

## ***How Do You Read It?***

Ken Wilson 8.08.2021

Hope read my most recent favorite little portion from our sacred writings. An “expert in the law” (one well versed in Jewish law, or instructions, called “torah”) asks a question to test Jesus. It’s a standard question, not a tricky one: What deeds lead to life? People often impose a negative spin on this lawyer, but I don’t read it that way. Jesus was a new teacher in Israel, without the normal credentials, who rose quickly to prominence—mostly because of his healing powers. So this expert in the law was doing his due diligence. We shouldn’t just blindly follow popular teachers—we should check them out, test them (if only inside our heads).

But I especially like Jesus’ answer to his questioner’s question about the deeds that lead to life: Jesus replies: “***What has been written? How do you read it?***” What has been written is one thing, how do you read it, another.

Ancient Judaism regarded their sacred writings as **cryptic**—not plain, not obvious. *Because* they were sacred, the writings were cryptic. So of course, there were many ways to read them. In that case, disagreements were expected and not nearly so threatening. Now the culture is Middle Eastern, not Minnesota nice, so there’s heat, like certain Mexican or Indian cuisines. People express their disagreements with a lot of Siracha. But many different readings? Of course. So when Jesus replied, not only “What has been written?” but also, “How do you read it?” he was expressing a very Jewish approach to Israel’s sacred writings.

Why am I bringing this up today? We are all in need of divine centering these days. We are in need of inspiration. If I had a pin-making machine: *We are all not OK*. Our Sunday time is a time for catching a moment of divine centering, of inspiration, a lift in perspective or shift in perspective to help us through a difficult time. It might come through a song, or a prayer, or candle lighting, or communion, or benediction. Or through the portion of Scripture read and commented on. Last Sunday, my mini-magic moment came through “Be courageous. I’m here. Don’t be afraid”—that’s been resonating all week for me. A lift of perspective, a shift of perspective, a sense of not being alone from others, from ourselves, or from God.

But we face an obvious challenge and an opportunity in this portion of our service. Many of us have been exposed to ignorant, dysfunctional or even damaging ways of reading our sacred writings. I don't need to belabor this point: you appreciate it instantly, I think.

The difference between inspiration and breaking out in hives, often boils down to the perspective that underlies the second part of Jesus reply. Not just "What has been written?" But "How do you read it?" What a huge difference it would make if we understood, "What has been written?" Is only half the question. "How do you read it?" is just as important?"

I thought I might try to answer for myself as one of the people who does this on Sunday on a recurring basis. Yeah, how do I read it? In general, how do I read, or approach the task of reading a collection of ancient writings like this? Sometimes we don't know our own opinions about a matter until we hear someone else state theirs---like in a book group. Today is a little experiment to see if addressing this question is helpful. Not in series, but now and again.

Let me know (by email or chat) if this topic is worth another try another time. Actually, begin tby sharing highlights from someone who reads these writings in a way that resonates with me. Let me tell you who it is, and then share a handful of things he says.

Name is Leon Kass, Professor Emeritus from University of Chicago in area of Great Books.

Well into his 80's. Describes himself as a humanist. Grew up secular Jewish and didn't start attending synagogue until well into adulthood. Had a great rabbi whose comments on Torah intrigued him, so in his Great Books department UC, he has done courses on Genesis, and another on Exodus—first two books of the Hebrew Bible. His first book, Genesis: Beginning of Wisdom I loved. He came out with another, just recently, on Exodus.

In the introduction, Leon Kass includes 3-page section titled, "How I Read" That's what I'll summarize for you. His main way of reading Genesis and Exodus (I assume it applies to Scripture as a whole for Leon Kass) is philosophically. But not in academic sense of

philosophy I, but the basic sense. The “philo” in philosophy means “love” and the “sophy” means “Sophia”—the divine feminine of ancient thought including Scripture. So he reads these as a seeker or lover of Sophia. Sophia is a delighter and a dancer, an artist. A different vibe. Different than seeking “Absolute Truth” or certainty or the magic ring of control. Jesus was a lover of Sophia, also, so that says a lot about Jesus and Sophia- great way to read sacred writings.

I’m paraphrasing here (but closely)—Leon Kass on: “How I read it”

***No matter who reads it, the Bible is not self-interpreting.***

***Like most books, the Bible doesn’t provide rules for how to read it.***

***The thoughtful reader must find their own way.***

That’s been my experience. Ultimately, I’ve had to find my own way of reading. As a pastor where this occupies a lot of my mental space over the years, that’s meant wading through many of the proposed ways, and saying “What makes sense to me?” Trying some ways on for size, seeing they don’t fit, trying something else and in the process cobbling together an approach that works for me. I’m a little nerdy, I’ll admit it, so I value scholarship—it’s actually a source of woo-woo inspiration for me. Whereas for others, its not. My spouse Julia is an Episcopal priest with a master’s in divinity and in music. A choir director since she was in high school, and then for 24 years St. Clare’s, then a priest. Julia is not into biblical scholarship like I am. I’d say music, hymns in particular, is a way she reads Scripture. If it doesn’t sing, if it can’t fit into a great lyric set to a great tune, doesn’t mover her in same way.

Everyone has to find their own way. And just, btw, I know people who have been immersed in ways of reading Scripture that have been harmful. Many who were big into reading Scripture (as in sit down and read) take what I regard as loving sabbaticals from reading Scripture—for the sake of their divine connection. Sometimes a lifelong sabbatical is called for. For Eastern Christianity meditating with icons is a powerful window into the divine, much more than reading Scripture. I’ve only dabbled in that. Sacred writings are only one door, one window, into the temple of the sacred. Scripture is more inspiring when it’s not an idol. Besides, the aim of any spiritual practice is love. If ain’t helping you love, use another practice.

For those who do: *No matter who reads it, the Bible is not self-interpreting. Like most books, the Bible doesn't provide rules for how to read it. The thoughtful reader must find their own way.*

Here's the bit for nerds like me: ***Every word matters. So does word order, first or unique uses, nearby repetition, puns, shifts from prose into poetry, juxtapositions, what precedes or follows; absences and silences also count.***

And I love this from Leon Kass: ***Like any great book [the Bible] carries its own persuasive power in itself. Access to the truths it might contain does not require prior faith, prior traditional or religious commitments, or reliance on outside authorities.***

If access to the truths Scripture might contain depends on some prior faith, some prior traditional or religious reliance on outside authorities—what's the difference between that and a cult? Cults ask for up front prior commitments, signing blank checks. I prefer the Leon Kass way of reading Scripture. *Like any great book it carries its own persuasive power in itself. Doesn't require prior faith, prior traditional or religious commitments, or reliance on outside authorities.*

A corollary to this: *Commandments, instructions, etc., have to make enough sense to give one's consent.* For another time, I can tell the first time I followed what I thought was a command in Scripture even though it didn't make sense, and came to regret it. Not advised. We could vastly reduce harmful readings by observing this. Where was Leon Kass, when I needed him at age 20? *Commandments, instructions, etc., have to make enough sense to give one's consent*

Here's another (almost done): ***Often, the stories of the Bible are too rich, too complex, and too deep to be captured fully, once and for all. One can approach the book in a spirit that is simultaneously philosophical [as a lover/seeker of wisdom], modest, and reverent.***

And: ***To glean its benefits we can—we should—enter sympathetically into it and inhabit the hearts and minds of all its characters, including those who initially repel us. This takes an effort of sympathy and imagination.*** [Emily did this last week with Jesus'

water-walking, it led to my mini-magic moment around “Be courageous. I’m here. No need to fear.”]

Last one for today, maybe worth expanding on another time because speaks to the value in ancient writings far removed from many contemporary sensibilities: ***We can become integral participants in the book. Even though I am not a character in the story, my vicarious participation is required for the text to come fully to life. Such participation can change our feelings and thoughts about important matters. Precisely because the world of the text is so different from my own, it can be a powerful mirror in which to look at my own complacent understandings of significant subjects.***

What I like about Leon Kass on this “How I Read” is how he combines investing effort especially exercising the imagination, approaching with humility, but also (especially) relaxing, not being uptight—which means ignoring approaches that are chasing control and certainty and are riddled with fear and compulsion. Enough for today. And now, Cassie will lead us in a time of mediation.