



INTRODUCTION TO A NEW WAY OF READING

Neil Elliott



There are many ways to study the Bible, and any number of textbooks that, in different ways, introduce the academic study of the Bible. You are about to embark on a different kind of Bible study in the pages that follow.

Some textbooks—and some courses on the Bible, for that matter—approach the Bible as if one or another part of it meant or means just one thing. Often, however, different textbooks, like different instructors or different students, can't agree on what that one meaning is! The result can be frustrating. A student who enters a course with a pretty clear idea of “what the Bible means” may be surprised, disappointed, or even angry when the text or the instructor suggests that it means, or meant, something else. Both this student and the instructor may feel pulled into an argument: Who is right? Who gets to decide what the Bible means? Meanwhile, another student who enters the same course without any background with the Bible may feel like an outsider who has wandered into someone else's family gathering (or family feud).

THE READING DIFFERENCE MAKES

We all know, of course, that different people read the Bible in different ways. That's not just a matter of individual preference: historical processes and cultural factors, differences in ethnic experiences and perspectives, and diversity in privilege and socioeconomic position all

influence the ways we hear and read the Bible. Teachers often work to bring that diversity into class discussion. Despite those efforts, however, we often continue to perceive the very real diversity among people as something *external* to the Bible, which we (wrongly) assume remains just *one* thing with just *one* meaning.

It is always easy for the members of a dominant majority group to imagine themselves at the center of things, and others as peripheral. But I can speak more personally. I grew up in almost all-white churches, listening to white missionaries plead for our support to “take the Bible” to benighted dark-skinned people in distant lands. Such moments were possible because of a long history in which European conquest and colonialism were intertwined with Christian missionary efforts among other lands and peoples, including North America, and the particular history of slavery, conquest, and wave after wave of immigration that has produced the present diversity in the United States. It never occurred to me, as a white, Euro-American Christian, to imagine that the Bible was anything but “ours” in a way it could never belong to others. We could read ourselves into the biblical story, spontaneously identifying ourselves with the people of God. Meanwhile, as some of the contributors to this textbook point out, it has been harder for people from other groups to read the Bible as connected with *their* story. Someone who has grown up in a church where all the pictures of Jesus and his contemporaries are white—but the congregation isn’t—might find it more difficult to connect with the Bible, its world, and its people. How much more difficult is it when one’s ancestors were told by European missionaries that they would have to give up their culture and traditions to become part of the “people of God,” while those same Europeans could simply identify their culture with Christianity?

I read it differently now, but that doesn’t make me unusual. It is now less and less a possibility for any single group to imagine that the Bible is “theirs” any more than it belongs to others. The rich variety of peoples—including the diversity of communities of faith—has now made impossible the assumption that any one people or group “owns” the Bible.

That insight has long been at home in the university classroom. Even colleges that were originally founded by Christian denominations now offer classes in religious studies where asking students to subscribe to one or another religious doctrine would be out of the question. Nevertheless, many resources available for biblical study in the classroom—textbooks, commentaries, and study Bibles alike—have perpetuated the impression that the questions raised in multicultural and culture-critical scholarship are somehow extraneous ones, imposed by marginalized “others” onto a Bible that itself remains transcendent, universally authoritative, and ethnically “neutral.”

READING THROUGH OTHERS’ EYES

The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible puts cultural diversity at the very center of reading the Bible. This textbook brings together the voices of many different biblical scholars from many places,

all of whom speak candidly about what the Bible means to them and for their people. As the editors observe in the Preface, the *Companion* has been conceived as a crossroads where we may *all* find ourselves invited to other folks' family gatherings.

The editors and contributors believe that more is at stake in biblical interpretation than promoting a healthy campus climate of multicultural understanding or making visible the true diversity of biblical scholarship today, though those are worthy goals. The men and women who write here have for decades been taking part in conversations at the cultural "crossroads" in biblical scholarship. Their presence and their insights have dislocated some long-dominant habits of interpretation and broken open the rich diversity evident in the Bible itself. We now understand that the biblical writings were produced out of the complex interplay of peoples and cultures, whether those encounters involved conquest or cooperation, conflict or convergence, warfare or the discovery of new neighbors. *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* highlights both the way the Bible continues to be read as a text *in* different cultures and the way we now understand the Bible as the multilayered product *of* ancient cultures.

READING AGAIN THROUGH OUR OWN EYES

The unique perspective at the heart of this textbook offers the student of the Bible the opportunity to encounter the Bible "again for the first time." If the Bible is familiar to you, you have the opportunity to encounter it new through the experience of others and thus rediscover new meanings for yourself. If the Bible has been foreign territory, it no longer needs to remain a matter that seems to belong only to others. You can explore it in the company of women and men who have taken very different paths across its landscapes and, in so doing, you may find worthy guides and companions for your own journey. Whatever your previous experience with the biblical writings, here is an opportunity to engage its stories and characters, its myths and heroes—and the communities that shaped them all—and find your own voice as a reader and an interpreter alongside others.

THE PEOPLES' COMPANION TO THE BIBLE AND THE BIBLICAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

Professors of biblical or religious studies who wish to bring multicultural perspectives and the diversity of interpretive options into the classroom will find *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* a welcome resource. The following remarks will highlight the distinctive approach taken here.

First, *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* is designed to be used alongside another classroom Bible of the professor's choice, for example, one of the accepted academic study Bibles (such as the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 4th edition, or the *Harper Study Bible*), or in courses where no specific version of the Bible is required. Instructors who wish to adopt a single study Bible incorporating the perspective of this *Companion* may wish to consider *The Peoples' Bible* (Fortress Press, 2008), which includes the entire Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha in the New Revised Standard Version as well as many of the chapters and all of the book introductions that follow.

Chapters in this book are organized in the order in which the biblical books appear in the Protestant canon; Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal books are discussed after the Hebrew Bible and before the New Testament. Students should understand that the books of the Bible are not arranged in the chronological order of their composition. In fact, a thoroughly historical approach to the Bible would discuss the biblical books in a very different order, and would likely first discuss sources and "layers" of tradition that lay *behind* the biblical writings. Students and instructors interested in this history should give particular attention to chapters 11, "The Hebrew Bible as a Text of Cultures," and 17, "The New Testament as a Text of Cultures," and to the Timelines that accompany each of those chapters. These have been included in *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* precisely to address many of the historical-critical insights into the development of the biblical writings, while keeping the role of cultures clearly in view. On the other hand, professors who know they will use a more extensive historical-critical textbook in class may wish to adopt *The Peoples' Companion* as an important second textbook that will supplement the historical introduction with its own distinctive approach.

While the historical-critical approach to the origins and development of the biblical writings has been the dominant approach in biblical studies for more than a century, it has not escaped questions and challenges from those who ask, what it is *for*? Are "historical-critical" scholars out to wrest control of the Bible's interpretation away from faith communities that have traditionally read these writings as Holy Scripture? Once scholars have identified and elaborated the historical origins of one or another writing—what then? Does the value of an ancient text become "fixed" in the past, or can it still speak to people today? Who gets to decide? The historical-critical scholar? And to whom are scholars accountable?

These are lively questions in contemporary biblical studies, not least among scholars who themselves work with and are committed to the historical-critical method. Readers of *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* will benefit not only from the historical-critical perspective adopted especially in the key introductory chapters on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament but also from watching carefully to see how and to what purposes individual writers use historical-critical insights in their own appreciation and appropriation of the Bible.

Students and instructors who wish to explore the *literary character of the biblical writings* will want to read each chapter attentive to those particular aspects of the biblical text that have caught the ear, and eye, of one or another community today. Those interested in different *methods of biblical interpretation* will note that no single method is adopted by all the contributors to this textbook and that none of them claims to present “the” authoritative reading. By design and intention, each contributor presents a deliberately personal angle of vision and invites the reader to see the text from that angle. Think of each writer not as making authoritative pronouncements on the meaning of a biblical text, but as offering to accompany the reader with an informed, but nevertheless personally inflected perspective. Of course, especially where that angle of vision is different from the reader’s own, the difference is an opportunity for the reader to become aware of his or her *own* standpoint—an intentional goal of this textbook (see the Guide for Students and the Self-Inventory for Bible Readers, below).

We realize there are almost as many ways to organize a course in biblical studies or an introduction to the Bible as there are instructors! Some will want students to begin by encountering a biblical text directly and reflecting on it, then turning to the textbook for a broader view. Others may want to lead students through a more directed narrative, whether a historical account of the emergence of the Bible or a survey of themes in the Bible. Still others will want to highlight the plurality of voices in contemporary Bible interpretation. *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* is suited to all these purposes. Sample syllabi for each of these approaches are available at the Web site, www.fortresspress.com/peoplescompanion.

For any of these approaches we recommend spending time with the Reader’s Self-Inventory early in a course. Instructors may wish to devote at least one class session to discussing responses to it. The heart of *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible* is the concentration of varied perspectives of scholars writing from very different social locations—but the *Companion* is not really about those scholars; it is about the role of culture and angle of vision in *anyone’s* interpretation of the Bible. For that reason we also recommend returning to the Reader’s Self-Inventory at the end of the course. That may be a time for students to identify their own social locations as interpreters and describe how that location influences the way they read and experience the Bible.

A final recommendation concerns the online forum at www.fortresspress.com/peoplescompanion. This forum gives students a range of opportunities to interact with the biblical text and with scholar and student readers from a variety of perspectives. Visit the forum and explore how it might add to your class.

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

The point of a “companion” to the Bible is to *accompany* you as *you* read the Bible. Nothing can substitute for your own encounter with the biblical writings. The chapters in this textbook provide you with a wealth of information, much of it from perspectives not your own—probably not so different from the mix of viewpoints and experiences in your classroom! But the Bible isn’t the only subject of this textbook. Neither is one or another of the viewpoints expressed by the scholars writing here. This textbook is also about *you* and your own awareness of how you encounter the Bible.

Your instructor may assign reading whole books of the Bible, or select passages from the biblical books. Either way, we recommend the following approach as a way to get the most from *The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible*.

1. Read the introduction to the assigned biblical book in this textbook.
2. Ask yourself: *What is the author’s perspective? How does it compare with my own? What does the author find significant in his or her encounter with this book in the Bible? What value does the author find in the writing? What challenges?*
3. Read the biblical book (or the selection) for yourself, making notes as you go.
4. Ask yourself: *What strikes me as a reader? What surprises me? What value do I find in the writing; what challenges?*
5. Reflect: *How do your own responses to the biblical writing compare to the author in this textbook? In what ways does the textbook present a different way of encountering the Bible? How do you account for the difference? What does the difference tell you about your own social location, about the influences that have shaped your own perspective?*
6. Synthesize: *In the wake of your own encounter with the text, how would you introduce this biblical writing (or selection) to another person? What do you consider the most important things you would want someone else to know about it?*
7. *An online option:* Visit the online forum at www.fortresspress.com/peoples-companion. Is the biblical passage to which you have responded already the topic of a discussion? If so, you can add your synthesis (above) or respond to the posts of other students using *The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible*. If there is no posting on your passage, you can start one!

The point of the online forum is to assemble a body of biblical interpretation similar, in some respects, to ancient Jewish interpretation. It is instructive to compare a page of a contemporary biblical commentary—for example, a commentary from the respected Hermeneia series from Fortress Press—to a page from the “rabbinic Bible,” the Bible as used in rabbinic Judaism from the sixth century onward. Note that on one page, the Hermeneia commentary provides a scholar’s translation of the biblical text, with notes to the right on the history of the text and on the translation; below that, a running commentary representing the scholar’s best judgments about the meaning of the text; and at the bottom, a selection of other references in notes where the scholar interacts with previous interpreters.

Jeremiah 23:1–4	
	Yahweh Will Punish the Evil Shepherds and Replace Them with Good Ones
	Bibliography
	On 23:1–8: Klein, Ralph W. “Jeremiah 23:1–8,” <i>Int</i> 34 (1980) 167–72.
	On 23:1–4: Holladay “Recovery,” 420–24.
23	
1	Text 1a—a G reads “their pasture” (אֶת־רֵעָם); given 10:21 this is an equally plausible reading. 1, 2b These occurrences of אֶת־רֵעָם are lacking in G and are probably expansionist glosses here. 3a This is a gloss (compare v 8) which specifies the reality of exile to a greater degree: note that in the bracketed words the exile is Yahweh’s work rather than that of the shepherds (see further Interpretation, and compare the emendation of Volz). 4a—a The expression is lacking in G; it nevertheless probably belongs here, given the fact that it is a further play on עָבְדָם (compare v 2, and see Structure and Form).
Woe to the shepherds who destroy and who scatter the sheep of “my pasture!”—[oracle of Yahweh.]² 2/ Therefore thus Yahweh God of Israel has said concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: You for your part have scattered my sheep and chased them and have not tended them: I am going to attend to you for the evil of your doings, [oracle of Yahweh.]² 3/ And I for my part shall gather the remnant of my sheep from all the lands where I have chased them.]² and I shall bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4/ And I shall appoint over them shepherds who shall shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer nor be panicked, *nor be missing, *oracle of Yahweh.	
Structure and Form Some commentators deal with vv 1–8 as a unit (Rudolph, Bright, Thompson), but there are surely three units here. Verses 7–8 are a passage duplicated in 16:14–15. Verses 1–4 deal in general with irresponsible shepherds, while vv 5–6 deal with a specific future king who name is a play on that of Zedekiah; except for the word “I appoint” (אֶת־נִיֵּן, vv 4 and 5), there is no duplication of vocabulary between the two sequences. There is no way to be sure whether vv 1–4 and 5–6 were added to chapter 22 as a unit or whether they were added separately. If they were added separately, vv 1–4 are appropriately added to the general array in chapter 22 regarding the kings of Judah; in particular the double use of “shepherd” in vv 2 and 4 (“shepherds who shepherd”) can be linked to the similar double use of the root in 22:22. The passage is a carefully crafted sequence of structured prose (<i>Kunstprosa</i>). ¹ It is a “woe” oracle like 22:13–19: an accusation in the third person introduced by “woe” (וָהִי, v 1, compare 22:13–17), followed by “therefore Yahweh has said concerning” (v 2, compare 22:18). But 21:13–19 is a judgment speech to an individual, while this passage is to a whole group. Westermann points out that “woe” oracles directed to a group resemble more closely the judgment speech to individuals than the judgment speech to the nation. ² One expects the messenger formula at the beginning of v 2 to be followed directly by the judgment speech (compare 22:18–19), but in this	
1 Against my proposal that it is poetry: Holladay, “Recovery,” 420–24. 2 Westermann, <i>Basic Forms</i> , 191–92; compare also Zimmerli, <i>Ezekiel</i> 1, 291, and Wolff, <i>Joel and Amos</i> , 243 n. 108, g.	
613	



The rabbinic Bible, *Mikraot Gedolot*.

In contrast, two pages in the “rabbinic Bible” (*Mikraot Gedolot*) provide, first, in the upper right-hand corner, the Massoretic text of the Hebrew Bible (here, of Exodus); beside it, the Aramaic paraphrase of the Targum Onkelos, and at the top of the facing page, that of pseudo-Yonatan. Beneath these columns are commentaries from revered Jewish scholars from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries, including Shabbethai Bass (*Siftey Chakhamim*), Rabbi Shlomo Yitzakhi (Rashbi), Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (“Rashbam”), Abraham Ibn Ezra, Rabbi Moses ben Nachman Girondi (“Ramban”), and Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno.

That is, while the Hermeneia commentary page is designed to focus attention on the most accurate determination of “the meaning” of the text that a single scholar can provide, the Rabbinic Bible is designed to draw on a *variety* of voices interpreting a single text.

The Peoples’ Companion to the Bible is something in between these examples. The writers of the following chapters do not strive to provide a single authoritative interpretation; on the other hand, space permits only one voice to respond to each book of the Bible. *That’s where you come in.* By going to the online forum (at www.fortresspress.com/peoplescompanion) you can take part in an ongoing interpretive conversation that in some ways resembles the process and format of the rabbinic Bible.

A SELF-INVENTORY FOR BIBLE READERS

Throughout history and today, men and women have differed among themselves in their interpretations of the Bible.¹ Given the many different perspectives evident in the essays and introductions in this *Companion* alone—and probably represented in your classroom as well—it is inevitable that you will encounter voices different from your own. One goal of the *Peoples' Companion to the Bible* is to help you understand the different perspectives from which others hear and read the Bible—and thus to think seriously about where *you* are coming from as well.

Some readers might consider their religious background a sufficient explanation for how they read the Bible: “That’s just what I believe.” The following exercise asks you to go deeper. Even within a religious community, a variety of experiences have shaped different people to perceive their faith—and to find their place in the Bible—in very different ways. Ask yourself: do most of the people whom I expect to think like I do share other characteristics with me as well?

Different readings of the Bible are only partly due to the nature of the Bible itself. They are also due to differences between our experiences and identities as people who read the Bible, whether we are approaching it for the first time or have read it often. The point of the following self-inventory is that none of us comes to the Bible as a “blank slate.” Its goal is to assist you in identifying and reflecting on some of the factors at work in the way *you* read or hear the Bible and to gain a stronger sense of your own voice as an interpreter of the Bible.

This inventory will be most helpful if you spend some serious time with it on your own and then have an opportunity to discuss it with others. For example, in a college class, the inventory could be the basis for at least one hour-long discussion period early in the course. It would also be valuable to take the inventory again at the end of the course to see what has changed as a result of engagement with the writers in *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible*—and what hasn’t!

You don’t have to know much about the Bible to answer the following questions. There are no right or wrong, or better or worse answers. The point is to be as honest as you can, both in answering these questions and in discussing them with others. Pay attention to which questions are more difficult for you, and to the questions for which you don’t have an answer. (Leaving a question blank is preferable to making up an answer.)

Other students have used similar inventories before you. They attest that this is serious work. Readers who enjoy certain privileges in society—because of wealth, education, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors—may find themselves thinking that these factors “don’t matter” for them as much as they might for others. If a question seems unimportant or irrelevant, one might well ask *why*?

Questions 1–4 address your own sense of your religious background and identity. Questions 5–8 concern the standards in whatever religious community may have influenced the way you look at the Bible now. (If your views have not been shaped by a particular religion, are there particular individuals or groups that *have* influenced your thinking?) Questions 9–17 have to do with other aspects of your background and identity that may or may not be related to your religious self-understanding.

1. ***Your personal religious background.*** How do you describe your religious background? Have you grown up in a religious community? How do you describe yourself now in terms of religious affiliation? Have you grown closer to or farther from a religious community?
2. ***Your family religious history.*** What was the characteristic view of the Bible in your childhood home? Have you stayed in touch with that point of view, or do you now see the Bible differently? If there have been major changes in the way you see the Bible, how did these happen? How do you feel now about any differences within your family regarding the Bible?
3. ***Your life experience.*** Have you experienced a crisis in your life in which the Bible played a role? Did you come to a deeper or a different understanding of the Bible through that crisis? How do you describe the lasting effect on your understanding of the Bible?
4. ***Your spirituality.*** What has been your experience of the role of the Bible in your own spiritual awareness, your sense of a spiritual path, or your spiritual practice? Have particular themes or images in the Bible been important for your spiritual awareness?
5. ***Your religious community.*** If you identify yourself now with a particular religious community, how would you describe the way the Bible is understood and read (if it is) in that community? What is the cultural or racial makeup of your religious community? Is a diversity of people an important value in your religious community? Does this affect the way the Bible is understood?
6. ***Authoritative standards.*** In that religious community, what are the “norms” or standards outside the Bible that are recognized as bearing authority on the way the Bible is read or heard? Is there a “founder,” an authoritative organization or group, a creed or set of beliefs, a set of authoritative customs, a type of personal experience, a particular social commitment, or some other principle?

7. *Customary exposure to the Bible.* Describe the ways you have been or now are ordinarily exposed to the Bible. Such exposures might include worship services, group Bible studies or discussions, classes, friends and roommates, family members, radio, TV, Internet, or your own private reading. How do these exposures influence the way you read or hear the Bible?
8. *Your own “philosophy” regarding the Bible.* What is your own “working” approach to the Bible—how do you honestly think about it? Is that different from the way your religious community or the authoritative standards of your community regard it?
9. *Your ethnicity and/or race.* How do you identify yourself ethnically or racially? How does your own ethnic history, racial group, culture, and identity influence the way you read or hear the Bible?
10. *Your gender.* How do your gender and the way your culture perceives your gender influence the way you read or hear the Bible?
11. *Your class.* How do you describe yourself in relation to class? How does your class location or background influence the way you read or hear the Bible? (This is a tough question, especially in the United States, since the dominant attitude is that economic classes don’t exist or are unimportant in U.S. society. It may help in answering this question to think in terms of your work experience; your inherited wealth; your income; your education to date, and your expectations for further education; your social and career expectations; and so on. You can ask these questions about yourself, about your parents, your grandparents, the people you hang with, your neighborhood, or your religious community.)
12. *Your education and professional aspirations.* How do your education so far and your educational and professional aspirations influence the way you read or hear the Bible? If you have some specific education or training in other fields (for example, your major in college), how does that influence your perception of the Bible?
13. *Your community’s priorities.* How do the values, the welfare, and the survival needs of your community influence the way you read or hear the Bible? (This also may be a difficult question in the United States, since much of the dominant culture focuses strongly on the individual rather than on membership in a community. If you have trouble identifying “your community,” that, too, is valuable information for reflection!)

14. *Your explicit political position.* How does your avowed political position influence the way you read or hear the Bible? (This can mean a lot more than which political party you identify with, if any. It can mean how much you feel the impact from the larger society or the government on your own life, or how much responsibility you take for society and government, and may also involve any political position you think is characteristic of your religious community.)
15. *Your implicit political stance.* Even if you do not think of yourself as very political, how does your being *not* political influence the way you read or hear the Bible? How about the religious community with which you identify (if any): Does that community claim to be “not political”? How does that influence the way the Bible is read or heard in that community?
16. *The media to which you are exposed.* Specifically, which books have you used when you have read the Bible (if you have)? Which books have influenced the way you think about the Bible? What movies, music, plays, or other cultural media come to mind when you think about the Bible?
17. *Preachers, teachers, leaders, and scholars in your life.* Are there particular individuals who are professionally trained and professionally involved in interpreting the Bible—clergy or professors of biblical studies or religion, for example—who have had an important influence on your thinking? How do they regard the Bible; how does their perception influence the way you read or hear the Bible? Do you perceive a difference between important leaders in your life and scholars of the Bible? How do you relate to that difference?
18. *How would you rank the factors you’ve just described?* Which are more important, which are less important? Are some foundational or pivotal or even nonnegotiable for you? Are there other factors that are important to the way you read the Bible that you haven’t discussed here?
19. *What have you learned about yourself?* Are you surprised by any of the factors you’ve described; have you identified influences on the way you read or hear the Bible that you hadn’t much thought about before now?
20. *What next?* Do you have any different sense of yourself as a Bible reader now that you’ve taken this inventory? Are there some aspects of the way you perceive the Bible about which you want to learn more? Are there some aspects that you’d like to change? If so, in what ways, and why?