



*How to
Read
the
Bible*

so that it makes a difference

Michael Parsons

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 809 3

First published 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

All rights reserved

Text © Michael Parsons 2020

This edition © The Bible Reading Fellowship 2020

Cover illustration by Rebecca J Hall, photographed by Adrian Serecut

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, Today's New International Version, copyright © 2004 by Biblica. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, a division of Hodder Headline Ltd. All rights reserved. 'TNIV' is a registered trademark of International Bible Society.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright owners for material used in this resource. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions or errors, and would ask those concerned to contact us so that full acknowledgement can be made in the future.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

*How to
Read
the
Bible*

so that it makes a difference

Michael Parsons



Photocopying for churches

Please report to CLA Church Licence any photocopy you make from this publication.
Your church administrator or secretary will know who manages your CLA Church Licence.

The information you need to provide to your CLA Church Licence administrator is as follows:

Title, Author, Publisher and ISBN

If your church doesn't hold a CLA Church Licence, information about obtaining one can be found at uk.ccli.com

Contents

Introduction	7
PART I Foundations: reading the Bible today	11
1 What kind of book is the Bible?	13
2 The Holy Spirit and the Bible	27
3 Why do we read the Bible?	29
4 Biblical statements on scripture.....	33
PART II Macro-strategies: how to read the narrative	37
5 The linear model: where are we in the narrative?	38
6 The triangular model: how do the Old and New Testaments fit together?	48
7 The Bible as God's drama: Christian improvisation	59
PART III Micro-strategies: how to read the text	67
8 Ignatian Bible reading: the use of Christian imagination	68
9 Praying the Bible: a garland of four strands	73
10 Being precedes acting: indicative and imperative	78
11 Engaging Bible stories: a narrative retelling	86
12 Narratives are about people: sorting through the characters.....	92

13	Working out the topic sentence: everything else hangs on it	95
14	What's the big idea? Intention in a single sentence.....	102
15	Choosing a title: what is the passage about?.....	106
16	Seeing gospel grace: always yes, in Christ	110
17	The slow way: verse by verse	117

PART IV Things to take into account when reading the text ... 123

18	Poetic licence: daring to speak of God	124
19	Poetic language: the imagery of faith	128
20	God-focused: Trinitarian shape	132
21	When things are difficult: theology and experience.....	135
22	Rhetorical questions: should I answer them?.....	141
23	I'll say that again: repetition and meaning	144
24	Perspectives on Jesus: above or below?.....	151
25	The boring bits: a love of lists and detail	156
26	Lastly: the final things before the end.....	160
	Conclusion: reading scripture – to what end?.....	167
	Notes.....	172

7

The Bible as God's drama: Christian improvisation

We have seen repeatedly that the Bible's story, or narrative, is important if we are to read it well and engage with it. It isn't so much the story as story that is significant, but rather the actual living history into which we are invited or called by the Spirit of God. As we put our faith in God, as we trust and follow Jesus Christ and as we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into the history of God's dealings with the world, the biblical history of Israel and the life of the early church and beyond. This is where our story is taken into the story of God, where we find our identity in Christ and his kingdom and where we are offered salvation. Story is important. We've seen this to be the case in both the linear and the triangular models. Story is important, too, if we look at the Bible, as some do, as an unfinished play script.

Some theologians suggest that the Bible is God's story, or God's drama (more technically, *theodrama*). The most prominent of these theologians are Tom Wright, a leading English New Testament scholar, based at the University of Oxford, and Kevin Vanhoozer, a systematic theologian in Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, following the lead of the significant Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. While Wright divides the Bible's narrative into creation, the fall, Israel, Christ and the church, Vanhoozer lists it slightly differently: creation, Israel, Christ, Pentecost/church and the consummation.⁵² The scheme that Vanhoozer suggests gives more prominence to the divine working in the story.

To examine and explore this strategy, let's take a step back for a moment and start at a slightly different place. Imagine that you're digging in the garden when your spade hits a different sounding object. You unearth the object with some anticipation, take it out and look carefully at what you've discovered. On examination, you realise that it's the manuscript of a very old play marvellously preserved – you recognise it as a play by William Shakespeare, as yet undiscovered. As you've always enjoyed the Bard's plays, you read this one with considerable interest, poring over each page and line, until you get to where the last act should be, only to find it missing.

Let's say the previously unknown play that you've dug up is *Romeo and Juliet*. However, all you've found under the earth is the first four acts and scene 1 of act 5. You read what you have, and you are determined to stage it anyway. The question at this point is how to go about staging a Shakespeare play with the vital last scenes missing.

Why don't you consider this question before moving on? What would you need to do to make your completed version as authentic as possible? Where would you start? Let me suggest a few pointers.

- First, you'd need a group of committed people interested and willing to take a part in the production of the to-be-extended play. You couldn't go solo on a project like this – just look at the list of characters, for example! So a small group, or *community*, is required.
- It would be good at the beginning of your discussion to have some Shakespeare *experts* in the group. Ideally, you'd like a Shakespeare scholar and researcher – perhaps the director of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford. And why not, for good measure, a Shakespearean actor and director, like Sir Kenneth Branagh? With their considerable knowledge and expertise, they would direct your thinking and writing, your acting and conclusions.

- You'd need to keep the end of the play *consistent* with the part that you have. So you'd need to get to know the first four acts and act 5, scene 1, really well. You'd read them again and again, over and over until you felt sure you understood where it might be going, who the characters are, what their roles will be, how they relate and so on. Only in that way could you be anywhere near certain that your play will conclude in a genuinely Shakespearean manner, perhaps even close to how the playwright intended. What has been the character's role until this point? How would you expect them to respond to the narrative flow of the play?
- You'd read some more of Shakespeare's plays to get a feel of his writing, his language, his imagery, his characterisation, his plot twists and the like.
- In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, you have the Prologue to guide you – in which the playwright gives you not only *explicit hints* about the story and characters (see the italicised words below) but also how long the play lasts ('two hours' traffic of our stage')!

Two households, both alike in dignity,
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
 From *ancient grudge* break new mutiny,
 and *civil blood* makes civil hands unclean.
 From forth *the fatal loins* of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;
 Whose misadventure'd piteous overthrows
 Doth with *their death* bury their parents' strife.
 The fearful passage of their *death-mark'd love*,
 And the continuance of their parents' rage,
 Which but their children's end nought could remove,
 Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage.⁵³

- Your group would *discuss* a lot before concluding anything. You'd accept some interpretations; you'd reject others. You'd need to *compromise* in this discussion, too.

- Finally, you'd actually have to act that last part of the play. I imagine you'd improvise what you've previously thought through, then you'd discuss it. Sometimes that *improvisation* would work, you'd consider it right or appropriate. Sometimes, though, you wouldn't get the improvisation 'right' or good enough, and you'd have to go back to group discussion and consideration until you improved on it.

Perhaps that rather lengthy illustration allows us to look at the biblical narrative and our part in it in a new and significant way. Using the imagery we've evoked in the illustration, let's see how this might help us to read and engage with the Bible as a narrative in which both the Lord and we ourselves are intimately involved. I should underline at this point that this model does not lessen the significance of the Bible and its intrinsic authority in any way. Rather, it gives us another strategy for reading it and seeing our place in its story.

If the discovered play is a metaphor for the Bible and the world is the scene for the missing part to be enacted, what are the advantages of thinking about the Bible in this way? There are a good many that we could simply list at this point:

- This approach makes sure that we consider the story as *God's* story and not ours. Just as we would give full and proper reverence to the Bard if we were handling his play, so too with the Lord in considering the Bible. He is both author and central character. In his discussion of theodrama, Peter Phillips emphasises this conclusion: 'In the end, the Bible isn't about the history of the world, nor of Israel, nor of the church. Everything is discussed, the whole story told, from a theological perspective. What matters is God's activity, God's engagement, God's covenant love for his people and for his creation.'⁵⁴ If we were being true to the play, we'd want to be true to its author, its playwright – true to his intentions, true to the dynamic of the narrative, true to its characters and true to the envisioned finale. Just so with

scripture, seen through the theodrama lens. We want to be true to the author's intentions, both explicit and implicit throughout the text. Not one of us is the leading character in the story; God is both author and leading role.

- This perspective indicates that reading scripture (that is, engaging with scripture) is not easy! It is, in fact, rather more complex than many of us realise. And because of that, we will need a community of people who love the text, who want to discuss its riches and its direction openly and with appropriate vulnerability, to come alongside us and to engage generously with God's word with us. That group may be the local church or a home group. This implies the need sometimes of 'experts' – in the shape of theologically trained and Spirit-gifted women and men or in the form of commentaries and books on the Bible.
- Theodrama allows for diverse opinions and perspectives on scripture. When a group gets together to read scripture like this, the aim is to learn from one another, to take on board other personal or cultural views, to allow an imaginative and improvised reading in order to generate discussion and progress.
- Theodrama encourages a less stark reading of the Bible. While doctrine is important, the notion of theodrama suggests to us that there are areas where we have to improvise our response because we don't have enough information or experience. Improvisation is common enough in the scriptural narrative itself. One or two examples will suffice at this point.

When the prostitute Rahab hid the spies, for example, we are told that she concealed them from the king of Jericho and told him that they had fled the city – which was a lie.⁵⁵ Many pages of Christian or Old Testament ethics have been written questioning whether Rahab chose a secondary or 'lesser' sin (lying) over a primary or 'greater' one (giving the men up to certain death). This question is magnified in that the Lord blessed her and her

family with freedom from death when the city was later destroyed by Israel. But isn't it more likely that she simply improvised her response to the situation? On the basis of her limited knowledge of God – that the whole of Jericho feared him, that he'd fought on behalf of the Israelites, that he is 'God in heaven above and on the earth below' (Joshua 2:11) – she bargains with the spies for her life and that of her relatives. For that, she was saved and is included and honoured in the list of those who showed courageous and God-given faith (Hebrews 11:31). For a similar situation, look at Jeremiah 38:24–27, in which the prophet lies to escape his and the king's death.

The early church improvised in initially sharing everything they possessed to help the poor (Acts 2:44–45), demonstrating that the Lord's grace was working powerfully in their midst, so much so that there were no needy persons among them (Acts 4:33–34). Again, over the question of the circumcision of new Gentile believers and their keeping the law of Moses on entry to the church, the apostles and church leaders wrote to them that they were to 'abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality' (Acts 15:29). This decision was based on the grace of God to the Gentiles and on Peter's comment that difficulties should not be placed in the way of Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 15:19).

Biblical improvisation isn't just making things up as you go along! In these two examples, we see Rahab and the early church improvising into a brand-new situation, but both are based on an understanding of who God is – the God of heaven and earth, the God of grace in Jesus Christ. Improvising comes from limited understanding and knowledge – just as it would if we found only a part of a Shakespearean play. We know as much as we have, but no more. We discern where the play is going but more in its direction than in the details of its conclusion. So too with scripture. From the Bible we glean an understanding of God and of his intentions for his people and the world in which we live. Theology comes before

improvisation, indicative before imperative. However, when we try to read scripture on subjects such as marriage, divorce, nuclear war, housing problems, politics, mission, the church and its government, use of the internet, gay rights, animal testing and the like, we have some help, some instruction and history to work with, a divine trajectory, but perhaps not enough to be definitive about the detailed conclusions we reach. Knowing what we do, however, gives us enough to improvise, to move ahead and not simply to be inert for lack of clarity.

- Biblical improvisation gives us a way of reading the biblical text without always looking for 'right' and 'wrong', for black-and-white answers. Life and experience aren't that simple or straightforward. Biblical improvisation allows us to hold on to the things we see clearly, but to be courageous in the things that are not so certain. It encourages us sometimes to have a go without fear of failure,⁵⁶ to do our best though we know it isn't going to be 'good enough' or perfect, to join the narrative as best we can.
- Biblical improvisation reminds us that we need to think biblically. If we were looking at the play by Shakespeare, we'd need to think in a similar way to the playwright if we were going to finish the play and do him proud. It's not good enough to have completed the play but to have lost the plot! So too with the Bible. There is a danger of using proof texts and missing the point of God's word. To quote a text is not the same as thinking biblically – for that, we need to have grasped the whole narrative and to see ourselves in that divine story as best we can.
- It might be helpful to see one or two biblical passages as doing the same work as Shakespeare's prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*. Genesis 1 gives us more than a good clue about the whole story of the Bible: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). John's opening prologue indicates the same narrative fleshed out in Jesus Christ (John 1:1–18). Can you think of any other passages that may play this role?

See for yourself

In your home group or with a number of friends, consider one of the following subjects, or a topic of your own choice, through the lens of theodrama: immigration, slavery, worship, working on Sundays, IVF treatment, discipleship. In each case we have some information, some biblical narrative that might help, but not a great deal. For each we might discern the conclusion in the direction of God's story and our inclusion in it. In what ways might we need to improvise our response? What would you consider to be suitable improvisation?

How to read the Bible? And how to apply it?

To read and engage with the Bible, we first need to understand the story, the styles of writing and the approaches we find in the text. Michael Parsons encourages readers to look at the whole biblical storyline and demonstrates ways of approaching individual texts. Topics along the way include understanding different genres, the importance of narrative, imaginative reading, praying the Bible, what to do with difficult passages, and how to apply scripture to our own lives.

Mike Parsons is passionate about the Bible – and it shows! He is also passionate about helping people engage with the Bible in ways that draw them into personal and transformative encounters with the God revealed in its pages. This book is bursting with resources to help us understand what the Bible is, how to read and study it for ourselves and how to know God better as we do so. It is a richly rewarded read!

Mags Duggan, author and speaker



Michael Parsons is minister for discipleship at Lechlade Baptist Church. He has previously been a theology lecturer in the UK and Australia and commissioning editor for Paternoster and The Bible Reading Fellowship. He is the author of books on the Reformation and an associate research fellow at Spurgeon's College, London.



Handmade paper created by Rebecca J Hall
Photographed by Adrian Serecut



brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship is a Registered Charity (233280)