

The approach to Scripture many of us either grew up with, learned in a campus ministry, previous church, or simply absorbed from popular culture, can turn into a stumbling block to our fruitful engagement with Scripture. It's summed up in the phrase, "The Bible Says..." How many times have we heard that played as a final word trump card?

Maybe we've been taught that all other approaches to Scripture are only grease for the slippery slope. For the last hundred years, Evangelicalism has advanced a false binary: *we hold to a "high view of Scripture" and anything else is a "low view of Scripture."* *If you don't adopt our view, all that's left is debunking the Bible, so it's not even worth reading.* I'll offer an alternative: one that debunks this narrow view of Scripture, proposes key features of a different approach.

Three main headings: longest to shortest

1. **The Trouble with "The Bible Says"**
2. **Thoughts on the Morally Objectional Things in Scripture**
3. **Suggestions for Bible Recovery**

The trouble with "The Bible Says": *First. The Bible Doesn't "Say" Anything*

Obvious problem is hidden in plain sight. The Bible is a written document, and no text speaks for itself. [EAR demo] All texts require a reader to be deciphered. The act of reading a text (out loud, or as a voice in our heads) is an act of interpretation—example: *Don't be afraid* in the voice of a mother, reassuring a child is one thing, in the voice of a platoon leader urging a private into battle, another. Tone of voice, facial expression, body posture accounts for as much as 80% of communication; all of which are only inferred at best in written communication; often as readers, we're making our best guess. We're interpreting, simply by the act of reading.

Here's the hardest thing to remember as modern readers: In the ancient world, where manuscripts were rare, and literacy low, the primary mode of communication was performance: a person speaking before a group, acting out a message. Not even reading a portion of the Bible out loud, but more like retelling a story from the Bible like Diane Sonda does in a kid's minute—with puppets, changing voices, dramatic pauses.

In the ancient world, the oral performance—acting a story out—is primary. Written documents come into existence as notes or a script for such performances, only without the stage directions of a modern script. That means that interpretation (filling in the gaps, shaping the meaning of the words with tone of voice, physical gesture, acting out the words) is even more important, compared to, say, a modern novel where the writer is seeking to convey all this with language, internal dialogue, and so on. Someone acting out a story can inflect with humor, sarcasm, irony, exaggeration, pathos, dramatic pauses, all of which affect the meaning.

What's more, most of us don't know the original languages of the Bible (Ancient Hebrew, Koine Greek) so we depend on translations of these ancient languages into modern English. The act of translation involves a great deal of interpretation. Every choice made in translation affects meaning. [Khrushchev in 1960, "We will bury you! Was more accurately, 'We will outlast you.'"]

Sarah Ruden, accomplished translator of ancient texts, including New Testament, says in *The Face of Water* that translations of the Bible can easily convey different meanings because the ancient languages—Koine Greek and Biblical Hebrew—are very different from English. For one thing, English has a *much* larger lexicon (vocabulary) than either Ancient Greek or Biblical Hebrew; English is therefore capable of being more precise. (When a language has fewer words, each word carries more possible meanings—is more vague, less specific.)

What do we mean, fewer words? Biblical Hebrew uses an estimated 8700 unique words. English has 170,000. It's the difference between a preschooler and clinical psychologist talking about feelings. The preschooler uses "glad, sad or mad." A psychologist knows mad encompasses irritated, annoyed, hangry, resentful, jealous ... to enraged. That gap is filled in by interpretation. When word choices are limited (as in Ancient Hebrew & Greek, each word covers a wider range of meanings, so translating the word into English takes some guess work.

Significant interpretation decision start with the opening words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the Spirit over the waters" God seems straightforward, except the Hebrew is "Elohim" which is a plural noun, more literally "the gods." *Ruach* is translated Spirit, but it means (equally) wind, breath, breeze, spirit [in English, different things] In Genesis 2, the woman is described as a "helpmate" in older English translations. Robert Alter says "helpmate" is misleading, "sustainer beside him" is closer. SO every translation involves a lot of interpretation, producing a written text that needs further interpretation.

All readers come to a text with prior **assumptions**, **concerns**, and **loyalties**, all of which affect our interpretations. If our **assumption** is "Scripture cannot contradict itself," we turn ourselves into a pretzel explaining away contradictions. We come with prior **concerns**: a modern person is often asking different questions than an ancient person; the concerns we bring, the things we're looking for, affect what we find in a text. We come with **loyalties**. If we are part of a close-knit community, holding a different interpretation could threaten our belonging to the group, introduce painful tensions in a marriage or family. I was shocked when N.T. Wright a New Testament scholar weighed in on marriage equality, even though he admitted not being familiar with the debate. He weighed in on the traditional side. Then I met someone who knew him well, who said his wife was very conservative—didn't support women's ordination. Partners with strong opinions affect our interpretations.

So, Scripture doesn't say anything without a reader; all reading is an act of interpretation; all interpretation is shaped by prior assumptions, concerns, loyalties. And that's just the first problem with saying "The Bible Says"

A second problem with “The Bible Says”: *The Bible includes a variety of perspectives by different writers that can disagree or contradict each other*

Scripture is multi-vocal not univocal. It’s not a single book by a single human author; but a collection of writings by many “authors”—the original storytellers before anything written down, the people who gathered the stories and committed them to writing, called the redactors. These different authors have different points of view and don’t agree with each other, including on important matters.

Genesis one describes creation happening in 6 days, in which vegetation appears, before creatures, with humans the last of the creatures. But in Genesis 2, creation occurs in a single day, In the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground ... then the Lord God formed the human from the dust” (Gen. 2; 4b-7a) Human first, vegetation next, other creatures after that. The word translated God in Genesis 1, is “Elohim” [a plural noun] the word translated God in Genesis 2 is YHWH, a singular noun. Whoever combined Genesis 1 with Genesis 2 (signs of different authors) knew this and it wasn’t important to make them line up with each other. They had other concerns than what we call historical accuracy.

In Mt/Mk/Lk, Jesus’ prophetic disruption in the Temple occurs at the end of his ministry, while in John it occurs early on. Not “the Bible says,” but “Mark says one thing, John another”

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah inveigh against Israelites having foreign wives—urges them to send them away. The book of Leviticus says love the foreigner who lives in the land as equals.

The book of Ruth features Boaz marrying a Moabite (hated enemy group) and giving birth to Obed, who is the father of David. Moses marries Zipporah, a foreign wife.

“The Bible says” implies that the Bible speaks with one voice; this assumption easily leads to a sometimes harsh, exclusionary, and controlling orthodoxy. In a system where there’s only one right answer, there are many wrong ones. Fear of mistakes runs high in such a framework.

What if the goal, instead, is a plausible or good interpretation? Meaning is still important, but anxiety is reduced. In Acts 15, the early church was facing an interpretation issue regarding what to expect of non-Jews coming to faith in Jesus. They debated the matter then summed up with, “It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit.” One way to be right, but many to be good.

A multi-vocal view of Scripture—evident from reading Scripture—emphasizes our responsibility and agency as readers, to compare and contrast, agree and disagree with the differing voices within Scripture. We can say, I agree with the voices that undermined slavery, not the ones that support it. Or I agree with the voices that elevate women, not subordinate them.

To sum up so far: Simply accepting these two things: all Scripture must be interpreted and what we call Scripture includes many different perspectives, which don’t always agree with each other, brings

enormous relief. In this view we are invited into a conversation with the different perspectives. It assumes we have agency and responsibility to bring as interpreters. Which writings do we elevate, which do we consider secondary? That's our task as readers.

On to our second main section: thoughts on the morally objectionable things in Scripture, including ones attributed to God.

All Ancient Writings Include Morally Objectionable Things

It's the nature of ancient writings to include such things. Most of us are less aware of this because the only writings from the ancient world that we have read are the writings of Scripture. We haven't read ancient Buddhist or Hindu scripture, or the Quran, or Homer's *The Iliad*, or Virgil's *the Aeneid*. If we did, we'd find much to take issue with.

The U.S. Constitution is only 250 years old (a tenth the age of Scripture) and it contains things we regard as morally objectionable: only white men who are land owners are eligible to vote? We can imagine society 50 years reading our contemporary writings and being aghast at things we take for granted. Fifty years from now, it's possible pork would be grown in the lab from cells, not pigs—and everyone would look back at willingness to eat pork from pigs, highly intelligent creatures, as morally abhorrent.

Within Scripture itself, what is considered morally abhorrent in one era (like marrying a half-sister) is accepted in another era, often an earlier one. Though sometimes, the older perspective is arguably superior: the laws on treatment of animals in Exodus and Leviticus far exceed most stringent best practices of PETA, the animal rights group.

The worst things in Scripture are where God commands Moses or Joshua to commit genocide against the Canaanites. These writings didn't emerge until 500 BC, long after the events depicted. So they were stories: even the law portions are set within a narrative: "this happened, that happened, and the Lord said to Moses..." Like all the stories in Scripture they began as performance art. They are acted out and they were designed to keep people's attention, employ humor, exaggeration, pathos, surprise, sarcasm and all the other tricks of rhetoric. God would appear as a character in the story.

We know that when the writings were gathered as writings the people of Israel had suffered at least two major horrific invasions—worse than what the Ukrainian or the Syrians have suffered under Putin, worse than the attacks on Yemen by the Saudis. More like what the first nations suffered here suffered. Psalm 137 comes from this period, a beautiful psalm "by the willows there, we hung our lyres"—but it ends with "God, dash their infants against the rocks!"

Obviously, this is the cry of a traumatized people for vengeance. *Treat them, God, like they treated us!* So we see this in the writings of that period, which include the genocidal commands. There's no archeological evidence for a mass genocide in what became the holy land—no mass graves, which should leave tell-tale signs.

In Scripture, we have voices calling for vengeance [different than justice] and we have voices calling for mercy. In Leviticus 19—from the same time period as the stories where God command Moses to wipe out the Canaanites, we have—"love the foreigner living in the land as you love yourself." This rules out killing them. So when we encounter the stories calling for genocide, we can respond like Abraham: Will the God of justice, be unjust! God forbid! Actually, let's look at the story in Genesis 19.

People in Scripture Freely Protest Words & Actions Ascribed to God in Scripture

What's fascinating to me is that within Scripture itself, we see characters disagreeing with God, and getting away with it, even being honored for it. Abraham meets the 3 messengers (one of which is called, simply "the Lord") on the way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for the wickedness of its inhabitants. Abraham lodges a protest: "Will the God of justice, not himself be just?" He negotiates with G-d: will you destroy the cities if there are 50 righteous (innocent), 30, 40, 20, 10? God adjusts in response to his protest. Some ancient sages of Israel faulted Abraham for stopping at 10. If Abraham had been a better negotiator, he could have prevented the destruction of these cities! Just because God is portrayed as advocating something in Scripture doesn't mean our only faithful option is to go along with it. Especially when the reason for our protest is rooted in what we've learned from the God portrayed in Scripture, as Abraham did: "Will the God of Justice not be just?"

If Abraham, the father of all who believe, was free to protest, why would we also not have the same freedom? This is a model within Scripture of how we can relate to Scripture.

To Sum Up (Again) So Far:

First. Scripture requires a human reader, and the act of reading involves interpretation. All interpretations are not equally good, and we are responsible for our readings, whether they bear good fruit or bad fruit.

Second, Scripture is multi-vocal not univocal. It's more like entering a vigorous conversation with differing views, rather than listening to a panel of experts who all agree with each other. We're invited to be active participants in the process.

Third, the writings of Scripture are not just old, but ancient writings and we shouldn't be surprised to find things that we find morally objectionable.

Fourth, there is evidence within Scripture of faithful people objecting to God, protesting what God is portrayed as saying or doing. We don't check our moral responsibility in a locker before we read Scripture—we bring it with us.

Bible Recovery Suggestion: *Don't Force It*

Take the pressure off. It's possible to foster a vital connection to God without reading the Bible.

Many have done so within the Jesus tradition. In *Solus Jesus*, Emily has points out how literacy rates were very low up to the invention of the printing press. People who don't read were not reading their Bibles. Even today, literacy is not universal; literacy is not a requirement for faithfulness to God. If you have been subjected to spiritual abuse from people using Scripture as a club, you may need a break from reading it. At the very least, you will need to proceed with caution. And there are a lot of materials/resources to help you. Maybe you read a book that engages Scripture for Lent or listen to podcasts the deconstruct and reconstruct.

If you never read Scripture again, you can still have a meaningful-vibrant connection with God.

Bible Recovery Suggestion: *Take a "Self-Define & Stay Connected" Approach*

A way to re-engage Scripture, if your experience has been tainted by the misuse of Scripture, is to employ the tried and true "self-define/stay connected" approach.

In family systems theory, anxiety flows between people. Families tend to organize around the most anxious members. To navigate this, self-define. Set your boundaries. Say what you think, even if it differs. And then, if it's possible, stay connected. If you don't self-define, the only way to stay connected is to go along or pretend. Or just disconnect entirely. In an anxious family system, self-defining can help you stay connected.

Actually, that's a great way to interact with friends, spouses, business partners, a therapist, someone you admire who you don't always agree with. Self-define/stay connected. It's good way to stay involved with groups of any kind. And it's a good way for connected with Scripture.

Self-define. That's what G-d does in the burning bush with Moses. Who are you? I AM WHO AM That tells Moses "What you are seeing is not just a projection your imagination, but a Someone defined by themselves, not others. Jesus was *really good* at self-defining.

So, to self-define in relation to Scripture: Step into your power, your moral agency to discern, to agree or disagree, to learn from, be inspired by, to poke, prod, protest—bring the whole range of your agency as a reader. This is the glorious liberty of the children of God. We're children of God, not clones of God, or robots of God. Paul writes 1 Corinthians "women should cover wear head coverings in church—as nature itself indicates"? You might say, "If I'm understanding him correctly, I don't agree with him. By "nature" I think he means "culture." Agreeing with everything, or worse, pretending to, is not the best way to learn. Sometimes arguing with someone is the way to learn from them.

Because we're free to self-define, we can afford to stay connected. And by staying connected we can also learn from Paul, gain insights that we don't have, but come to appreciate. Or with the Psalmists, or Isaiah the prophet, or Mary in the gospel of Luke, or Jesus in the gospel of John, or Naomi or Ruth in the book of Ruth. These ancient writings are from a time when the world was more enchanted, more tuned into mystery, more comfortable with transcendent realities peeking in at us, a semi-

permeable membrane between heaven and earth. We didn't get that in high school or college or grad school or reading the New York Times. But we have an itch for that needs scratching.

If we're free to self-define, and we practice self-defining (which can be a little scary at first) then we can expand our horizons beyond the limits of contemporary voices—because every culture including our own has lenses to help see some things better and blinders that don't. If we can learn to self-define, give ourselves emotional permission to self-define, we can stay connected to ancient voices, with different lenses and different blinders than ours. These are the skills we develop to be in any meaningful relationship, including one with God.