book. On the first day of the retreat, Tom, a United Church of Christ clergyperson from St. Louis, was gravely injured in a horse-riding accident. For a day we did not know if he would live. His accident united the community of retreatants in a remarkably intimate way, especially as we prayed together for his recovery. In particular, I want to thank the staff at Ring Lake Ranch, especially Robert Hoskins, Ann Mebane, Elly Stewart, and its director, Joan Guntzelman. I am happy to say that Tom has recovered and very pleased to dedicate this book to him and the people with whom I lived for two rich weeks in the mountains of Wyoming.

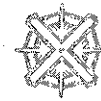


FOUNDATIONS



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Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again



The key word in the title of this book—*Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*—is “again.” It points to my central claim. Over the past century an older way of reading the Bible has ceased to be persuasive for millions of people, and thus one of the most imperative needs in our time is a way of reading the Bible anew.

Reading and seeing go together. On the one hand, what we read can affect how we see. On the other hand, and more important for my immediate purpose, how we see affects how we read. What we bring to our reading of a text or document affects how we read it. All of us, whether we use reading glasses or not, read through lenses.

As we enter the twenty-first century, we need a new set of lenses through which to read the Bible. The older set, ground and polished by modernity, no longer works for millions of people. These lenses need to be replaced. The older way of seeing and reading the Bible, which I will soon describe, has made the Bible incredible and irrelevant for vast numbers of people.

This is so not only for the millions who have left the church in Europe and North America, but also for many Christians who continue to be active in the life of the church.

The need for new lenses thus exists within the church itself. The older lenses enabled Christians of earlier generations to experience the Bible as a lamp unto their feet, a source of illumination for following the Christian path. But for many Christians in our time, the older lenses have become opaque, turning the Bible into a stumbling block in the way.¹ Yet not all Christians agree about the need for new lenses. Many vigorously defend the older way of seeing the Bible. For them, what seems to be at stake is nothing less than the truth of the Bible and Christianity itself.

Conflicting Lenses

Conflict about how to see and read the Bible is the single greatest issue dividing Christians in North America today. On one side of the divide are fundamentalist and many conservative-evangelical Christians. On the other side are moderate-to-liberal Christians, mostly in mainline denominations.² Separating the two groups are two very different ways of seeing three foundational questions about the Bible: questions about its origin, its authority, and its interpretation.

The first group, who sometimes call themselves "Bible-believing Christians," typically see the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God.³ This conviction flows out of the way they see the Bible's origin: it comes from God, as no other book does. As a divine product, it is God's truth, and its divine origin is the basis of its authority. As a contemporary bumper sticker boldly puts it, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." The sticker may be unfair to many who hold this position, but it was created by an advocate, not by a critic.

For these Christians, the Bible is to be interpreted literally, unless the language of a particular passage is clearly metaphorical. From their point of view, allowing nonliteral interpretation

opens the door to evading the Bible's authority and making it say what we want it to say. They typically see themselves as taking the Bible with utmost seriousness and often criticize moderate-to-liberal Christians for watering it down and avoiding its authority. They also commonly see themselves as affirming "the old-time religion"—that is, Christianity as it was before the modern period. In fact, however, as we shall see, their approach is itself modern, largely the product of a particular form of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant theology. Moreover, rather than allowing the Bible its full voice, their approach actually confines the Bible within a tight theological structure.⁴

The second group of Christians, most of whom are found in mainline churches, are less clear about how they *do* see the Bible than about how they do *not*. They are strongly convinced that many parts of the Bible cannot be taken literally, either as historically factual or as expressing the will of God. Some people who reach this conclusion leave the church, of course. But many continue within the church and are seeking a way of seeing the Bible that moves beyond biblical literalism and makes persuasive and compelling sense.

Their numbers are growing;⁵ never before has there been so great an appetite for modern biblical scholarship among mainline Christians. They are responding strongly and positively to a more historical and metaphorical reading of the Bible. At the grass-roots level of mainline churches, a major de-literalization of the Bible is underway.

Though these Christians know with certainty that they cannot be biblical literalists, they are less clear about how they *do* see the origin and authority of the Bible. They are often uncertain what it means to say that the Bible is "the Word of God" or "inspired by God." Though they reject grounding the Bible's authority in its infallibility, they are unsure what "biblical authority" might mean.

Thus it is not surprising that even within mainline denominations, there is conflict about how to see and read the Bible. At the national level, most of these denominations have vocal minority

movements protesting what they perceive to be the loss of biblical authority. At the local level, some congregations are sharply divided about how to see the Bible. The conflict also divides families. In many conservative Christian families, one or more members have either dropped out of church or become part of a liberal church. The reverse is also true: many liberal Christian families have seen one or more of their members become conservative Christians. Some families have been able to negotiate this conflict with grace. But in many, it has been a source of division, grief, and hand-wringing.

The conflict about the Bible is most publicly visible in discussions of three issues. First, in some Christian circles, "creation versus evolution" is the primary litmus test of loyalty to the Bible. The second issue is homosexuality: May practicing gays and lesbians be full members of the church? May the unions of gay and lesbian couples be blessed? May gays and lesbians be ordained? This debate is often cast in the form of accepting or rejecting biblical authority.

A third lightning rod for the conflict is contemporary historical Jesus scholarship. For the last decade, the quest for the historical Jesus has attracted widespread media attention and public interest, especially among mainline Christians. But it has generated a strongly negative reaction among fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical Christians. From their point of view, questioning the historical factuality of the gospels strikes at the very foundations of Christianity.

The Roots of the Conflict

The border between fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical Christians is hard to draw. A fundamentalist has been defined as "an evangelical who is angry about something."⁶ But some conservative-evangelicals are not fundamentalists and have no interest in defending, for example, the literal factuality of the Bible's story of creation or the complete historical accuracy of all the words attributed to Jesus. But what they share in

common is an understanding of the authority of the Bible grounded in its origin: it is true because it comes from God.

Fundamentalism itself—whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim—is modern. It is a reaction to modern culture.⁷ Christian fundamentalism as an identifiable religious movement originated early in the twentieth century in the United States, with its immediate roots in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸ It stressed the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible in every respect, especially against Darwinism and what it called "the higher criticism" (by which it meant the scholarly study of the Bible as it had developed primarily in Germany in the nineteenth century).

The roots of the evangelical understanding of the Bible are older, going back to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Reformation replaced the authority of the church and church tradition with the sole authority of scripture. John Calvin and Martin Luther, the two most important leaders of the Reformation, both had a strong sense of biblical authority. But it was in the second and third generation of the Reformation that claims for the infallible truth of the Bible were made. "Plenary inspiration"—the notion that the words of the Bible were dictated by God and are therefore free from error—was emphasized by those later Reformers.⁹

The realization that these developments are relatively recent is important. The explicit description of the Bible as inerrant and infallible by fundamentalists and some conservative-evangelicals cannot claim to be the ancient and traditional voice of the church. Yet both fundamentalism and the notion of the Bible as "God's truth" (and thus without error) have their roots in an older, conventional way of seeing the Bible widely shared by most Christians for a long time.

An Older Way of Seeing the Bible

Ordinary people did not read the Bible until relatively recently. Until about five hundred years ago, the Bible could be read only

by the very few who knew Latin, Greek, or Hebrew and who had access to handwritten manuscripts, which were expensive to produce and therefore relatively scarce. Two developments changed this. In the middle of the 1400s, the printing press was invented. Less than a hundred years later, largely because of the Protestant Reformation, the Bible was translated from ancient "sacred" languages into contemporary languages.

The accessibility of the Bible to anybody who can read has been a mixed blessing. Positively, it has resulted in a democratization of Christianity. No longer are the riches of the Bible known only to an educated elite. But it has also had negative consequences. It has made possible individualistic interpretation of the Bible; and that, coupled with the elevated status given to the Bible by the Protestant Reformation, has led to the fragmentation of Christianity into a multitude of denominations and sectarian movements, each grounded in different interpretations of the Bible.

Moreover, prior to the invention of the printing press, virtually nobody had seen the books of the Bible bound together in a single volume. Rather, the Bible was most commonly experienced as a collection of separate manuscripts. Indeed, during antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Bible was most often referred to in the plural as "scriptures"—that is, as a collection of books. Once the Bible was routinely bound as a single volume, it became easier to think of it as a single book with a single author (namely, God).

Since then and until recently, the majority of Christians (especially Protestants) shared in common a set of lenses for seeing and reading the Bible. Indeed, this way of seeing was so widespread that most Christians were not even aware of the lenses.

This older way of seeing the Bible has been called "natural literalism." In a state of natural literalism, the Bible is read and accepted literally without effort. Because someone in this state has no reason to think differently, a literal reading of the Bible poses no problems.

Natural literalism is quite different from "conscious literal-

ism," a modern form of literalism that has become aware of problems posed by a literal reading of the Bible but insists upon it nevertheless.¹⁰ Whereas natural literalism is effortless, conscious literalism is effortful. It requires "faith," understood as believing things hard to believe. But natural literalism does not insist upon literal interpretation. Rather, it takes it for granted, and it does not require "faith" to do so.

Fundamentalists and many evangelicals are conscious literalists. But their way of seeing the Bible stands in considerable continuity with the natural literalism of past centuries. Seeing the Bible through the lenses of natural literalism leads readers to the following conclusions about the Bible's origin, authority, and interpretation—conclusions that are similar to those of conscious literalism:

1. *Origin.* The Bible is a divine product. Such is the natural or immediate meaning of how the Bible has been spoken about by Christians through the centuries. The Bible is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit; it is sacred scripture. The Bible is thus not a human product, but comes from God in a way no other book does.
2. *Authority.* The Bible is therefore true and authoritative. The truth and authority of the Bible are grounded in its origin. As a divine product, it has a divine guarantee to be true and must be taken seriously as the ultimate authority about what to believe and how to live.
3. *Interpretation.* The Bible is historically and factually true. In a state of natural literalism, it is taken for granted that what the Bible says happened *really* happened. The only exceptions are manifestly metaphorical language, such as "mountains clapping their hands with joy." Natural literalists can recognize and appreciate metaphor. But when the Bible seems to be reporting something that happened, it happened. Moreover, believing in the factuality of the Bible takes no effort; in a state of natural literalism, there is no reason to believe otherwise.

Though most readers of this book will not see the Bible this way, the perspective is nevertheless familiar. Its familiarity flows in part from the conventional status it held until recently within Christianity. Most of our ancestors two or three generations back were natural literalists. For those of us who are older, perhaps even our parents were.

Many of us grew up immersed in this tradition. So it was for me. As a child growing up in a Lutheran church in the middle of the previous century, I heard the Bible spoken of as "the Word of God." It was thus obvious that I should take it seriously.

In Sunday school, we were expected to memorize the Ten Commandments. They were important because they were in the Bible and were thus God's laws. We sang "Jesus loves me, this I know"—and how did we know? Because "the Bible tells me so."

In common with most Protestants, we Lutherans thought of the Bible as the sole authority for faith and morals. Though I did not know the Latin phrase then, *sola scriptura*—"scripture alone"—was one of the battle cries of the Protestant Reformation. To the same melody as the great hymn of the Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," we sang:

God's Word is our great heritage,
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay;
Lord grant, while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure,
Throughout all generations.

My family and congregation were not fundamentalists. Rather, we were natural literalists, though we favored what we might call "soft literalism." We did not, for example, insist upon reading the Genesis stories of creation literally. It was fine to see the six days

of creation as six geological epochs. We did not have to deny the existence of dinosaurs or the fossil record.

But as "soft literalists," we took it for granted that the most important events in the Bible happened pretty much as they are reported. That at the time of the exodus the sea really did part to allow the ancient Hebrews to pass through. That Jesus really was born of a virgin, really did walk on the water, really did multiply loaves, and so forth. This is what I mean by "soft literalism": taking it for granted that the most central events reported in the Bible really happened.

This older way of seeing the Bible went with an older way of seeing Christianity. The reason for the connection is obvious: the Bible has been foundational for Christianity throughout the centuries. How one sees the Bible and how one sees Christianity go hand in hand.

An Older Way of Seeing Christianity

This older understanding of Christianity was conventional Christianity as recently as a century ago. It is still the common understanding among fundamentalist and many conservative Christians. I will describe it with six adjectives, explaining each briefly.

First, as already mentioned, this older way of seeing Christianity was *literalistic* (whether in harder or softer form).

Second, it was *doctrinal*. Being a Christian meant believing Christianity's central doctrinal teachings. In churches that used either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed regularly, you were a "real" Christian if you could say the creed without crossing your fingers or becoming silent during any of the phrases.

Third, it was quite *moralistic*. By this I mean two things. First, being a Christian meant trying to be good, and being good meant trying to live in accord with the ethical teachings of the Bible, understood as "God's law" (whether understood as a narrow and highly specific code of righteousness or, more broadly, as general principles such as the golden rule or loving one's neighbor as oneself).

The second aspect of moralism seen in the older way of looking at Christianity grew out of the fact that we are not very good at being good. This older way of being Christian was centered on the dynamic of sin, guilt, and forgiveness. Indeed, it is striking how central sin and forgiveness are to this older, conventional version of Christianity. Most Christian worship services include a confession of sin, and most celebrations of the eucharist (also known as the mass, the Lord's supper, or communion) have sin, sacrifice, and forgiveness at their center. Even quite liberal churches emphasize sin and forgiveness. I was struck by this at a recent week-long conference in a liberal Christian setting. Each morning's worship service began with a confession of sin. I thought to myself, "It's nine o'clock in the morning, and we've already been bad."

Fourth, this older way of seeing Christianity was *patriarchal*. It not only used predominantly masculine language for God and people, but also legitimated male-dominated hierarchies in church, society, and family.

Fifth, it was *exclusivistic*. In hard form, Christian exclusivism is the insistence that Jesus is the only way of salvation and Christianity the only true religion. There is also a softer form held by Christians who feel uncomfortable with this claim but fear that letting go of the traditional stance might be un-Christian.

Sixth and finally, this older way of seeing Christianity was *afterlife-oriented*. In the Christianity I learned as a child, the primary meaning of salvation was "going to heaven." Indeed, heaven was so central that if you had been able to convince me at age twelve or so that there was no afterlife, I would have had absolutely no idea why I should be a Christian. Heaven was what it was all about.

Cumulatively, to put this older understanding into a single sentence: "Be a Christian now for the sake of salvation later." To express the same notion in only slightly different words: "Believe in Christianity now for the sake of heaven later." And the emphasis was on "believing"—believing all of this to be true.

But this way of seeing the Bible and Christianity has come un-

done for the majority of people in Western culture. The natural literalism of my childhood could not endure, just as the natural literalism of most of our ancestors has largely disappeared. Conscious literalism, of course, remains. But for many of us, it is not an option.

It is important to note that this older vision is often seen as *traditional* Christianity by both Christians and non-Christians, and by both conservatives (who defend it) and liberals (who reject it). But this older way of seeing the Bible and Christianity is not "the Christian tradition." Rather, it is a historically conditioned way of seeing the tradition (including the Bible) that has been shaped by the circumstances of the past few centuries. Thus the issue is not whether to keep or abandon the Christian tradition, but a transition from one way of seeing it to another. The question concerns the lenses through which we see and read the Bible and the Christian tradition as a whole.

Seeing Again: Our Cultural Context

Why has this older way of seeing and reading the Bible ceased to be persuasive? Why do the older lenses no longer work? The primary reason: who we have become. By "we," I mean most of us in modern Western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I will describe who we have become with four statements. Though not a comprehensive description of who we are, these statements name four factors that affect the way we see the Bible, Christianity, and religion more broadly.

Religious Pluralism

We are aware of religious pluralism. We are aware of the world's religions in a way that most people have not been for most of human history, even as recently as a century ago. We know about other religions to varying degrees and in a variety of ways: from college religion courses, or from our own reading, or from public television series such as those featuring Joseph Campbell and Huston Smith, or from personal acquaintance with people of

other traditions. This is simply part of our increasingly global awareness.

Thus many of us find the exclusivistic claims of the Christian tradition impossible to accept. This is so for both commonsense reasons and Christian theological reasons. Does it make sense that the creator of the whole universe would be known in only one religious tradition, which (fortunately) just happens to be our own?

Moreover, such a claim is difficult to reconcile with the centrality of grace in the Christian tradition. If one must be a Christian in order to be in right relationship with God, then there is a requirement. By definition, then, even though we may use the language of grace, we are no longer talking about grace.

Historical and Cultural Relativity

We are aware of historical and cultural relativity. In only slightly different words, we know about historical and cultural conditioning. We are aware that how people think is pervasively shaped by the time and place in which they live, as well as by social and economic class.

This applies not only to people in earlier times and other places, but also to us. Our concepts, images, language, knowledge, beliefs—even our thought processes themselves—are all profoundly shaped by culture. They are all conditioned by and relative to the time and place in which they originated. We are thus suspicious that any collection of teachings can be absolute truth or the only truth, just as we are suspicious of attempts to exempt anything from this category (such as the Bible or the religious teachings of our own tradition).

Modernity

We are modern people. By this I mean simply that we live in that period of Western cultural history known as “modernity.” Modernity is the cultural mind-set that began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century and continues into the present. Modernity is a complex phenomenon, of course, with both

impressive achievements and important limitations. For our purposes, I will mention two of its most central features, both closely connected to each other.

First, modernity is characterized by scientific ways of knowing. Indeed, the birth of modern science is the birth of modernity. With modern science came a new epistemology (or theory of how we know): unlike people of earlier eras, we know something to be true today through experimentation and verification.

Second, modernity is marked by what is sometimes called “the modern worldview” or “the Newtonian worldview.” A worldview is an image of reality—an understanding of what is real and what is possible. The modern worldview is based on scientific ways of knowing: what is real is that which can be known through the methods of science. Epistemology (how we know) has become ontology (what is real).

The modern worldview yields a material understanding of reality. What is real is the space-time world of matter and energy. Reality is made up of tiny bits and pieces of “stuff,” all of them interacting with each other in accord with “natural laws.” The result is a picture of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect. Although this worldview has already been superseded in theoretical physics, it continues to operate powerfully in our minds.

Modernity has produced much of great value. Its most obvious accomplishments are in the sciences, technology, and medicine. But its achievements extend beyond those realms into systems of government, human rights, the study of the past, the empathetic awareness of other cultures, and on and on. I am very appreciative of modernity, even as I now mention two of its deeply destructive effects upon religion in general and Christianity and the Bible in particular.

The first of these effects: modernity has made us skeptical about spiritual reality. Modernity’s material understanding of reality has made the reality of God problematic for many of us. It is no accident that “death of God” theology emerged in the modern period. It is the logical outcome of absolutizing the modern worldview.

Second, modernity has led us to be preoccupied with factuality—with scientifically verifiable and historically reliable facts. Indeed, modern Western culture is the only culture in human history that has identified truth with factuality. We are "fact fundamentalists": if a statement isn't scientifically or historically factual, it isn't true.¹¹

Within the church, both biblical fundamentalists and Christian liberals are often fact fundamentalists. For the former, the Bible must be factually true in order to be true at all (hence they emphasize the literal and historical factuality of biblical texts). The latter have tended to follow a different strategy, seeking to rescue a few facts from the fire. But fundamentalists and liberals alike have agreed: facts are what matter.

The modern preoccupation with factuality has had a pervasive and distorting effect on how we see the Bible and Christianity. During most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Christians and much of Christian theology were caught between the two sterile choices of literalism (in harder or softer form) and reductionism. The first sought to defend the factual accuracy and uniqueness of the Bible and Christianity. The second tended to reduce the Bible and Christianity to what made sense within the modern worldview. Both are thoroughly modern positions.

A further result: Christianity in the modern period became preoccupied with the dynamic of believing or not believing. For many people, believing "iffy" claims to be true became the central meaning of Christian faith. It is an odd notion—as if what God most wants from us is believing highly problematic statements to be factually true. And if one can't believe them, then one doesn't have faith and isn't a Christian.

The thoroughly modern character of this notion of faith can be seen by comparing what faith meant in the Christian Middle Ages. During those centuries, basically everybody in Christian culture thought the Bible to be true. They had no reason to think otherwise; the Bible's stories from creation through the end of the world were part of the conventional wisdom of the

time. Accepting them did not require "faith." Faith had to do with one's relationship to God, not with whether one thought the Bible to be true.¹²

Postmodernity

We live on the boundary of postmodernity. We are not simply modern people; in addition, we are living in the borderland of a new period of cultural history. The central and defining features of that new period have not yet become clear, so we do not know what to call it yet. Hence we simply call it *postmodernity*: it is what comes next.

Like modernity, postmodernity is a large and complex phenomenon. Moreover, some postmodern movements strike me as dead ends. Thus I will not attempt a comprehensive description or definition of *postmodernity* but will simply highlight three characteristics of primary importance for our purposes.

First, postmodernity is marked by the realization that modernity itself is a culturally conditioned, relative historical construction. The modern worldview is not the final word about reality any more than previous worldviews have been. Postmodernity knows that someday the Newtonian worldview will seem as quaint and archaic as the Ptolemaic worldview, a development that has already occurred among theoretical physicists.

Second, postmodernity is marked by a turn to experience. In a time when traditional religious teachings have become suspect, we tend to trust that which can be known in our own experience. This turn to experience is seen in the remarkable resurgence of interest in spirituality within mainline churches and beyond. Spirituality is the experiential dimension of religion.

Third, postmodernity is marked by a movement beyond fact fundamentalism to the realization that stories can be true without being literally and factually true. This development is reflected in much of contemporary theology's emphasis on metaphorical theology. An obvious point that has often been forgotten during the period of modernity: metaphors and metaphorical narratives can be profoundly true even if they are not literally or factually true.

This realization is central for the way of seeing and reading the Bible that I will be suggesting in this book.

Given who we have become, one of the imperative needs of our time is a re-visioning of the Bible and Christianity. I deliberately hyphenate the word "re-vision" in order to distinguish what I mean from a common meaning of "revision" (without a hyphen). We often use the latter word to describe the improvement of something that has been poorly done—for example, a manuscript or a term paper. But that is not what I mean.

Rather, to re-vision means "to see again." The emphasis upon "seeing again" also reminds us that the older form of Christianity is not "traditional Christianity" but was an earlier way of seeing the Bible and the Christian tradition. What is needed in our time is a way of seeing the Bible that takes seriously the important and legitimate ways in which we differ from our ancestors.

The way of seeing and reading the Bible that I describe in the rest of this book leads to a way of being Christian that has very little to do with believing. Instead, what will emerge is a relational and sacramental understanding of the Christian life. Being Christian, I will argue, is not about believing in the Bible or about believing in Christianity. Rather, it is about a deepening relationship with the God to whom the Bible points, lived within the Christian tradition as a sacrament of the sacred.

NOTES

1. The point is made in a remark I have heard attributed secondhand to Peter Gomes, author of a recent best-selling book on the Bible, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow, 1996). Because I am uncertain of Gomes's exact words, I do not use quotation marks, but the gist of the statement is this: Has the Bible become a hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel?
2. Mainline Protestant denominations include most of the older Protestant churches: the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the largest Lutheran body), the Christian Church (Disciples), American Baptists, Quakers, and some others. On the Bible, the Catholic Church has more in common with mainline Protestant churches than with fundamentalist and conservative-evangelical churches.
3. For an important essay on variations within conservative attitudes toward

- the Bible, see Gabriel Fackre, "Evangelical Hermeneutics: Commonality and Diversity," *Interpretation* 43 (1989), pp. 117-29.
 4. See L. William Countryman, *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny?* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. ix-x: "These Christians imagine that the nature of biblical authority is perfectly clear; they often speak of Scripture as inerrant. In fact, however, they have tacitly abandoned the authority of Scripture in favor of a conservative Protestant theology shaped largely in the nineteenth century. This fundamentalist theology they buttress with strings of quotations to give it a biblical flavor, but it predetermines their reading of Scripture so thoroughly that one cannot speak of the Bible as having any independent voice in their churches." Countryman's book as a whole is strongly recommended.
 5. I do not mean that the number of mainline Christians is increasing. As virtually everybody knows, membership in mainline churches has declined sharply over the last forty years. Among the reasons: when there was a cultural expectation that everybody would belong to a church, mainline denominations did very well, for they provided a safe and culturally respectable way of being Christian. Once the cultural expectation disappeared (as it did in the final third of the twentieth century), membership in those denominations declined. But among those in mainline churches, the appetite for modern biblical scholarship is remarkable.
 6. Attributed to Jerry Falwell by George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 1. Marsden himself expands the definition slightly: "[A]n American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values and mores." Marsden affirms that "fundamentalists are a subtype of evangelicals." For American fundamentalism and its relation to evangelicalism, see also Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980). Both books strike me as particularly illuminating and fair.
 7. See the important new study of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim fundamentalism (all understood as reactions to modern culture) by Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Knopf, 2000).
 8. See the books by Marsden cited in note 6. The origin of a movement explicitly known as "Fundamentalism" is usually traced to the publication between 1910 and 1915 of twelve paperback volumes known as "The Fundamentals."
 9. See the very helpful and interesting article on "Scriptural Authority" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, pp. 1017-56. The article is written by a number of authors.
- On page 1034, Donald K. McKim notes that the second- and third-generation Reformers affirmed "plenary inspiration," the notion that the Bible was directly inspired by God, "... in essence a 'dictation' theory of inspiration." Roughly a hundred years after Luther, the Lutheran Johann Quenstedt (1617-88) wrote that the books of the Bible "... in their original text are the infallible truth and are free from every error. ... [E]ach and

every thing presented to us in Scripture is absolutely true whether it pertains to doctrine, ethics, history, chronology, topography," and so forth.

- On page 1035, Henning Graf Reventlow notes that this was a significant change from Luther: "[W]hereas for Luther the Bible becomes the living word of God in being preached and heard, in the orthodox systems Scripture in its written form is identified with revelation."
10. For natural literalism and the distinction between it and conscious literalism, see Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), chap. 3, esp. pp. 51–53.
 11. I owe this very useful phrase to Huston Smith, "Jesus and the World's Religions" in *Jesus at 2000*, ed. Marcus Borg (Boulder: Westview, 1997), pp. 116–17. In his *Forgotten Truth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1976, 1992), especially the first chapter, Smith speaks of modernity as marked by scientism, which he carefully distinguishes from science. Scientism affirms that only that which can be known by science is real. To which I would add that modernity is also marked by historicism: historicism affirms that only that which is historically factual matters. Both perspectives are serious mistakes.
 12. For this and other meanings of faith, see my *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 168–71.

2

Reading Lenses: The Bible and God



Christians have always affirmed a close relationship between the Bible and God, just as other religions affirm a close connection between the sacred and their holy scriptures. In this chapter, I begin to describe a way of seeing and reading the Bible again by focusing on how we might see the relationship between the Bible and God. Four topics are most central: the Bible as a human response to God, the Bible as sacred scripture, the Bible as sacrament of the sacred, and the Bible as the Word of God.

The Bible as Human Response to God

Foundational to reading the Bible is a decision about how to see its origin. Does it come from God, or is it a human product? Are we to see and read what it says as a divine product or as a human product?

Through the lenses of natural literalism and its modern descendants, the Bible is seen as a divine product (as already emphasized).

The inspiration of scripture is understood to mean that God guided the writing of the Bible, directly or indirectly. What scripture says, then, ultimately comes from God.

The alternative, of course, is to see the Bible as a human product—the product of two ancient communities. This is the lens through which I see scripture. The Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) is the product of ancient Israel. The New Testament is the product of the early Christian movement. What the Bible says is the words of those communities, not God's words.

To see the Bible as a human product does not in any way deny the reality of God. Indeed, one of the central premises of this book is that God is real and can be experienced.¹ I have put that as simply as I know how. At the risk of repetition, I mean that God (or "the sacred" or "Spirit," terms that I use synonymously) is a reality known in human experience, and not simply a human creation or projection. Of course, whatever we say about the sacred is a human creation. We cannot talk about God (or anything else) except with the words, symbols, stories, concepts, and categories known to us, for they are the only language we have. Nevertheless, we also have experiences of "the holy," "the numinous," "the sacred." These experiences go beyond our language, shatter it, and relativize it. I am convinced that the Bible, like sacred literature generally, originates in such experiences. I am also convinced that the Bible (like everything else expressed in words) is a human construction.

There is a third way of seeing the relationship between God and the writing of the Bible: there is no relationship, for there is no God. For this position, the Bible is, of course, a human product, but it has no religious significance beyond what it tells us about what these ancient people mistakenly thought. This is not how I see scripture.

I see the Bible as a human response to God. Rather than seeing God as scripture's ultimate author, I see the Bible as the response of these two ancient communities to their experience of God. As such, it contains their stories of God, their perceptions of God's character and will, their prayers to and praise of God,

their perceptions of the human condition and the paths of deliverance, their religious and ethical practices, and their understanding of what faithfulness to God involves. As the product of these two communities, the Bible thus tells us about how they saw things, not about how God sees things.

The Difference Our Perspective on the Bible Makes

The justifications for seeing the Bible as a human product are compelling, and the case has been made by many writers.² Most basically, it seems to me that a close and careful reading of the Bible makes it impossible to think that what it says comes directly or indirectly from God. So, rather than making the case that the Bible is a human product, I will offer five illustrations of the difference that these two ways of seeing and reading the Bible make.

The first illustration is a story. I sometimes listen to Christian radio. One night I was listening to a call-in show about the Bible and ethical questions. In response to a listener's phone call, the host said, "Let's see what God says about that," and then quoted a passage from the Bible (one that happened to be from Paul). I was a bit stunned by the host's leap from God to scripture, even as I immediately understood it. After all, the host saw what the Bible says as coming from God. But the difference between seeing the Bible as a divine product and seeing it as a human product is apparent in this illustration: Does a passage from Paul tell us what God says or how Paul saw things?

My second illustration concerns the Genesis stories of creation. If we see the Bible as a divine product, then these are God's stories of creation. As God's stories, they cannot be wrong. If we go very far down this road, we may find ourselves attracted to scientific creationism (the attempt to show that a certain kind of "science" supports a literal reading of Genesis). We may even become involved in conflicts about whether Genesis should be taught alongside evolution in biology courses in public schools.

But if we see the Bible as a human product, then we read the opening chapters of Genesis not as God's account of creation

but as ancient Israel's stories of creation. Like most ancient cultures, Israel had such stories. If we ask, "What are the chances that ancient Israel's stories of creation contain scientifically accurate information?" the answer would be, "About zero." And if they did, it would be sheer coincidence. Having said that, though, let me add that I think Israel's creation stories are profoundly true—but true as metaphorical or symbolic narratives, not as literally factual accounts.³

My third illustration concerns the laws of the Bible. If we think of the Bible as a divine product, then the laws of the Bible are God's laws. To illustrate with a contemporary Christian controversy, the single law in the Hebrew Bible prohibiting homosexual behavior between men is found in Leviticus: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The penalty (death) is found two chapters later.⁴

If we see the Bible as a divine product, then this is one of God's laws. The ethical question then becomes, "How can one justify setting aside one of the laws of God?" This is, of course, how fundamentalist and many conservative Christians see the issue.

But if we see the Bible as a human product, then the laws of the Hebrew Bible are ancient Israel's laws, and the prohibition of homosexual behavior tells us that such behavior was considered unacceptable in ancient Israel. The ethical question then becomes, "What would be the justification for continuing to see homosexual behavior as ancient Israel did?"

The question becomes even more acute when we realize that this law is embedded in a collection of laws that, among other things, prohibit planting two kinds of seed in the same field and wearing garments made of two kinds of cloth.⁵ We do not worry about these matters; most of us wear clothing made of blends without giving it a second thought. We readily recognize some of these prohibitions as the laws of an ancient culture that we are not bound to follow. Why, then, should we single out some as "the laws of God?"

My fourth illustration is a strange little story in Exodus involv-

ing Moses, Zipporah (his wife), and their son.⁶ They are on their way back to Egypt, in obedience to God's commissioning of Moses as the liberator of Israel. We are told, "On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him." Zipporah then circumcises their son and touches Moses' feet with the foreskin. The result: God lets him alone; the divine intent to kill Moses vanishes.

If we see the Bible as a divine product, the question becomes, "Why would God want to kill Moses—especially since Moses has been chosen by God and is doing what God has commanded him to do?" The question is impossible to answer. It suggests a disturbingly capricious and malevolent God. Appealing to the familiar "God's ways are not our ways" seems like a dodge, not an adequate response.

But if we see the Bible as a human product, we realize that this is a story told by ancient Israel. The question then becomes, "Why would Israel tell this story?" The answer may still not be clear (presumably it has something to do with the importance of circumcision), but at least we are not left with the dilemma of seeing it as a true story about God.

Because the previous three illustrations have been taken from the Hebrew Bible, I conclude with one from the New Testament. The passage is from I Timothy, a letter attributed to Paul but almost certainly not written by him:⁷

Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.⁸

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This is an extraordinary passage. Not only are women not to teach or have authority over men, but they are not to braid their hair or wear pearls or gold or expensive clothes. Furthermore, they are held responsible for the origin of sin in the world: it was the woman who was deceived, not the man. The "good news" is that women can be saved—through childbearing.

If the Bible is seen as a divine product, then these are God's restrictions on the behavior and roles of women. Indeed, for those Protestant churches that continue to prohibit the ordination of women, this is the way the passage is seen (even though the other restrictions are commonly ignored).⁹ For them, the ordination of women is against "God's Word."

However, if the Bible is seen as a human product, then this passage tells us about how an early Christian author—a man—saw things. As just mentioned, Paul almost certainly did not write these words. The author is commonly seen as a second- or third-generation follower of Paul writing in his name. But it is equally possible that the author is not a follower of Paul, but a "corrector" seeking to negate the remarkable gender egalitarianism of the early Christian movement. When the Bible is seen as a human product, the contrast between this text and other texts in the New Testament requires that we recognize more than one voice in early Christianity speaking about the role of women and that we seek to discern which voice to honor.

Thus much is at stake in whether we see the Bible as a human or a divine product. When we are not completely clear and cannot decide about the Bible being a human and not a divine product, we create the possibility of enormous confusion.

Why Our Perspective Needs to Be Either-Or

To anticipate a possible objection: Why see the question as an either-or choice? Why not see the Bible as *both* divine and human? In my experience, affirming that it is both only compounds the confusion.

When the Bible is seen as both divine and human, we have two options. One is to say that it is *all* divine and *all* human.

That may sound good, but it leaves us with the dilemma of treating all of scripture as divine revelation. More typically in my experience, affirming that the Bible is both divine and human leads to the attempt to separate the divine parts from the human parts—as if some of it comes from God and some is a human product. The parts that come from God are then given authority, and the others are not. But the parts that we think come from God are normally the parts we see as important, and thus we simply confer divine authority on what matters to us, whether we be conservatives or liberals.

To use an example: most Christians who think of the Bible as both divine and human would say that the Ten Commandments are among the parts that come from God. They seem important in a way that the prohibition against wearing garments made of two kinds of cloth does not.

But a moment's reflection suggests that the Ten Commandments are also a human product. They are written from a male point of view: for example, they prohibit coveting your neighbor's wife but say nothing about coveting your neighbor's husband.¹⁰ Moreover, the commandments against stealing, adultery, murder, bearing false witness, and so forth are simply rules that make it possible for humans to live together in community. Divine genius is not required to come up with rules like these. The point is not that the Ten Commandments are unimportant. Rather, the point is that their human origin is apparent.

Thus the lens I am advocating does not see the Bible as a whole as divine in origin, or some parts as divine and some as human. It is *all* a human product, though generated in response to God. As such, it contains ancient Israel's perceptions and misperceptions of what life with God involves, just as it contains the early Christian movement's perceptions and misperceptions.

Thus it is we who must discern how to read and interpret, how to hear and value, its various voices. The Bible does not come with footnotes that say, "This passage reflects the will of God; the next passage does not," or "This passage is valid for all time; the previous passage is not." So also the Bible does not

come with footnotes that say, "This passage is to be read literally; that passage is not." Reading the stories of creation or the stories of Jesus' birth literally involves an interpretive decision (namely, a decision to read them literally) equally as much as does the decision to read them metaphorically.

Thus any and every claim about what a passage of scripture means involves interpretation. There is no such thing as a noninterpretive reading of the Bible, unless our reading consists simply of making sounds in the air. As we read the Bible, then, we should ask not, "What is God saying?" but "What is the ancient author or community saying?"¹¹

The Bible as Sacred Scripture

Though the Bible is a human product, it is also sacred scripture for three religious traditions. The Hebrew Bible is sacred for Judaism, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are sacred for Christianity, and both are sacred for Islam (though neither is given the same holy status as the Koran).

Sacred Status

What does it mean to refer to the Bible as "sacred scripture"?¹² I begin by noting that the books of the Bible were not sacred when they were written. Paul, for example, would have been amazed to know that his letters to his communities were to become sacred scripture. Rather, the various parts of the Bible became sacred through a process that took several centuries.

The process whereby the Bible became sacred is known as "canonization." So far as we know (and we do not know much), the canonization process did not involve official councils that met and made decisions. Rather, it was gradual, happening in stages. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Law, also known as the Torah or the Pentateuch) were apparently regarded as sacred by about 400 BCE. The second part of the Hebrew Bible (the Prophets) had achieved sacred status by about 200 BCE. The third part (the Writings) became canonical by

about 100 CE. The canon of the Hebrew Bible was then complete.

For the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, the process took about three centuries. Though most of the documents now in the New Testament were written by the year 100, the first list that mentions all twenty-seven of them as having special status is from the year 367.

The awareness that the Bible became sacred scripture over a period of centuries has implications for our understanding of its origin, status, and authority. To speak of the Bible as sacred addresses not its origin but its status within a religious community. Any document is sacred only because it is sacred for a particular community. To mistake status for origin leads to the kind of confusion I described in the previous section of this chapter.

For Christians, the status of the Bible as sacred scripture means that it is the most important collection of writings we know. These are the primary writings that define who we are in relation to God and who we are as a community and as individuals. This is the book that has shaped us and will continue to shape us.

Because of the importance of this point, I will make it in another way. In common with many scholars of religion, I see each of the world's religions as a "cultural-linguistic world." Two things are meant by this somewhat abstract phrase. First, each religion emerges within a particular culture and uses language and symbols from that culture (even if it also subverts or challenges the central values and understandings of that culture). Thus religions are born within an existing cultural-linguistic world.

Second, if the new religion survives over time, it becomes a cultural-linguistic world in its own right. As such, it provides a world in which its followers live. Its stories and practices, its teachings and rituals, become the lenses through which its members see reality and their own lives. It becomes the primary basis of identity and vision.

Within this framework of understanding, the Bible as sacred scripture is the foundation of the Christian cultural-linguistic

world. The Bible is the "constitution" of the Christian world, not in the sense of being a collection of laws but in the sense of being its foundation.

The Authority of the Bible

To see the Bible as sacred in status and not origin also leads to a different way of seeing the authority of the Bible. The older, conventional way of seeing the Bible grounded scripture's authority in its origin: the Bible was sacred because it came from God. The result was a monarchical model of biblical authority. Like an ancient monarch, the Bible stands over us, telling us what to believe and do. But seeing the Bible as sacred in its status leads to a different model of biblical authority. Rather than being an authority standing above us, the Bible is the ground of the world in which Christians live.

The result: the monarchical model of biblical authority is replaced by a dialogical model of biblical authority. In other words, the biblical canon names the primary collection of ancient documents with which Christians are to be in a continuing dialogue. This continuing conversation is definitive and constitutive of Christian identity. If the dialogue ceases or becomes faint, then we cease to be Christian and become something else. Thus the authority of the Bible is its status as our primary ancient conversational partner.

Yet because the Bible is a human product as well as sacred scripture, the continuing dialogue needs to be a critical conversation. There are parts of the Bible that we will decide need not or should not be honored, either because we discern that they were relevant to ancient times but not to our own, or because we discern that they were never the will of God.¹³

But critical dialogue with the Bible implies not simply that we make discerning judgments about the texts. It also means that we allow the texts to shape and judge us. As we read the Bible, we are not only to bring our critical intelligence with us, but also to listen. I often tell my students that reading well involves listening well—seeking to hear what the text is saying to

us and not simply absorbing the text into what we already think.

To be Christian means to live within the world created by the Bible. We are to listen to it well and let its central stories shape our vision of God, our identity, and our sense of what faithfulness to God means. It is to shape our imagination, that part of our psyches in which our foundational images of reality and life reside. We are to be a community shaped by scripture. The purpose of our continuing dialogue with the Bible as sacred scripture is nothing less than that.¹⁴

The Bible as Sacrament of the Sacred

Thus one major function of the Bible is the shaping of Christian vision and identity. The Bible has another primary function as well, and it is a further aspect of the relationship between the Bible and God. Namely, the Bible is a sacrament of the sacred.

In the Christian tradition, the word "sacrament" often refers to one of the specific sacraments: for Protestants, the two sacraments of baptism and the eucharist; for Catholics, those two plus five more. Central to the definition of "sacrament" in this particular sense is that something that is sacramental is "a means of grace."

The word "sacrament" also has a broader meaning. In the study of religion, a sacrament is commonly defined as a mediator of the sacred, a vehicle by which God becomes present, a means through which the Spirit is experienced. This meaning thus includes the two (or seven) Christian Sacraments even as it is broader. Virtually anything can become sacramental: nature, music, prayer, birth, death, sexuality, poetry, persons, pilgrimage, even participation in sports, and so forth. Things are sacramental when they become occasions for the experience of God, moments when the Spirit becomes present, times when the sacred becomes an experiential reality.

The Bible often functions in this sacramental way in the lives of Christians. It did so, for example, in the conversion experiences of many of the central figures of Christian history. Augustine's

conversion experience happened when he heard a child singing, "Take up and read," which led him to read a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans that changed his life. Martin Luther's breakthrough from anxious striving to the experience of grace, as well as the movement of the Spirit in John Wesley's heart, happened through immersion in scripture. In each case, they experienced the Bible as a means whereby the Spirit addressed them in the present.

The sacramental use of the Bible is also among the spiritual practices of both Jews and Christians. Meditation upon the Torah is an ancient Jewish practice. In the Christian tradition, a spiritual practice designed by Ignatius of Loyola involves meditating upon the images of a biblical text until they become animated by the Spirit. Another practice, *lectio divina*, involves entering a contemplative state and listening while a passage of scripture is read aloud a number of times with periods of silence between each reading. In these examples, the purpose of the practice is not to read or hear the Bible for information or content. Rather, the purpose is to listen for the Spirit of God speaking through the words of the biblical text.

For many Christians the Bible sometimes becomes sacramental in private devotional reading. As with the practices mentioned above, the purpose of devotional reading is not acquisition of content. Rather, it is openness to the experience of God addressing the reader through a phrase or verse, openness to a sense of the Spirit present within. In such moments the Bible becomes sacramental, a means of grace and mediator of the sacred. God "speaks" through the words of the biblical text.

To see the Bible as a sacrament of the sacred also connects us back to the Bible as a human product. The bread and wine of the Christian sacrament of the eucharist are manifestly human products. Somebody made the bread and somebody made the wine. We do not think of the bread and wine as "perfect" (whatever that might mean). Rather, to use a common eucharistic phrase, we affirm that "in, with, and under" these manifestly human products of bread and wine, Christ becomes present to us. So

also "in, with, and under" the human words of the Bible, the Spirit of God addresses us.

In the worship services of many denominations, including my own, the following words are spoken after the reading of a passage from the Bible: "The Word of the Lord." With my emphasis on the Bible as a human product, I sometimes joke that we should say instead, "Some thoughts from ancient Israel," or "Some thoughts from the early Christian movement." But when I am being serious rather than flippant, I find the words used in the New Zealand Anglican Book of Common Prayer exactly right: "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church." The Spirit of God speaks through the human words of these ancient documents: the Bible is a sacrament of the sacred.

The Bible as the Word of God

The sacramental function of scripture leads to a final point about the relationship between God and the Bible: the Bible as "the Word of God." As already mentioned, speaking of the Bible as "the Word of God" has often led Christians to see the Bible as coming from God. By now it is obvious that the lenses I am prescribing for reading the Bible do not see it that way.

What then does it mean to call the Bible "the Word of God"? It is important to emphasize that the Christian tradition throughout its history has spoken of the Bible as the *Word* of God (capital *W* and singular), not as the *words* of God (lowercase *w* and plural). If it had used the latter phrase, then one might reasonably claim that believing the words of the Bible to be God's words is intrinsic to being Christian.

But the use of a capital *W* and the singular suggests a different meaning. Namely, "Word" is being used in a metaphorical and nonliteral sense. As with metaphors generally, this one resonates with more than one nuance of meaning. A word is a means of communication, involving both speaking and hearing. A word is a means of disclosure; we disclose or reveal ourselves through

words. Words bridge the distance between ourselves and others: we commune and become intimate through words.

To call the Bible the Word of God is to see it in all of these ways, and no doubt more. The Bible is a means of divine self-disclosure. The traditional theological phrase for this is "the Bible as the revelation of God." In the Bible, as the foundation of the Christian cultural-linguistic world, Christians find the disclosure of God—not because the Bible is the words of God but because the Bible contains the primary stories and traditions that disclose the character and will of God.

Seeing the Bible as the Word of God also underlines its sacramental function: the Bible's words sometimes become a mediator of the sacred whereby the Spirit addresses us in the present. In short, calling the Bible the Word of God refers not to its origin but to its status and function.

Concluding Metaphors for Seeing the Bible

In the modern period, Christians have often emphasized believing in the Bible. I conclude this chapter with three metaphors, all suggesting a very different way of seeing the relationship between Christians and the Bible.

A Finger Pointing to the Moon

The first metaphor comes from the Buddhist tradition. Buddhists often speak of the teaching of the Buddha as "a finger pointing to the moon." The metaphor helps guard against the mistake of thinking that being a Buddhist means believing in Buddhist teaching—that is, believing in the finger. As the metaphor implies, one is to see (and pay attention to) that to which the finger points.

To apply the metaphor to the Bible, the Bible is like a finger pointing to the moon. Christians sometimes make the mistake of thinking that being Christian is about believing in the finger rather than seeing the Christian life as a relationship to that to which the finger points.

The Bible as Lens

Until now, I have been speaking about the lenses through which we see the Bible. Now I am applying the lens metaphor to the Bible itself: the Bible is a lens. I owe this use of the metaphor to a student who a few years ago took my introductory-level course on the Bible. About two weeks into the term, he said to me, "I think I'm beginning to get it. You're saying that the Bible is like a lens through which we see God, but some people think it's important to believe in the lens."

His simple statement has stayed with me. The point, of course, is the same as the finger metaphor: there is a crucial difference between believing in the lens and using the lens as a way of seeing that which is beyond the lens.

The Bible as Sacrament

For my final metaphor, I return to the Bible as sacrament. Now, though, I extend the metaphor so that it includes the Christian tradition as a whole: the Bible as well as Christian creeds, liturgies, rituals, practices, hymns, music, art, and so forth. When one sees Christianity as a sacrament of the sacred, being Christian is not about believing in Christianity. That would be like believing in the bread and wine of the eucharist rather than letting the bread and wine do their sacramental work of mediating the presence of Christ. It would be like believing in the finger or the lens.

Rather, being Christian is about a relationship to the God who is mediated by the Christian tradition as sacrament. To be Christian is to live within the Christian tradition as a sacrament and let it do its transforming work within and among us.

NOTES

1. I cannot demonstrate this, of course, though I think I can make a persuasive case against those who think they can demonstrate God's nonreality. My study of religious experience in many cultures over many centuries and my acquaintance with contemporary religious experience have led me to the conviction that God is real and can be experienced, and that such experiences occur across cultures and religious traditions. See chapter 2 of my *The God We Never Knew* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

2. Among recent books, see Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: The Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999); John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), esp. pp. 1-36; L. William Countryman, *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny?* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 1-15.
3. See chap. 4.
4. Lev. 18.22 and 20.13.
5. Lev. 19.19.
6. Exod. 4.24-26.
7. I Tim. 2.9-15. Virtually all mainline biblical scholars see I and II Timothy and Titus (known together as "the pastoral epistles") as relatively late documents written around the beginning of the second century, some forty years or more after the death of Paul. In antiquity, it was acceptable practice to write in the name of a revered figure of the past.
8. The shift in pronouns in the last verse is puzzling. "She" obviously refers to woman/women; "they" could refer to women, or it could refer to the children born of "childbearing."
9. The Catholic prohibition of ordaining women as priests has a different basis.
10. Exod. 20.17 and Deut. 5.21.
11. Important clarification: I am not saying that the meaning of a biblical text is confined or restricted to what the ancient author or community said. As I will say in the next chapter, a metaphorical reading of the Bible yields meanings beyond the ancient historical intention of the text.
12. For a superb treatment of the meaning of "scripture," see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). Smith argues that scripture is "a human activity," a phrase with several meanings: the writings that become scripture are produced by humans, are then declared to be scripture by a community, and then function to shape the lives of the people who regard them as scripture. See also the helpful book by John P. Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).
13. I do not wish to provide a comprehensive list, but an example of each may be helpful. (1) Paul's counsel about whether it is permissible to eat meat left over from pagan sacrifices was relevant to his time, though not very much if at all to our time. (2) I cannot believe that it was ever God's will that the women and children of one's enemies in war should be slaughtered, to use an example from the Hebrew Bible; or that it is God's will that the majority of the earth's population be destroyed at the second coming of Christ, to use an example from the New Testament.
14. This is how the Bible functioned in earlier periods of Christian history. See the comment by Rowan A. Greer in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 5, p. 1028: During the period of the early church, "Scriptural authority was not so much a matter of propositions or of the application of principles to cases as a question of the way in which the lore of the church's past persuasively shaped the corporate lives of Christians."

3

Reading Lenses: History and Metaphor



In this chapter, I move from ways of seeing the Bible to the more specific topic of reading the Bible. In radical shorthand, I call the method I will develop a "historical-metaphorical approach." It presupposes the central claims about the Bible made in the previous chapter: its origin as a human response to God, its status for Christians as sacred scripture, and its functions as foundation of the Christian world and sacrament of the sacred.

The Historical-Metaphorical Approach

Both adjectives in the phrase "historical-metaphorical approach" are crucially important. As shorthand, they are large umbrellas. I will compactly define each before describing them at greater length.

By "historical approach," I mean all the methods that are relevant to discerning the ancient historical meanings of biblical texts. The chief concern of the historical approach is the past-