



Ora et Lege (Pray and Read): Bible Reading as a Form of Prayer

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Many people think reading the Bible and praying are entirely different things. Although both are widely practiced, most people—in Protestant contexts especially—see more differences than commonalities between the two.

While different, they have more overlap than it may seem, at least within the Christian tradition. In this tradition, the Bible is not primarily a history book or work of literature, but the word of God. Thomas Merton gives expression to this:

The Bible claims to contain a message which will not merely instruct you, not merely inform you about the distant past, not merely teach you certain ethical principles, or map out

Can reading the Bible be a form of prayer? While the Bible is many things, a work of history, of literature, etc., it can also be the place where one encounters God. While some may understand prayer and Bible reading to be different activities, reading scripture can be an important form of prayer.

a satisfying hypothesis to explain your place in the universe and give your life meaning—much more than that, the Bible claims to be: The Word of God.¹

Although the Bible is a collection of ancient literature, a writing of history, an account of a religious movement, and many other things, within the Christian tradition the Bible is first and foremost the written word of God.² And attentiveness to God's word has a great deal in common with prayer practices that cultivate a disposition of listening and receiving.

In an essay titled "Exegesis as Prayer," C. Clifton Black suggests that reading the Bible—even the kind of reading that is intellectually rigorous (i.e., "exegesis")—may rightly be understood as a distinctive form of prayer:

When proceeding in alignment with the same Spirit that animated scripture's creation and canonization within the church, *exegesis is an expression of prayer*. The glorification of God and the sanctification of life constitute the ultimate reason for scripture's interpretation, as for everything else that Christians are and do.³

Black suggests that prayer and reading scripture, when done in the spirituality of the Christian tradition, have shared purposes.

¹ Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), 17.

² In recent years, many American traditions of Lutheranism have come to define the Word of God in a threefold way: first, as Jesus Christ (the Incarnate Word) (John 1:1–5); second, as the message about Jesus (the proclaimed Word) (Acts 13:5; 18:11); and third, as the Bible (the written Word) (Mark 7:13). This threefold understanding of the Word is first articulated most fully by Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics* 1.1 §4, 88–124), who identifies seeds of this threefold understanding in Luther: "First Lectures on the Psalms, Psalm 45" (1513–1515), in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), 10:220; "St Stephen's Day Sermon, Matthew 23" (1522), *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 127 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–2009), 10/1:272. Mark Allan Powell, "How Can Lutheran Insights Open Up the Bible?" in *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 21–24; ELCA, "Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" (rev. 2024): 2.02.

³ C. Clifton Black, "Exegesis as Prayer," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23 no. 2 (2002): 131–145, here 138 (*italics original*).

However different the two may look, they share the same goals and lead to the same ends.

In this essay, I suggest reading the Bible has much in common with prayer—and may even be seen as a distinctive form of prayer. When approached as word of God, the Bible leads hearers and readers to the same disposition cultivated by practices of contemplative prayer. The Bible directs us to God, invites us to listen, and allows for a transformative experience that invites a lived response.

THE BIBLE DIRECTS US TO GOD

The Bible recounts a lot of history about ancient Israel and the early church, but it is not simply a history book. It is a book about God and God's relationship with humanity and creation across specific seasons of history.

This is more readily apparent in some writings than others. Writings like Esther, for example, never explicitly mention God, while Paul's letter to the Romans names God over 150 times. As a collection, the thread that runs throughout the Bible is its collective witness to the God of Israel, the God made known in Jesus Christ. The Bible's content is not first and foremost history, science, legal codes, or even ethics as much it is about God. It is not a story about human achievement as much as it is about humans in relation to God. Collectively, the Bible is a book that bears witness to and directs hearers and readers to God.

We see some of this in how Jesus approached scripture. In a discussion recounted by all Synoptic Gospels, a scribe asks what commandment in scripture is the "first of all" (Mark 12:28–34).⁴ Both the questioner (a scribe) and question (about commandments) make clear this is about the right interpretation of scripture. The question aims not to dismiss other commandments as irrelevant, but to clarify a

⁴ Matthew's version uses "greatest" (vs. "first of all") language, omits "and with all your strength," and adds: "This is the first and greatest commandment" (22:34–40). After the second commandment (love your neighbor as yourself), Matthew also adds: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (v. 40). Luke begins the story with a different question ("What must I do to inherit eternal life?"), progresses with slightly different dialogue (e.g., "Do this and you will live"), and concludes with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37).

guiding principle for all.⁵ Jesus responds: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (v. 30, NRSVUE).⁶ In response, Jesus uses scripture (quoting Deuteronomy 6:5) to show how its focus is God: it calls hearers to love God in a holistic and comprehensive way. In short, when asked for an overarching focal point of scripture, Jesus emphasized how it invites holistic devotion to God, accompanied by love for neighbor.

Like prayer, the Bible’s purpose is to direct readers and hearers to God, to set their focus on God, and to connect them with God. Both acts of reading the Bible and praying serve to direct and connect people to God.

Martin Luther had a similar approach to the purpose of scripture. In his “Prefaces to the Old Testament” (1523), he not only described scripture as “the loftiest and noblest of holy things” and “the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored,” he also likened scripture to the manger that held the Christ child: “Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies...Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.”⁷ Although focused specifically on Christ (vs. God generally), Luther’s metaphor implies the Bible’s true purpose is to show forth the God made known in Christ. That is, the Bible’s purpose is to direct hearers and readers to God in Christ.

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⁵ The question about an essential principle (or several) of the demands of the Torah was in circulation around this general timeframe: b. Makkot 23b–24a; Terrence A. Donaldson, “The Law That Hangs (Matthew 22:40): Rabbinic Formulation and Matthean Social World,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1995): 689–709.

⁶ Jesus’ response includes the “second” commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31), but the focus of this essay justifies focus on the first. Jesus is not the only Jewish interpreter to connect Deuteronomy 6:5 with Leviticus 19:18. J. B. Stern, “Jesus’ Citation of Deuteronomy 6, 5 and Leviticus 19, 18 in the Light of Jewish Tradition,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966): 312–316.

⁷ LW 35:236.

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THE BIBLE INVITES US TO LISTEN

To engage the Bible, we need to listen. True enough, hearing or reading *anything* requires a capacity to listen. In that sense, the Bible is not unique among literature.

But the Bible calls for listening in a more intentional way. Several passages from the Hebrew Bible call for silence as an act that reveres God and shows humility (Psalm 46:10; Eccl 5:2; Hab 2:20; Zech 2:13; Zeph 1:17).⁸ As these calls for silence show, silence and listening in scripture are more than just abstaining from talking. They constitute a disposition of awareness of God and attendance to God's word.

Listening not only enables us to hear something or someone. Listening is a core attitude and disposition of Christian spirituality. Henri J. M. Nouwen speaks of listening as "the core attitude of the person who is open to God's living and creative word."⁹ Rowan Williams describes Bible reading as "an essential part of the Christian life" because "*Christian life is a listening life*. Christians are people who expect to be spoken to by God."¹⁰

We see such an attentiveness to the word of God in Jesus's example. He regularly referenced scripture to refute temptation, to inform theological discussions and debate, to ground his teaching about God and ethics, and as a primary reference to the word of God.¹¹ He not only repeated Deuteronomy 8:3 ("One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," Matt 4:4),

⁸ See also Exodus 14:14; Job 6:24; Ps 4:4; Lamentations 3:26; Isaiah 30:15; Revelation 8:1. Related, on the perils of careless speech, see Proverbs 17:28; 29:11; Sirach 14:1; 19:16; Matthew 12:36–37; James 3:1–12.

⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 88. Some of the points made in this paragraph are also made in Troftgruben, "A Spirituality of Studying Scripture (Exegesis)," *Word & World* 42 no. 4 (2022): 344–351, here 348.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 21, italics original.

¹¹ For example: Matthew 4:1–11; 5:17–20; 9:13; 12:1–8; 19:4–8; 22:41–46. See also John 10:35. On the ways Jesus interprets scripture in Matthew's Gospel, see F. Scott Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," *Interpretation* 64 no. 4 (2010): 368–378.

he exemplified it through his teaching, ministry, and life. Similarly, Jesus emphasized brevity in prayer (6:7–15) and spent extensive time in prayer (Mark 1:35; 6:46; 14:32, 35, 39). In these ways, he embodied a disposition of listening, both in prayer and in attentiveness to scripture. We find in the Gospels a Jesus who lived a “listening life,” attentive and responsive to the presence and word of God.

The Bible invites us to intentional listening, not just to the world around us, but more importantly to the word of God. In this way, hearing and reading the Bible is a great deal like prayer. Leaders of contemplative spirituality often emphasize that prayer is not about our words as much as it is about our silence and openness to God. As Thomas Merton describes it, “prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart—it is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration.”¹² Like prayer, scripture and its reading invite us to listen for and attend to the word of God.

This kind of listening takes time. Unlike the fast pace and bombastic stimuli of media in our world, which train us to make snap judgments and to multitask as much as possible, the listening called for by the Bible and many practices of prayer require time and energy. A bit like good, art, music, or poetry, scripture and prayer call for an appreciative attending that requires time—generally in contrast to the noisy overstimulation of a world that idolizes entertainment and instant gratification.

This listening is not entirely passive. Intentional listening, after all, may involve active dialogue, challenge, lament, or protest. Reading scripture and praying are both enriched from interactive, dynamic engagement, which can help deep listening more than hinder it. After all, the acts of prayer and reading scripture are formative experiences, and formative experiences take time.

READING THE BIBLE IS TRANSFORMATIVE

The Bible is not a book to be mastered, the way some books and subjects are. Although the Bible records historical events and offers ethical content that may be learned, its ultimate purpose is to bear

¹² Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 40.

witness to a living God with whom the hearer and reader may have an encounter. Eugene Peterson writes this about the Bible:

This book makes us participants in the world of God's being and action; but we don't participate on our own terms. We don't get to make up the plot or decide what character we will be. This book has generative power; things happen to us as we let the text call forth, stimulate, rebuke, prune us. We don't end up the same.¹³

This unpredictable, dynamic quality is not because the Bible takes the form of an entirely different kind of literature, unlike anything in human history. It is because it bears the word of God in written form, and the word of God can create things anew.

In the Gospels, we see Jesus engaging scripture in this way. While he reveres, references, and bases his teachings in the scriptures, he also distinguishes God's words from human interpretive traditions (Mark 7:1–13), sees scripture as bearing witness to God's work in Christ (John 5:39), and sees his own life, death, and resurrection as fulfilling scripture (Matt 5:17–20; Luke 24:44–48). Jesus treats scripture with reverence as the word of God, upon which human life and its flourishing depend (Matt 4:4). Yet, he also discerns how the Bible's generative power comes from beyond itself—from its Author, the Creator of all.

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¹³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 66.

¹⁴ Mitzi Smith and Yung Suk Kim rightly understand transformation language in relation to Bible reading as deeply interconnected with freedom, justice, and peace. Mitzi Smith

In his letter to the Romans, Paul begins the portion dedicated to the human response to the gospel (Romans 12:1–15:13) by using “transformation” language:

I urge you therefore, siblings, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, as your reasonable act of worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age *but be transformed by the renewal of your mind*, that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and pleasing and perfect. (Rom 12:1–2)¹⁵

Paul does not explicitly clarify the agent of this “transformation,” but his gospel and theological convictions make clear: the source, power, and agent of transformation is God alone. Although Paul’s exhortation is not focused on engaging scripture, the language he uses (transformation) aptly describes the renewal associated with encountering the message and grace of God. Such language captures the transformative experience that may take shape through practices of Bible reading and prayer.

Experiences like these invite a response. Thomas Merton points out: “Any serious reading of the Bible means personal investment in it, not simply mental agreement with abstract propositions. And involvement is dangerous, because it lays one open to unforeseen conclusions.”¹⁶ In many places, the Bible does not call for belief in abstract principles as much as a lived response.

Elsewhere Merton suggests: “If we approach it [the Bible] with speculative questions, we are apt to find that it confronts us in turn with brutally practical questions. If we ask it for information about the meaning of life, it answers by asking us when we intend to start living?”¹⁷ The stories of the Hebrew Bible, the oracles of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, and other material in the Bible invite a lived response, as individuals and communities of faith, to the calling of a

and Kim, Yung Suk, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction* (Eugene: Stock Publishers, 2018), 25–27.

¹⁵ The italics were added. This and all subsequent Bible translations quoted in this essay are my own.

¹⁶ Merton, *Opening the Bible*, 43.

¹⁷ Merton, *Opening the Bible*, 30.

living God. This response cannot happen in the abstract, but in the concrete realities of daily living.

The most natural response is worship. This is why Paul begins Romans 12 with a call to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, as your reasonable act of worship” (12:1). It is why throughout the Hebrew Bible, the responses to God’s activity of thanksgiving and praise are virtually inseparable, one and the same. This “worship” must also result in seeking freedom, justice, and life for the world around us. Jesus’s inclusion of “love your neighbor as yourself” alongside the command to love God make clear that love for God cannot justly be divorced from love for neighbor (Mark 12:29–31). However we respond to the message and presence of God, the most reasonable responses fall under the larger category of worship.

CONCLUSION: “HOW DO YOU READ IT?”

When approached as the word of God, the practice of reading the Bible shares many goals with practices of contemplative prayer: it directs us to God, invites us to listen, and allows for transformative experiences that invite a lived response. While many spiritual practices nurture these things, prayer and Bible reading do so in distinctive ways. In these ways, Bible reading invites us to an experience and disposition that have things in common with contemplative practices of prayer—enough that Bible reading may even be considered a distinctive form of prayer.

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However, this resonance depends upon an approach to scripture that receives it as word of God. Not every time and place require this disposition. Sometimes heightened scrutiny and critical awareness are called for instead. This only underscores the great significance of how

we go about reading—a consideration with which I wish to conclude this essay.

In Luke 10:25–37, Jesus interacts with a Torah expert (a lawyer) interested in knowing how he may secure eternal life. Throughout the dialogue, Jesus raises more questions than answers. He begins his approach by asking a fundamental question: “What is written in the Torah (Law)? How do you read it?” (v. 26).

How we read scripture matters. That is why Jesus asks the Torah expert the question. If we read scripture with a focus on securing our place in heaven (like the Torah expert), we will be hard pressed to see anything else. If we read it with an openness to God’s expansive mercy and work in the world, we are more likely to catch a glimpse of the mind-blowing nature of the gospel and the God at work in it.

There are other ways of reading the Bible that have little to do with prayer (or other spiritual practices). At my first regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, I was given an opportunity to present my first paper. Our session took place in the chapel of a Lutheran seminary. Just before me, another presenter discussed a parable in Luke. He tried to show that the parable was polemical, manipulative, reflective of a selfish Jesus, and an unethical story. It was quite a feat of Christological demolition. It felt odd to hear it from a chapel pulpit. In response, I asked: “So then, what message about God does the parable offer?” He stared as if I had spoken gibberish. The question never crossed his mind. No additional questions followed.

Not everyone interested in the Bible has interest in getting involved with God. But God is what the book is finally about.¹⁸ There are many ways to read and hear the Bible. But not all resonate closely with its purpose of conveying a word from God.

In his book *Reading the Bible for All the Wrong Reasons*, Russell Pregeant observes:

It is important when approaching the Bible to consider the nature of the biblical writings and to ask questions appropriate to that nature. Much of our confusion about the Bible stems from the inappropriate questions many interpreters ask of it, and the result is a phenomenon I call ‘Bible abuse.’...The Bible is a collection of writings that has

¹⁸ Noted in Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book*, 30.

the potential liberate human beings from fear, despair, and meaninglessness. It has the power to inspire them and empower them to break free from destructive patterns of personal behavior or social systems. All too often, however, it is used to oppress rather than liberate and to strike fear into the human heart rather than to banish fear. And whether the Bible liberates or oppresses us depends upon the way we choose to read it.¹⁹

How we read the Bible matters.

Martin Luther shared this opinion. In his preface to Romans (1522), he contends that those with an insufficient grasp of grace—no matter how eloquent or prolific they are—“will never understand this letter of St. Paul, nor any other book of Holy Scripture.”²⁰ While diverse approaches have their place, those that approach the Bible as a word from God resonate more organically with its nature and purpose, allowing its message of divine grace to be more readily heard.

How we read the Bible very often makes the difference whether it is used as a weapon or as a source of life, whether it is used to condemn or to set free, and whether it is a rule book or a message of grace. The question posed by Jesus to the scribe—“How do you read it?”—still stands for us today. How we respond, through our practices of reading the Bible, inevitably shapes what we see and the encounters we have. ⊕

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¹⁹ Russell Pregeant, *Reading the Bible for All the Wrong Reasons* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 5–6.

²⁰ LW 35: 371–372. Luther expresses a similar opinion elsewhere: “Prefaces to the New Testament” (1522), LW 35:360–361; “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for an Expect in the Gospels” (1552), LW 35:118–119.