

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

CRITIQUE OF HOW TO READ THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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I. Introduction

At some point in the sanctification process of a believer, many will reach a point where a mere cursory reading of the Bible is no longer adequate to answer their growing concerns about their faith, and what God has to say to them in Scripture. When they reach that point, almost everyone must look for help above their own understanding, but this help must not come from the culture or current flavor of society presently at hand. The Christian is told to seek wisdom and understanding first from the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33 and others) through the spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting. Secondly, they can also turn to places like the Church Fathers, scholars, and pastors who have done the hard work of discerning the Bible's wisdom and value for others' understanding.¹

This most important secondary place of exegesis and hermeneutics is where *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth* is placed today. Believers and scholars must insist the Bible texts to first “mean what they meant” (exegesis), and second “we must learn to hear that same meaning in [a] new or different context of our own day” (hermeneutics).² *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth* takes on a most difficult task of trying to instruct others in the personal means of learning to read and understand the Bible. The authors do this in many ways by getting to the “plain meaning of the text” through an “enlightened common sense” approach, and in the process, they have created an extremely valuable resource for the Church body that has already survived the scrutiny of three decades.³ This review and critique will examine the manner in which the authors have achieved their stated task of being obedient to the Biblical texts through

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV). *Holy Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

teaching a hermeneutical process readers can apply to their daily walk with Christ.⁴

II. Brief Summary

In the text, the authors introduce the material, and a summary of their intent with the book, in two preface sections, which also takes a look at the differences between the updated editions. The text can then be loosely divided up into three parts; a lengthy introduction to interpretation and translations, the Epistles through the Parables, and the OT sections of the law, prophets, psalms, and wisdom literature. The book ends, not necessarily with a conclusion to a premise, but with a look at the apocalyptic genre, mainly containing the material of the book of Revelation.

As the authors go through each individual section, sometimes focusing more on the genre, sometimes more on the historical context, they provide a basic structure that remains through each chapter. Each chapter is generally partitioned into smaller a section, starting with “the nature of,” which then looks at the historical and literary context of each subject. The authors then move into hermeneutical observations pertaining to the material, and sometimes provide a look at the more difficult passages each section may contain. When appropriate for their discussion, the authors will introduce the hermeneutics section with a look at the exegetical issues, especially when they need to bridge a theological gap between the Biblical writings and our modern day contexts. Although the task of this book is mainly stated to be hermeneutics, the authors make sure to point out the “key to good exegesis is to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text,” something important to learning hermeneutics itself.⁵ The book then concludes with an appendix, which overviews in great detail, the supplemental

⁴ Fee, 14.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

material and commentaries they believe the reader will find the most useful to complete the hermeneutical task outlined in *How to Read the Bible*.

III. Critical Interaction with Author's Work

A reader can often make first impressions of a book by reading the table of contents and skimming through the text, but to gain the wisdom collected in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, selective reading will not be sufficient. Two of the most important sections in the text are the two most often overlooked sections in a book, the preface, and the appendix. In *How to Read the Bible*, the authors have made these two sections essential reading, and quite valuable beyond the text itself. As they proceed with the “introduction,” which contains the first two chapters and 20% of the book itself, the authors give a long, detailed explanation of why it is important to interpret the Bible well, and the basics of a good translation.

Explaining their own intentions, the authors pointed out one of the best ways to “learn to read the text carefully” was to read Adler’s *How to Read a Book* (1940, revised edition, with Charles Van Doren [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972]), which is excellent advise.⁶ Adler’s book has become somewhat of a classic in learning how to read literature “well,” and it includes all different genres and forms of literature throughout written history. In fact, Adler’s words from the 1940’s compliments the *How to Read the Bible* text in many ways. Alder points out that “we must know how to make books teach us well. That, indeed, is the primary goal of this book,” also a similar goal of the text in this critique.⁷ Biblical interpretation is a difficult science, which requires some explanation, making this first section well placed and much needed.

The second introduction section to the text deals with the complex issue of finding and using a “good” translation among the literal hundreds available in our modern world. With as

⁶ Fee, 26.

⁷ Charles Van Doren Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, 2nd Edition (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1972), 15.

many translations as the English language has today, the authors did a good job at going over the most well known and prevailing translations available today, with a few exceptions. It should be well noted that the authors' publisher (Zondervan) is also the publisher of the translation the authors conclude is the best overall translation to use as the base for hermeneutical study, and the Zondervan publications seem to have preference throughout the book. In fact, Zondervan is mentioned 23 times cover to cover in various contextual arguments and suggestions for reading. The authors conclude that "the TNIV is as good a translation as you will get," in spite of its many shortcomings, none of which were expounded upon in great detail.⁸ Most of the problems with the TNIV come from gender issues, many of which were brought to light during the time frame of this publication of the authors' 3rd edition (2003).⁹

These problems were still significant issues, which were addressed, in part, with the 2011 updated publication of the NIV and subsequent discontinuation of the TNIV. Religious organizations have still noted many problems even the updated 2011 NIV publication, and have not adopted the newer update.¹⁰ This is significant to note in detail here because the authors use this translation as the basis for the remainder of the book, and while the hermeneutical instruction given in the chapters to come is excellent, this is a significant issue with this edition.

Also of note here is the lack of mention or use of the English Standard Bible (ESV), published in 2001, a year prior to the TNIV, and two years prior to the 3rd edition of this text. While the authors do mention the ESV in passing, they give it little or no hermeneutical value other than to lump it in with the New American Standard Bible (NASB) as being too literal a

⁸ Fee, 52.

⁹ Katherine T. Phan, *Report: 75 Percent of TNIV Gender-Related Problems in Updated NIV Bible*, May 11, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/report-75-percent-of-tniv-gender-related-problems-in-updated-niv-bible-50191/> (accessed April 4, 2012).

¹⁰ Michael Foust, *Major group says it cannot endorse NIV 2011 Bible*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=34135> (accessed April 4, 2012).

translation to be of much value. This topic can be somewhat divisive in nature just because readers sometimes hold their own translation as “best” regardless of its theological value. Overall the authors did an excellent job explaining the significance, and value, in deciding between the different available English translations, but the overlying translation opinion is prevalent throughout the book, and is somewhat like the nonobjective opinion of one’s own denominational preference.

The remainder of the book methodically goes over the different genres in Scripture, picking out the most significant ones that need their own explanation. The structure of the individual chapters, as explained in the summary section of this paper, allows the reader to quickly follow the authors’ logic behind each premise. It was a little unclear why the overall structure of the text was organized in the manner presented. The material could have benefitted from a Biblical chronological order, but was presented in order of importance, or difficulty for the reader, with the Epistles first, and the Wisdom literature last, concluding with the apocalyptic material. Seemingly out of place, and wedged between the discussion on the Epistles and Acts, the Gospels, and the Parables, the authors placed a short chapter on the Old Testament Narratives. As they explained, the “narratives are the most common type of literature in the Bible, containing over 40 percent of the Old Testament,” and the authors excelled at explaining how the Hebrew narrative works. Even though this section seems somewhat out of place, it adds to the overall thesis presented by the authors to “read your Bibles more knowledgeably and with greater appreciation for God’s story.”¹¹

The remainder of the book is split between the more difficult Old and New Testament sections, each containing approximately 30 percent of the text. In the New Testament sections, the authors stress a different literary understanding in each chapter, giving the reader an

¹¹ Fee, 89.

overview of contextual issues, common hermeneutical questions, historical precedents, how and when to read allegory into the parables, and a quick overview of the synoptic problem. Each of these sections is an important aspect of the overall text, and each section, although pointed specifically at the intended difficulty at hand, can be applied across all Biblical genres. In explaining the historical precedent in the Book of Acts, the reader can see more clearly how Luke intended the book to be read, while also looking for the same types of historical precedents in the Epistles. In the Old Testament sections the authors took on the most difficult and prominent areas such as The Law, The Prophets, Psalms, and the Wisdom literature of (mostly) Proverbs. Each part contained a good exegetical outlook and a hermeneutical overview that any reader interested in understanding the Bible could comprehend, with an extensive section at the end describing how Proverbs is grossly misused by laymen and pastors alike. This section was an area where the authors adjudicated against the misuse of Scripture more adamantly, and provided a detailed hermeneutical guideline for reading wisdom literature. This interaction was one of the stronger elements of the Old Testament discussions, and could have struck a somewhat unknown chord for readers who have not been exposed to the misuse of the Wisdom literature.

IV. Conclusion

The need for a hermeneutical book such as *How to Read the Bible* is a testament to the greatness of Scripture itself because “either you understand perfectly everything the author has to say or you do not. If you do, you may have gained information, but you could not have increased your understanding,” and that is what the authors here intended to facilitate.¹² The strength of *How to Read the Bible* comes from the overall guide and tone, in general terms, given to the

¹² Adler, 7.

reader, and the methodical details presented in each section or chapter. This guideline, while far from being a step-by-step process to Biblical understanding, does give the reader general principles to better understanding the Biblical literature, and how the Biblical authors intended their writing to be understood. This was achieved in a manner that can be easily understood by readers of all levels, and yet provided enough depth to maintain the attention of those readers quite familiar with hermeneutics.

Unfortunately, the book's weakness, which cannot be understated, comes from the author's discussion on translations, and their overall choice of the TNIV to underline their text. Readers today, in 2012, have the benefit of almost a decade of scrutiny towards the TNIV, which the authors did not have when revising *How to Read the Bible* in 2003. One would hope their scholarly opinions might have changed somewhat since the publication date. Any revised edition to the text in the future should include a completely rewritten section on translations, or the authors could leave more of their personal opinions to the side, allowing the reader to decide on their own which translation is best given the information in the book. This suggestion would follow the author's own statements when they stress the importance of finding a text where the authors "discuss all the possible meanings, evaluate them, and give reasons for his or her own choice."¹³ This was attempted, just not executed as well as one would have hoped for.

Overall, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* is, and will be, an excellent source for beginning a study in hermeneutics. The text is not an end all of hermeneutical material, but well worth the investment in time to complete. Any student, laymen, or individual interested in understanding Scripture to its fullest possibility will benefit from the work of Fee and Stuart. This review and critique examined the manner in which the authors achieved the task of being obedient to the Biblical texts through teaching a hermeneutical process, and for the most part, the

¹³ Fee, 266-267.

authors accomplished this task admirably.

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