

What Good Are Sacred Texts? Why Bother With Them?

Should a lay person read sacred texts alone, without the help of clergy or community? How do you read and study sacred texts?

1.....The questions make assumptions worth looking at before answering.

(1) The "lay person" - the laity, non-professionals in a religion - can read. A huge assumption: more than half of us six billion human beings can't read. History's strongest impulse toward *literacy* has been the desire that the Bible be read and the desire to read the Bible.

(2) The assumption that a particular laity's language has been reduced to writing. Somebody must make visible signs representing audible sounds. The Russian alphabet was invented by two Christian missionaries. Indeed, most of the world's languages have been made visible (that is, reduced to writing) by Christian missionaries intent upon advancing literacy.

(3) A third assumption is that the sacred texts of the religion of a particular laity have been reduced to writing. Most of them have been. Some texts - passed on by oral tradition - are older than the invention of writing.

(4) And a fourth assumption is that the sacred texts of the particular religion are available to its laity in its laity's particular languages. (In whole or in part, the Bible is available in almost 2,000 languages, covering all but about 1% of humanity.)

2.....Much of sacred literature was oral before written. And most of the Bible was written primarily to be heard. Typically, the public reader expounded the meaning of what had been read (as did Jesus in synagogues: Gospel of Luke 4:14-44). The general hearer-in-community (synagogue or church) need not have been literate.

3.....Literacy is required for the laity to "read sacred texts alone." Oxford philosopher-theologian John Wycliffe wanted the Bible available to "every plow-boy" in the plow-boy's own language, and Wycliffe's Bible in English (translated from the Latin Vulgate) came out in 1384. The church rightly warned that the plowboy, unguided by clergy, would run off and make who knows what errant sense of the Bible. Wycliffe admitted the danger (which has often become reality), but argued that the *gain* in public literacy and personal freedom outweighed the danger.

4.....As literacy spread to enable Bible-reading, what had happened to Bible scholars happened to plow-boys: the authoritative Book in their hands gave them some distance from live human authorities: they became what Western Civilization means by "*the individual*."

5.....While Wycliffe was never excommunicated, the Council of Constance (1415) condemned him for relying on "the Bible alone" (*sola scriptura*) over against the authority of the Church and for making the Bible available to the laity. A dozen years after his death, the Church had his bones dug up, crushed, and burned, his ashes then thrown into the river. (Wycliffe is remembered as the earliest "reformer before the Reformation" and the earliest essayist on the separation of king-and-priest powers - leading eventually to the American separation of the institutions of church and state.)

6.....Biblical literacy got a huge boost from technology in 1455. Gutenberg's Bible (in Latin) was the first movable-metal-type book ever published, and the first mass-produced book. Luther's Bible (1534, translated by him from the original Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek) was the greatest literary influence in the formation of the modern German language, as the King James Bible (1611) was the greatest literary influence in the formation of modern English.


7.....The formation of *the modern mind* began with the Bible in the plowboy's hand - in everybody's hand. For us Protestants, the Bible continues to be the primary resource and norm for Christian faith and life.

8.....The Catholic temptation has been and is over-control of people. The Protestant temptation is individualism, the under-control of people, to the neglect of community. We are living in the ruins of "every man for himself" on

under-regulated Wall Street and in money-mad corporate boardrooms; yes, and in our consumerist mentality and chaotic homes.

9.....The Bible *balances* the needs/duties of the community and the individual. So, in the first question of "On Faith" this week, I must affirm all three terms: "alone," "clergy," "community." As for the second question, I personally "read and study" the Bible alone, in family, and in church. Alone: for more than 60 years I read the Bible daily in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, and English.

10.....Why have I concentrated, in my life and in this column, on *the Bible*? All of the world's sacred texts are worth attention and got my attention before I taught "The World's Religions." But I would not be a Christian if I did not think that the Bible is the best of the lot. Besides, it is *ours* sacred text, the formative scripture of the West, including America.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | FEBRUARY 18, 2009; 1:33 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:        

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Comments

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"Perhaps my Section 9 should have been Section 1. If it had been, would you have read past Section 1?"

Certainly. My background/bias in reading/writing articles is from a journalism perspective. Which means I favor articles that start out with a main point then use the rest of the available space to build support for it, with a summary/reachback at the end. In my humble, non-professional opinion.. just as an average interested reader, Had point 9 (slightly re-worded) been point 1, I would have indeed read on to see the basis/support for your answer.

"In your opinion, should a panelist have no purpose other than to answer the "On Faith" questions"

I do enjoy reading the opinions/thoughts of the panelists, So in response to this part of your reply I must affirm all three terms; purpose', panelist'and 'other'.

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | FEBRUARY 20, 2009 9:17 AM
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TO GLADERUNNER:

Yes, "all of the above."

Thank you for reading my column "about a half-dozen times." It's language is mid-range, neither popular nor technical.

Perhaps my Section 9 should have been Section 1. If it had been, would you have read past Section 1?

Beyond answering the "On Faith" questions, my purposes were (1) to show the importance of the Bible in the history of world-literacy, & (2) to encourage Bible-reading. In your opinion, should a panelist have no purpose other than to answer the "On Faith" questions?

Sorry you experienced my language as "pedantic." This old professor will try to sound less so.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | FEBRUARY 19, 2009 10:54 PM
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Mr. Elliot: You claim that: "My section 9 is an explicit, comprehensive answer to both questions."

Explicit and comprehensive? Perhaps, but also unnecessarily gregarious and (dare I say) pedantic.

The first part of the question was:

"Should a layperson read sacred texts alone, without the help of clergy or community?"

Your point 9:

The Bible balances the needs/duties of the community and the individual. So, in the first question of "On Faith" this week, I must affirm all three terms: "alone," "clergy," "community."

I have re-read your column about a half/dozen times now, specifically note 9. Am I correct in deducing now that your answer to the question "Should a layperson read sacred texts alone, without the help of clergy or community?" is 'All of the above'? Wow, kind of a long word-trip to a rather simple answer... You are aware that most people don't talk like that aren't you?

I understand that you are an accomplished academian, please forgive those of us that don't dwell in that realm for misunderstanding what it is you are saying from time to time.

"unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. "

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | FEBRUARY 19, 2009 3:24 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

1.....Thanks to those asserting that the Bible, to be understood, must be read "in context" (historical/cultural/religious/literary context). It's an honest, unexpurgated archive of the earliest writings of two religions, Judaism & Christianity. Rejecting it because you find something you don't agree with proves something: it proves you don't know how to read an archive, or have malice toward this particular archive.

2.....Of course sacred texts are more than archives: as in continuous use, they are contemporary literature, read for light on the path of life. Daily light, in the case of those of us who are daily readers (as I am of the Bible).

3.....A peculiarity of strings of comments after any column of any panelist is that most of the comments are not on the column but on comments of other commenters. Typically, a commenter will read a column only until something triggers a hot-button prejudice of the commenter; the ensuing comment will expound the prejudice as a countervailing truth.

4.....Reading is a skill, reading ancient literature is a further skill, reading sacred literature is a further skill, & reading "On Faith" columns completely & without prejudice--well, an improbable skill. Examples in this present string: (1) A commenter asks "Did Christ read any of the sacred texts?" My section 2 speaks precisely to that; (2) Another commenter calls my column "a non-answer" to the "On Faith" questions. My section 9 is an explicit, comprehensive answer to both questions.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | FEBRUARY 19, 2009 1:17 PM
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Daniel:

Since you're also active in the thread about gay prayer in the legislature, it is clear that you get what I'm trying to say there...the cut and paste verse at a time approach, context free, is dangerous!

(For those not following that thread, I posted a commentary on Sodom and Gomorrah that said what was truly at stake in the story is how a bunch of people of one tribe (citizens of Sodom) abused visitors of another "tribe",

using homosexual rape as the method, but that the text was not about "current understanding of homosexuality, especially in regard to homosexual orientation. Needless to say, there was considerable upset that I could assert it wasn't a condemnation of homosexuality...) The objectors obviously have no idea of the civilization in which it was written, and no idea of how to make it meaningful today, and no idea that current understandings of homosexual orientation have no place in scripture.)

As to the general point of this thread, I strongly believe that, assuming one desires to understand scriptures and their point, it is important to do a competent job of reading...that means, original context and language (original languages are preferable!), the society into which the text was written, the principles of hermeneutics, in order that the translation of the text into the equivalent in current society is made correctly, and an honesty in application to and willingness to accept in one's life.

In order to accomplish this, it requires a great deal of time and effort, and should be done in a varieties of settings: in one's own study or at one's own desk, and in various group settings, with one or more people. Both individual struggle with a text, and the feedback and growth gained in the joint exploration (and, too, argument!) of a text are critically important.

To some degree, even though I claim membership in the Lutheran catholic tradition, making a text available in lay people's native languages is not a danger free enterprise. Both the Protestant desire to learn free of authoritative pronouncements AND the Catholic concern for oddball interpretation are valid. At the least, any text written in verses without context (see: King James Version), or written by an individual (see: The Message) ought to be, if not set aside, sold with large DANGER! WARNING notices plastered all over, along with statements to the effect: Every verse is to be interpreted through the context of the whole ought to be posted on every page!

Pr Chris

POSTED BY: CALSAILOR | FEBRUARY 19, 2009 12:01 AM
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DID CHRIST READ ANY OF THE SACRED TEXTS? DID CHRIST EVER SPEAK OF ANY OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS? DID CHRIST SPEAK OF THE DIRECT CONTAINS OF A SACRED TEXT? WHY DOES HE NOT SPEAK DIRECTLY TO US TODAY? WHY DID HE SAY THAT ONLY THE FATHER KNOWS THE DAY THAT THE WORLD WILL END ? ARE NOT ALL THREE OF THE TRINITY EQUAL? ALWAYS ASK QUESTIONS.

POSTED BY: USAPDX | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 11:46 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Totally agree with Lepidopteryx..

POSTED BY: BIOS | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 9:12 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I do not think that any person can understand the Bible without also know about the history of the times in which the Bible was written, and without knowing about the cultures in which the Bible was written. Anyone can read it, of course, and anyone can make anything of it that they wish; that's the problem.

But to get anything worthwhile out of it, as a complete text, you need to know alot. That is why most of the Bible-quoters that I know could do with a little humility. Much of the Bible, if not most of it, does not translate over the ages and into our lives today.

One dramatic example is that of gay people.

POSTED BY: DANIELINTHELIONSDEN | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 6:54 PM
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Basically, Reverend, like *so* many other things on the rightwing agenda these days, this is not about *literacy,* this is about an *illusion* of literacy. Get people to struggle to put a complete sentence together and if they can do that, make them *defend* the idea that this makes them 'just as good' as those geeks they'd otherwise kick around, sexually-harrass, and then consign to Hell with Scriptural justification s long as it justifies their arrogance.

Feh.

Not literacy.

Even your *Bible* should get more credit for that.

This is simply *demagoguery* with a little sanctity... Leading bullies around with the nose by some scrap of pride.

House of cards.

One we're already seeing how we suffer for it.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 5:13 PM
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I mean, part of the point of *that* is, yer jocks and sprayheads that are now in politics on the Republican ticket, telling you how much they know about 'Ancient Written tradition,' well, they were cheating off *my* homework, and I *guarantee* you they ain't up on their Seneca.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 4:15 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"1) The "lay person" - the laity, non-professionals in a religion - can read. A huge assumption: more than half of us six billion human beings can't read. History's strongest impulse toward literacy has been the desire that the Bible be read and the desire to read the Bible."

Actually, that's not even so. In fact, it took till the *Sixties* for the Catholics to give up on the Latin Mass, and I went to Catholic schools with a perhaps-understandable interest in the classics, took six years of Church Latin, thinking I was all that cool.

Day came when the AP Latin exam was put before me.

Took about three minutes of a look at it.

Hung my head, and folded it in half. I knew the class had started bottoming out for a while, but. Forget about it.

Everyone, pretty much, can 'read' these days, as they will well tell you in a forum such as this.

It doesn't mean they *understand* or *care* to understand anything. I'm sure that for a lot of Christians the Bible is the only hardcopy book they *own,* and think that makes it special cause they can't *delete* it.

Anyone can *read* the darn thing, and as is well-demonstrated, take absolutely whatever they like out of it and call it the ordained ...order of the universe. Justification for any and everything. Over and over.

People make 'new translations' that have no relation to the original texts and call them 'Divinely-commanded authority.'

Ain't about literacy.

Literacy should start with *communication.* Not learning from the getgo to parallel-process an ideology when you maybe want to figure out what words might be trying to say.

One thing about the current age and the written word is, ...people are starting to think words on paper are magic in bad ways, again.

Then they type about it. That's new.

But don't believe everything you read.

Especially if you don't read much.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 4:08 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

"What a non-answer."

I agree... I read through it twice trying to find out what his exact answer was...

Nice history lesson though, I guess.....

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 3:10 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

What a non-answer.

POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | FEBRUARY 18, 2009 8:49 AM
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