

WAYS OF SEEING THE BIBLE: IN WHAT ORDER

SHOULD WE PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT? ----- ELLIOTT #1937

This thinksheet (1) says we have, in approaching the Bible, options, and (2) describes these options--all of them valid, no one "better" than any other, all appropriate, depending on time and circumstance.

1. Literary --The Bible's a book, (precisely) an anthology of "books" written over a period of a little more than a millenium. The Gideons put it in hotels in the hope that customers will pick it up as a book, with or without sacred associations. I believe the Gospel of Mark (which is standard papyrus-scroll-length) was written so to be read--as literature, e.g., by a man or woman at afternoon public bath (the public baths of the middle and upper classes of the Roman Empire having libraries, *cubinacula*, slots into which scrolls were shot for browsing)....I don't "downput" college courses in "The Bible as Literature": the only thing the Bible can't stand is neglect.

2. Oracular --The Bible's *verba ipsissima divina*, the exact Word of God in human words--accurate, infallible, inerrant. Theoretically, I reject this as magical, idolatrous ("bibliolatry"), and blasphemous (the WORD of God replacing GOD)--but practically, I've known the Spirit to speak transformingly, life-changingly, through the words of Scripture: God is not always kind to my theories.

3. Historical --So you're interested in history: no record is quite as fascinating--especially to a Westerner--as the Bible! But the Bible is unkind to the historiographer's question "What happened?" It's "into" the question "Why did what happen happen?" And its quite consistent answer to its question (no matter whether you see it as logically consistent) is, simply, "God, and God's response to humans' response to God and circumstance." (Focus on the EVENTS.)

4. Biographical--The Bible's chock full of folks, people plain and fancy; and it's just dying to get you interested in their stories. Yes, it has "commandments," and "virtue/vice lists"; but it's mainly "Look at them, and learn about God and how to be human!" Personal examples, the virtues and vices with hair and skin, is where it's at. The big story is about God in relation to Everyman-Adam and Everywoman-Eve, i.e., you and me. It's maddeningly unhelpful (in the perspectives of modern "sciences") about anything else. But why get mad? Why insist on getting what it hasn't got to give? Why not be content with what it has to give, which is life-and-world remaking?

5. Devotional--The Bible is God-intoxicated and is happy only when it hooks readers on this addiction. I resist the temptation to prove that every genre of Scripture has this devotion as its fundamental energy, but I can do it! The Muslim shout *ALLAH AKBAR!* (*God is great!*) can be heard above all other Islamic sounds, as can the Shema for Jews and "Jesus is LORD!" for Christians: the religions of the West (as the three book-religions stemming from Abraham are called, only somewhat accurately) agree in monotheistic fervor, their books (Hebrew Bible, NT, and Quran) all emblematic and sacramental of this unitive devotion. In the pietistic strains of all three religions, the theme is "God loves me, as I can see in the Scriptures; and through the Scriptures and all else, I am body-and-soul set upon loving God." Logically, this viewpoint is relaxed about how revelation and Scripture function together: actually and unfortunately, fervant devotion tends to correlate with anti-intellectual, literalistic hermeneutics.

6. Theological --Focus on the IDEAS.... **7. Existential** --life's common crises, calling for decisions, bridge the two worlds, that and this....See #947 for traditional modes or levels of Jewish interpretation (and Christian parallels)....The technical vocabulary of "hermeneutics" (Greek for "interpretation") includes ways ending with "analysis" or "criticism"--e.g., depth-psychological, interactional, social-historical, materialist, process, historical-critical, reader-response, genre, source, form, redaction, structuralist, liberationist, psycholinguistic, discourse or cluster, sociology-of-knowledge.

FOR YOUR MEDITATION: What's behind the text? in the text? in front of the text?