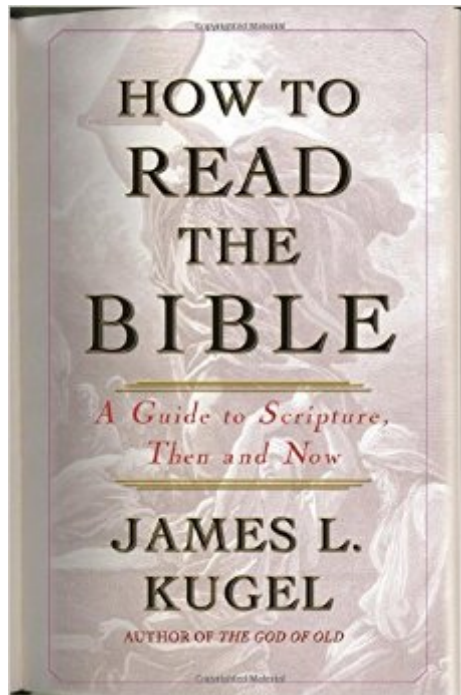


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How To Read The Bible: A Guide To Scripture, Then And Now



Synopsis

In *How to Read the Bible*, Harvard professor James Kugel leads the listener through the "quiet revolution" of recent biblical scholarship, showing how radically the interpretations of today's researchers differ from what people have always thought. The story of Adam and Eve, it turns out, was not originally about the "Fall of Man," but about the move from a primitive, hunter-gatherer society to a settled, agricultural one. As for the stories of Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob and Esau, they were not about individual people at all but, rather, explanations of Israelite society as it existed centuries after these figures were said to have lived. In the earliest version of the Exodus story, Moses probably did not divide the Red Sea in half; instead, the Egyptians perished in a storm at sea. Whatever the original Ten Commandments might have been, scholars are quite sure they were different from the ones we have today. What's more, the people long supposed to have written various books of the Bible were not their real authors: David did not write the Psalms, Solomon did not write Proverbs. Such findings pose a problem for adherents of traditional, Bible-based faiths. Hiding from the discoveries of modern scholars seems dishonest, but accepting them means undermining much of the Bible's reliability and authority as the word of God. What to do? In his search for a solution, Kugel leads the listener back to ancient biblical interpreters who flourished at the end of the biblical period. Far from naïve, these interpreters consciously set out to depart from the original meaning of the Bible's various stories and prophecies—and they, Kugel argues, hold the key to solving the dilemma of reading the Bible today. *How to Read the Bible* is, quite simply, the best, most original audiobook about the Bible in decades. Clear, often funny, but deeply serious in its purpose, this is an audiobook for Christians and Jews, believers and secularists alike. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

At first glance, a book titled "How to Read the Bible" would seem like one of those "for Dummies" books that offers simple explanations to an often mysterious tome. It is quickly apparent that James Kugel's book does not actually fit into this category: instead, it is a much more in-depth and insightful look into the Bible (which is to say the Jewish Bible, or to Christians, the Old Testament). The overall premise of this book is that through the course of history, there have been two general methods of reading the Bible, and that these two methods are often in conflict. First, there is the method of the ancient interpreters, which despite its name, was the dominant method until relatively recently. For these interpreters, Biblical reading was based on four general assumptions: (1) the Bible is cryptic; that is, what it seems to say may be different from what it actually means; (2) the Bible is a book of lessons for readers in their own day; it is not merely a historical text; (3) the Bible is perfect and without contradiction; any seeming error can be explained (assumption #1 is helpful with this); (4) the Bible is the divine word of God. Modern interpretation, which really began in the nineteenth century, does not adhere to the ancient assumptions. In particular, the modern interpreter views the Bible as a text written by men, with all the flaws that are associated with mortals. This interpreter views the Bible in the larger context of the ancient world to determine how it was constructed. Take, for example, the story of Jacob and Esau. An ancient interpreter would view the stories of this brotherly conflict as leading to the general hostility between Israel and Edom, the two nations that the siblings were the founders of.

'How to Read the Bible' by the former Starr Professor of Hebrew at Harvard University is about as different from the similarly titled 'How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth' by New Testament professor, Gordon D. Fee and Old Testament professor, Douglas Stuart, and still be a superb read for anyone, especially lay readers, who are interested in understanding the Hebrew scriptures. Yes, this book deals exclusively with Professor Kugel's specialty, the Old Testament, while the Fee / Stuart book deals with both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Another huge difference is that Professor Kugel not only advises us on how to read the scriptures today, he outlines how they have been read since they were first gathered together, sometime around the return from the Babylonian exile in 538 BCE. The big surprise to us lay readers is that these scriptures were not taken as the

perfect inspiration from God, with every statement literally, or at least figuratively true, given the right amount of interpretation. Professor Kugel does not make this comparison, but I suspect that the attitude toward much of the scriptures was very similar to the Achaeans' (early Greeks) attitude toward Homer's 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey', as national epic poems. Even without modern archeology, it would not have been difficult to detect anachronisms and downright errors when, for example, a Psalm attributed to King David describes events which happened 500 years after his death. The attitude of 'high reverence' for the scriptures developed shortly after the last book, 'Daniel', was added to the canon, the era of the last prophet Ezra, and the Maccabean revolt.

Kugel's "How to read the Bible" is a masterful work that will join a number of important new works on religion this Fall (for instance, Rodney Stark's "Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief" or Charles Taylor's massive "Secular Age"). I felt like buying it because it offers a comment on the bible from a Jewish scholar point of view, which is a novelty for someone brought up in Spanish Catholic traditions. After reading this book I much agree with DAVID PLOTZ's review [...], particularly when he states: "Though Kugel surely did not intend this, in its own way, his book proves as devastating to the godly cause as any of the pro-atheism books that have been dominating the best-seller lists in recent months". In my opinion, this is because the author is intellectually honest given that i) although one realizes he does believe in the God of the Bible, however ii) he clearly shows that the ancient interpreters' and the modern scholars' way of understanding the Bible clearly contradict each other; before that iii) he escapes from [in his opinion] non-well argued apologetics to save such a contradiction; and then iv) if I understood him correctly, he tries to square this circle in the last few pages, in the section called "The Very Idea of the Bible" (whether he achieves it or not, or whether his answer may please those who do not follow the Jewish path I let it to each one to decide on his own). In any event, Kugel's work is a pleasure to read, which is very important for a book 700 pages long plus notes [plus an appendix and bibliography which are available at the author's web site, jameskugle.com].

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