

Reading the Bible Like a Grown-Up

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What do we mean when we say
“like a grown-up”?

Like a grown-up...?

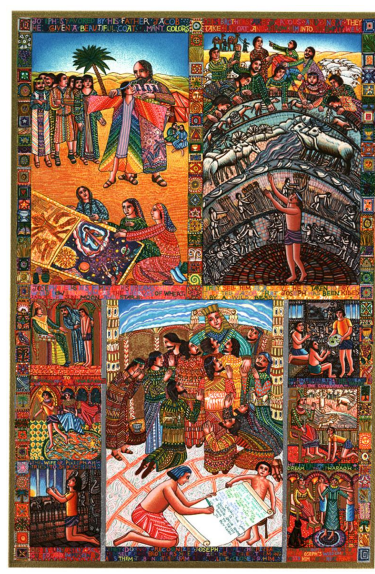
Acknowledge complexity

Tolerate nuance

Draw on experience

Accept unsatisfactory answers

Carry on



“I wrote this story for you, but when I began it I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result, you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound, you will be older still. **But someday, maybe you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.** You can then take it down from some upper shelf, dust it off, and tell me what you think of it...”

“The exegesis of ancient Israel’s Scriptures is surely one of the strangest activities in which Christians and religiously committed Jews regularly engage. It is strange that thoughtful people in sizable numbers would pay close, sustained attention to writings from a distant millennium and culture. It is even more strange that many are open to receiving these ancient and alien texts as having direct bearing on their lives—that is, to hearing and reading them as Scripture.”

—Ellen Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures*, 1.



“The Bible is not an easy book to read. It is often hard--if not, when it apparently contradicts itself, impossible--to understand. It customarily requires almost too much of us. Its estimation of human nature is hardly a comfort. And it leads us repeatedly into the temptation to use it selectively to excuse our ignorance, to justify our wishes, or to condemn people unlike ourselves.”

Approaching the Bible



Easy to understand

Impossible to understand



Where would you situate yourself?

What contributes to this feeling/impression?

Have you ever felt like you were moving one way or another along this spectrum? When and why?

The Bible is a Library

Books

“Bible” from the Greek *biblia*, meaning *books*



Eras

Nearly 1,000 year span of history



Contexts

Viewpoints, questions & concerns



Places

Cultural and political backgrounds and settings



Authors

For each book, even within books, many hands at work



Languages

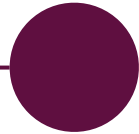
Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (at least)



Complexity in the Bible

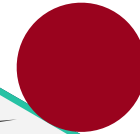
Contradictions

Does the Bible contradict itself?
Why? What does that teach?



Inconsistencies

Is the Bible bad at recording
details?



Different Ideas

Does the Bible teach different
things about important concepts?



Ambiguity

Is the Bible vague on purpose?



Complexity comes from *contradictions*

PROVERBS 26:4

Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.



PROVERBS 26:5

Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.

Complexity comes from apparent *inconsistencies*

GENESIS 6:13,

14-22

13 And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. 19 And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. 20 Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.



GENESIS 7:1-2

Genesis 7:1 Then the LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. 2 Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; 3 and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth.

Complexity comes from *different ideas*

DEUTERONOMY

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD,

ISAIAH 16:3-4

Give counsel, grant justice;
Make your shade like night at the height of noon
Hide the outcasts, do not betray the fugitive.
Let the outcasts of Moab settle among you
Be a refuge to them from the destroyer.



RUTH 4:11

Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make [Ruth the Moabite] who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem

EZRA 9:1-3

[Then] the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites...the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.” When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled.

Author of Ezra: How can you stand being married to a Moabite wife? Don't you know that Moabites are the worst—they sin and cause others to sin! And if that isn't enough, they are all the result of incest! You are going to dilute our “holy seed” by having children with her!

Author of Ruth: Moabites, shmoabites! People are what they become, not how they are born. A Moabite woman who performs acts of kindness is better than a Jewish man who doesn't. Don't listen to that fanatic “holy seed” notion—it is just plain wrong. And, while we are at it, your tone makes your sound like you don't like women too much either.

E: That's an overstatement. Some women are wonderful to look at, and that's when they listen to their husbands and other male relatives, good things happen. But beware the woman who shows independent initiative. She is “the highway to Sheol” (Prov 7.27)—stay away from her!

R: That view sounds shortsighted: “Beauty is illusory” (Prov 31.30). But more important, it's unduly harsh and judgmental. I prefer to judge women as we judge foreigners—by what they do, not by how they are born. Don't you know that a Moabite was the ancestor of King David?

E: You don't expect me to believe that myth, do you?

R: We may have to agree to disagree. And just wait and see whether my point of view or yours is preserved in the tradition...

Complexity comes from ambiguity

GENESIS 25:

The children struggled together within [Rebekah's womb]; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"^a So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."



*The elder the younger will serve
OR
The elder will serve the younger*

"When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Genesis 25:27-28)

Session 2



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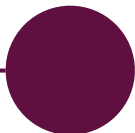
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Literary Artistry of the Bible

Repetition

Words or phrases repeated in ways that may shift our sense of what a text is *about*

Form & Structure

How a book or a passage is organized and how that contributes a sense of meaning

Intertextuality

How biblical books talk to one another across the canon

Reading Conventions

What we expect vs. what we find



Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?”
2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”

Genesis 3:5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, a knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate... 8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”

Genesis 3:11 He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” 12 The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” 14 The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go

3:16 To the woman he said,
“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”

3:17 And to the man he said,
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

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18

19

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Form & Structure: Lament Psalms

Psalm 6

Be gracious to me, Lord, for I am languishing
O Lord, heal me, my bones are shaking with terror...
I am weary with my moaning,
Every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with weeping.
My eyes waste away because of grief;
They grow weak because of all my foes...

The Lord has heard my supplication,
The Lord accepts my prayer.

Vv. 2, 6-7, 9

Form & Structure: Acrostic Poems

Psalm 119

A (א) Happy are those whose way is blameless
Who walk in the law of the Lord

A Happy are those who keep his decrees
Who seek him with their whole heart

A Who also do no wrong, but walk in his
ways

A You have commanded your precepts to be
kept

A O, that my ways be steadfast in keeping
them

A Then I shall not be put to shame

A I will praise you with an upright heart

A I will observe your statutes

B (ב) How can young people keep their way
pure?

B By guarding it according to your word...

Z (ז) ...I have gone astray like a lost sheep;
seek out

your servant, for I do not forget your

commandments

Form & Structure: Acrostic Poems

Lamentation S

A (א) How lonely sits the city
 That once was full of people!
 How like a widow she has become,
 She who was great among the nations...

B (ב) She weeps bitterly in the night
 With tears on her cheeks;
 Among all her lovers,
 She has no one to comfort her...

C (ג) Judah has gone into exile
 With suffering and hard labor
 She now lives among the nations
 And finds no resting place...

A,B,C; Aa, Bb, Cc; AAA, BBB, CCC; [22 verses]

Texts Talk to One Another

The LORD passed before [Moses],
and proclaimed,
“The LORD, the LORD,
a God **merciful and gracious,**
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and
faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the
thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth
generation.”

Exodus 34:6-7



But [God’s forgiveness to the Ninevites] was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for **I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.** 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Jonah 4:1-3

Conventions and Expectations



Groundhog Day (Columbia Pictures,
1993)

“It has been my own experience in making a sustained effort to understand biblical narrative better that such learning is pleasurable rather than arduous. As one discovers how to adjust the fine focus of those literary binoculars, the biblical tales, forceful enough to begin with, show a surprising subtlety and inventiveness of detail, and, in many instances, a beautifully interwoven wholeness. The human figures that move through this landscape thus seem livelier more complicated and various than one's preconceptions might have allowed... the biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to or resists Him. Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to *take the Bible seriously* rather than *to enjoy it*, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.”

“To say a written text is authoritative might mean several things. For example, a text might be authoritative because concepts articulate there are generally accepted,...or because it is the best account of an event, life, location, or phenomenon. Histories, travel guides, and scientific articles can have such authority. For Lutherans, the Bible includes such authoritative elements, but its effective authority has another source. **The Bible is authoritative because it communicates the grace of God in Jesus Christ.** Grace comes to us as law and gospel, demand and promise. The Bible is authoritative for us because it allows us to encounter the gracious God who was self-revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, the Bible is authoritative for us in much the same way that Jesus Christ was authoritative for those first-century women and men who became his disciples. They encountered God in him...God in Jesus Christ engages people through the Bible. The book is a means of grace. **Therefore, and this is a very important “therefore”, Lutherans begin with what the Bible *does*, rather than claims about its nature or origin (i.e., what it *is*).”**

Ruth 1:1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ruth 1:15 So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 16 But Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

17 Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth 1:19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” 20 She said to them,

“Call me no longer Naomi,
call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

21 I went away full,
but the LORD has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the LORD has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Asking Good Questions

Plot

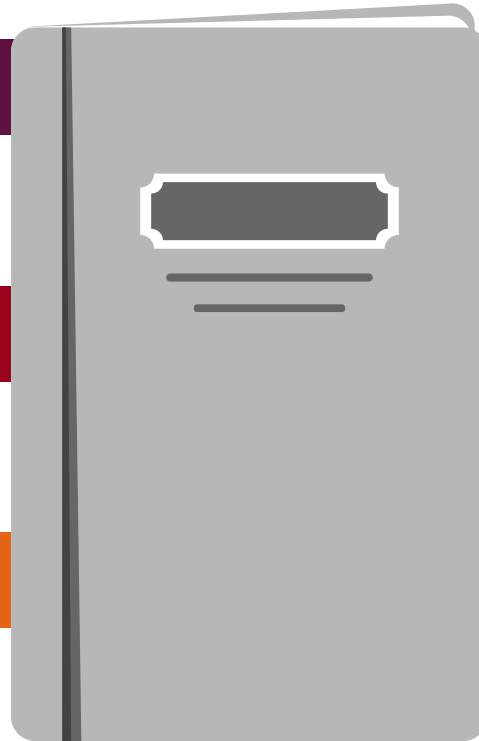
What happened in the story so far?

Character

Who are the characters and what do we know about them?

Setting

What is the setting and what do we know about it?



Theme

Does the passage have a theme?
Which ideas seem most important?

Gaps

What details do you want as a reader that are not provided?
Whose perspective is left out?

What's Next?

If you didn't know, where would you assume it is going?
Where are we in this story?
Where are you?

Why do we read the Bible?

faith, religion, spirituality, justice, right and wrong, who God is, how to treat each other, what to do when you've hurt someone, what to do when someone has hurt you, who Jesus was, who Jesus is, what to do in times of trouble, a meaningful song, your family's history, your country's history, why we live where we live, how to be happy, how to be wise, how to be safe, how to be healthy and moral



Thanks for coming!



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