How to Read the Bible in Changing Times
Understanding and Applying God’s Word Today

Mark L. Strauss
# Contents

Preface vii

1. Introduction: The Unchanging Word in a Changing World 1
2. What the Bible Is Not 13
3. What the Bible Is 41
4. A Heart-of-God Hermeneutic: Walking with God in His Story 69
5. Seeking the Heart of God in Dialogue: Tradition, Community, and the Spirit 93
6. Finding the Heart of God in the Diverse Genres of the Old Testament 107
8. When Cultures Collide: Discerning the Heart of God in Cultural Context 207
9. Conclusion 245

Notes 253
Scripture Index 265
The ideas introduced in this book have been developing over the past twenty years, as I have taught principles for reading and applying the Bible (“hermeneutics”) to students in undergraduate, graduate, and church settings. Yet the immediate circumstances arose when Jack Kuhatschek, Executive Vice President and Publisher for Baker Publishing Group, approached me a few years back about writing it. Jack, a close friend (and frequent theology dialogue partner), has a long history of work on this topic, including his immensely practical volume on the application of Scripture, Taking the Guesswork Out of Applying the Bible (InterVarsity, 1990). For years Jack wanted someone to take the subject further. I am honored that he approached me for this task. The title of the book was his idea, and it sums up beautifully the challenge of determining how a collection of ancient books written to God’s people millennia ago can be relevant to us today in our rapidly changing world.

I am grateful to Jack for his input along the way, and also to my project editor at Baker, Amy Donaldson, both for her expertise as an editor and for her exceptional scholarship. Her careful eye and sharp mind greatly improved the volume.

The book is dedicated to Jack, but also to the many students who have engaged, questioned, challenged, developed, and utilized practically the ideas that are presented here. This book is for them; but ultimately, I pray, it is for the glory of God.

Mark Strauss
March 2011
First met John when he showed up at the college ministry in the church where I was serving as a college intern. John, a diesel mechanic, had come from a very tough background and was a recovering alcoholic and drug abuser. He had recently made a decision to follow Jesus Christ and was anxious to find fellowship with other Christians. I had some doubts about his potential, considering his rough exterior, but we started meeting together regularly in a discipleship relationship. Someone had given him a Bible, and he began to read it voraciously. We decided to do a Bible study together, and I asked him which book of the Bible he wanted to study. “Romans!” he said. He had heard this was the apostle Paul’s greatest theological work and wanted to go deep into “hard-core” Bible study. I had my doubts, unsure he could handle such a challenging book, but we began meeting at his apartment, drinking coffee and discussing the passage we’d read that week.

As the months went by, I was constantly amazed at John’s growing insight into the text. He would make a profound comment about the meaning of this or that passage, or about how a passage connected to...
Paul’s larger thought in the letter. I would ask him, “Who taught you that?” or “Did you hear that from a preacher somewhere?” His answer was always the same: “No, that’s what the text says! Remember, you told me to read it in context.” (That statement warms the heart of a Bible professor!) Not only did I see John’s knowledge of the Bible grow, but I saw his life transformed, as he began to be shaped into a man of God. I witnessed before my eyes the transforming power of the Word of God.

The Transforming Power of the Word of God

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. More Bibles are published each year than any other book. The Bible is also the most revered book of all time. Christians affirm that the Bible is the “Word of God”—his message to us and our guidebook for life. Countless generations can testify how the Bible has transformed their lives, turning sinners into saints, giving meaning to life, and providing strength and guidance through life’s most difficult circumstances.

In How Christianity Changed the World, Alvin J. Schmidt documents the profound impact that the Bible and Christianity have had on the world. Biblical teaching and values have been the impetus behind many of the world’s great social and ethical movements. These include the abolition of infanticide and advocacy for the value of human life, raising the status and dignity of women, building hospitals and promoting health care, establishing schools and broadening education, defending the rights of workers, feeding the poor and combating poverty, sponsoring the arts and sciences, and working for justice for all.

On a more personal level, the Bible provides guidance and comfort in the lives of individuals. I remember sitting beside the bed of a dear friend who was dying of cancer. She had dropped into a coma, the last stage of her disease, and the family had asked me to come by. They gathered around the bed, and I opened my Bible and read Psalm 23. We reflected together that even when we pass through life’s darkest valleys we have nothing to fear, because the Lord is with us. We have hope, knowing that we will “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 23:6).
Introduction

Even more personally, I remember standing at my father’s grave shortly after his death in 1993, with my mother and three brothers beside me. One of my brothers opened his Bible and read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. This great passage reminded us that this was not the end. One day graves would be opened and all who had died in Christ would rise to meet the Lord in the air—a great reunion that would last forever.

Transforming experiences like these have confirmed for countless generations that the Bible is God’s Word—a message from God of comfort, instruction, and guidance.

Message from God or Tool of Manipulation?

While the Bible is the most revered book of all time, it may also be the most misunderstood and misused, a tool of manipulation, evil, injustice, and even genocide. In the 2010 movie The Book of Eli, Denzel Washington plays a character named Eli, who has in his possession the last copy of the Bible in a postapocalyptic world. His mission is to get this Bible—the book of ultimate answers—to a safe haven where it can be copied, read, and passed down for posterity. His nemesis is a man named Carnegie, who desperately wants to get the book for himself. Carnegie’s motives, however, are more sinister. He knows that the book has extraordinary power to control people and wants that power for himself. Though the movie is disturbing in many respects, it is a fascinating allegory about the power and potential of the Bible for good or for evil. For one man, the Bible has the answers to the ultimate questions in life and the power to redeem humanity. For another, it is a manipulative tool for self-promotion and power.

Throughout history, misuse of the Bible has had sometimes tragic results. William Miller (1782–1849), a Baptist preacher and a student of Bible prophecy, developed a system of biblical interpretation that he claimed could determine the time of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Drawing especially from Daniel 8–9, he predicted that Christ would return during the year 1844. One of his followers, Samuel S. Snow, refined Miller’s method and identified an even more specific date, October 22, 1844. Miller’s followers, known as Millerites,
How to Read the Bible in Changing Times

anxiously awaited that day; some even sold their possessions in anticipation of the coming millennial kingdom. The day came and went without incident, resulting in disappointment, disillusionment, and for some, loss of faith. It became known in history as the “Great Disappointment.”

Sadly, such end-time prognostication continues today in best-selling books written by “experts” on Bible prophecy. Some of them set dates, either general or specific; others point to contemporary persons or events as “signs” of the end times. Amazingly, despite the consistent and repeated failure of such books to accurately predict times, persons, or events, the Christian public seems to have an insatiable appetite for these works, which continue to sell briskly.

While such prophetic gurus may seem harmless and even entertaining, some end-time interpretations of the Bible have led to catastrophic results. In the early 1990s, a man named Vernon Howell assumed leadership of an end-time sect known as the Branch Davidians. The group was established in the 1930s by Victor Houteff (1886–1955), who had broken away from the Seventh-Day Adventists to form his own group. Houteff developed an elaborate system of interpretation for the end times based on the seven seals of the book of Revelation (Revelation 6–8). After Houteff died, a series of leaders succeeded him, and the group gradually grew. Howell joined the sect in 1981 and, through his charismatic personality and vast biblical knowledge, gradually usurped the leadership and gained authority over the group. Howell changed his name to David Koresh—“David” because he considered the group to be the reestablishment of Israel’s Davidic dynasty, and “Koresh” from the name of the Persian king Cyrus, who was appointed by God to restore Israel as a nation after the Babylonian exile (Isa. 45:1).

Koresh convinced his followers that the prophecy of the seven seals of the book of Revelation was soon coming to fulfillment in their little group. Living in a compound near Waco, Texas, they sought to become self-sufficient, farming the land and stockpiling food and weapons in preparation for the coming apocalypse. On February 28, 1993, dozens of heavily armed federal agents raided the compound in search of illegal weapons. Koresh and his followers were convinced that the end of the world was at hand. In the shootout that resulted, four agents and six members of the group...
Introduction

were killed. Koresh was seriously wounded, and a standoff ensued. In the following weeks, federal agents negotiated with Koresh, who claimed he would end the siege once he had decoded the seven seals of Revelation. After fifty-one days, the government’s frustration reached a breaking point, and Attorney General Janet Reno ordered an assault on the compound. The raid ended in tragedy as the compound caught fire and burned. Eighty-six members of the group died in the assault, including many women and children. Controversy has raged for years over the proportion of blame for the tragedy and whether the government overreacted. One thing is certain, however: Koresh’s misrepresentation of prophetic Scriptures had tragic results.

Prophets of the end time are not the only ones who misuse the Bible. It is quoted by all kinds of people—politicians, social commentators, religious leaders—to promote a bewildering array of agendas. A yoga master and swami cites Jesus’s words, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” and then explains that the blessed are those “who purify their consciousness, for they shall see themselves as God.” The original intent of the passage is ignored, and the text is read through a pantheistic worldview where the interpreter sees himself as God. Mormons identify the prophecy of two sticks in Ezekiel 37:15–23 as a prediction for the emergence of the Book of Mormon as an authoritative revelation from God beside the Bible (the passage actually refers to the reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel). Jehovah’s Witnesses identify themselves as the 144,000 special servants “sealed” with the name of God in the book of Revelation (Rev. 7:3–8; 14:1–4) and so as the only true believers in the end times. The Bible can be used to justify almost any agenda or doctrine, if the original intent of the biblical authors is misunderstood or distorted.

The Bible has been used to promote crusades of conquest, riots and pogroms against Jews and other minorities, and even the subjugation of whole people groups. In the years leading up to the Nazi Holocaust, some German theologians reinterpreted the New Testament to distance Jesus and his followers from their Jewish roots. Many claimed that the region of Galilee was populated by non-Jews and that Jesus came from Aryan rather than Jewish ancestry. Jesus’s goal, it was argued, was to abolish Judaism, a violent religion that threatened all Christians. In this literature, “Jesus was transformed...
from a Jew prefigured by the Old Testament into an anti-Semite and proto-Nazi.” This Aryan Jesus became part of the justification for the genocide of millions of Jews during the Holocaust.

While the Nazi justification of the Holocaust was certainly the most destructive misuse of the Bible, the most tragic misuse in American history was the defense of African slavery. Advocates of slavery asserted that the distinction of races arose from Noah’s three sons—Ham, Shem, and Japheth—and that the so-called Hamitic curse of Genesis 9:25 relegated Africans to an inferior status as slaves. Benjamin M. Palmer, a New Orleans clergyman and leading proponent of slavery, wrote in 1858:

the race of Shem [from whom the Jews arose] was providentially selected as the channel for transmitting religion and worship; . . . Japhet and his race . . . seemed designated to be the organ of human civilization, in cultivating the intellectual powers. . . . The Japhetic whites, spreading over the diversified continent of Europe, through a protracted discipline develop [sic] the higher powers of the soul in politics, jurisprudence, science and art: while the Asiatic Japhetites dispersed over a more monotonous continent, embark in those pursuits of industry fitted to the lower capacities of our nature. The descendants of Ham, on the contrary, in whom the sensual and corporeal appetites predominate, are driven like an infected race beyond the deserts of Sahara, where under a glowing sky nature harmonizes with their brutal and savage disposition.

Today we are shocked at such outrageous and absurd stereotyping: religious Semites, intellectual and creative whites, industrious Asians, and brutal and savage blacks. But it is also tragic that people have used the Bible to justify such stereotypes. Advocates of slavery further claimed that God has sanctioned slavery in the Old Testament (Lev. 25:44) and that the Bible never calls for its abolition. Indeed, they argued, Peter commands slaves to submit “in reverent fear of God” to their masters, “not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh” (1 Pet. 2:18). Paul, too, repeatedly calls for slaves to submit to their masters (Eph. 6:5–6; Col. 3:22; Titus 2:9).

There were contrary voices in this debate, who also quoted the Bible. Those working for the abolition of slavery countered the
pro-slavery arguments with biblical texts of their own, pointing out that the dignity of human beings created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26) demanded the abolition of slavery. No human being should own another. Paul himself says that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female” (Gal. 3:28). Paul also encourages slaves to gain their freedom if they are able (1 Cor. 7:21), and asserts the essential equality before God of slave and master (Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:24; Philem. 16–17).

In short, the Bible was used to support both agendas. So what does the Bible teach about slavery? Is there an authentic message from God in the text, or can people make the Bible mean whatever they want it to mean? For Christians who believe in the authority of Scripture, this is a critical and urgent question. In a world of constantly changing agendas and ideas, can we hear in the Bible a consistent and authoritative message from God?

Finding a Verse to Fit Your Agenda

While the two issues discussed above—human slavery and genocide—are egregious examples of the misuse of Scripture, throughout history people have used the Bible to support every conceivable agenda. Consider the following hot-button topics in our society today.

1. War and killing. Pacifists claim the Bible calls for peace and non-resistance. Jesus says to turn the other cheek when someone strikes you and, when a burden is forced upon you, to carry it for an extra mile. If someone sues you and takes your shirt, you should give them your coat as well (Matt. 5:38–42). In a world of hate and retribution, he calls for people to love even their enemies (Matt. 5:43–44). The apostle Paul affirms the same thing. He writes not to take revenge and never to repay evil with evil. We are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:17–21). Advocates of just war, on the other hand, assert that war and killing are sometimes justified. God himself has called for war and even the slaughter of entire populations (Josh. 6:21; 8:24–27). Capital punishment is repeatedly mandated in the Old Testament: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind” (Gen. 9:6). The New Testament affirms
that God has established human governments to promote justice and to punish evil (Romans 13), and this often involves war and killing. What is God’s will when it comes to killing other human beings?

2. *Socialism versus capitalism.* Socialists point out that the Bible calls for social justice and the need to share resources within the larger community (Matt. 5:42; Acts 2:44–45; 4:32). The accumulation of wealth holds great danger (Luke 3:11; 6:24–26; 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 18:18–30; 1 Tim. 6:10), and it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35; 2 Corinthians 8–9). The Old Testament Jubilee year required the redistribution of land every fifty years to its original family allotments (Leviticus 25). Capitalists counter that these are misunderstandings of Scripture. The Jubilee year is a command distinctly for the twelve tribes of Israel, and the call to share possessions is always voluntary, never demanded (Acts 4:34–37; 5:4). How can you share freely with others unless you have private property to share? The original creation mandate calls for people to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it (Gen. 1:28), an implicit recognition of private property and personal freedom. Again, appeal is made to Scripture to support both agendas.

3. *Roles of women and men.* One of the most divisive issues among evangelicals over the last fifty years has been the role of men and women in the church and the home, with both sides appealing to Scripture as their authority. Complementarians argue the Bible teaches that men and women have different, but complementary, roles. Men are to be leaders in the church and the home, while women are to fulfill supportive roles (1 Tim. 2:11–15; 3:2, 12), submitting to their husbands’ authority (Eph. 5:22–24; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1–6). Egalitarians counter that these commands arose within specific cultural contexts restricted to the first century and that God’s design is for full equality between the sexes (Gal. 3:28). The subordination of women is a part of the fall (Gen. 3:16), and believers should work to restore the equality ordained by God at creation. How is Scripture to be read and applied in this case?

4. *Homosexuality.* Perhaps the most controversial and emotional of the issues debated in the church relates to homosexual relationships. Opponents of homosexuality argue that same-sex relationships are clearly rejected in Scripture. The Old Testament law forbids a man to have sexual relations with another man (Lev. 18:22; 20:13),
and the apostle Paul points to male and female homosexual behavior as a distortion of human sexuality resulting from our fallen human nature (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:9–10). Pro-gay activists counter that these commands relate to practices such as male prostitution and pederasty (sex with children) and have no bearing on modern monogamous and loving homosexual relationships. The ancients had no concept of homosexual orientation and so these commands are not relevant for the church today.

Some readers will be shocked that anyone could possibly read the Bible and still affirm same-sex partnerships. Others will be shocked that anyone could read the Bible and not believe that God’s love for people trumps culturally embedded commands against homosexual relationships. So who is right? The problem is that all of us come to the Bible with our own agendas, our own backgrounds, and our own perspectives. How do we look past these differences and determine God’s will in Scripture?

Random Picking and Choosing?

In the face of so many different interpretations, some people default to the idea that you can make the Bible mean whatever you want. This, in turn, can produce cynicism concerning the Bible’s authority. Consider this tongue-in-cheek letter that appeared a few years back on the internet. It is written as though from an adoring fan of radio talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger, because of her strong stand against homosexual behavior.

Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God’s law. I have learned a great deal from you, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

• When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors.
They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

• I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

• I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanliness (Lev. 15:19–24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

• Lev. 25:44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans but not Canadians. Can you clarify?

• I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

• A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don’t agree. Can you settle this?

• Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God’s word is eternal and unchanging.

Kent Ashcraft

The author of this satire is obviously mocking Christians for picking and choosing which commands to obey and which to ignore. But does the author have a point? How can Christians condemn homosexuals yet ignore other commands in Scripture, such as those forbidding the eating of shellfish? We might respond that those are Old Testament commands meant for the nation Israel under the old covenant. True; but Christians apparently pick and choose among New Testament commands as well. Most Christians, for example, do not greet each other with a kiss, even though this is explicitly commanded five times in the New Testament (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). Nor do they require women to cover their heads in worship, despite Paul’s injunction to do so in 1 Corinthians 11:5.
Introduction

A Static Word in a Dynamic World?

These issues remind us that the Bible was written in a world very different from our own. How do we take a book that was written thousands of years ago, to people in a different culture facing different problems, and find meaning in it for our own time and circumstances? The people in the Bible could never have dreamed of airplanes, or televisions, or satellites, or cell phones, or the internet, or global media. Their world was changing at a snail’s pace compared to today’s blinding pace of change. We are facing issues that they could not have envisioned, such as genetic manipulation, stem-cell research, sex-change operations, or global terrorism. Can a Bible written so long ago and under such different circumstances have relevance for us in the present day and age?

To respond to these concerns, this book addresses the interpretation and application of Scripture in our changing times. We begin with the assumption that the Bible is God’s inspired and authoritative Word, his message for the present day. We believe God has spoken, and we are to hear and heed his message. But how do we take a message that was written to other people in a different time and place and find meaning and application for us today? In other words, how does God continue to speak through words first spoken to others in ancient times? The goal presented here is to develop a model and framework for reading God’s Word that enables us to formulate theological truth, answer ethical questions, and walk with God in our daily lives.

It is not a question of discerning which parts of the Bible are applicable to us and which are not. The Bible itself claims that it is all relevant. Consider 2 Timothy 3:16–17, perhaps the most important passage in the Bible concerning its own authority and inspiration: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” If all Scripture is inspired and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, then all Scripture ought to be heard and applied. The question becomes not whether a passage of Scripture applies to us, but how.

Before we can determine how to apply the Bible, we must understand what the Bible is and what it is not. The next two chapters
How to Read the Bible in Changing Times

cconcern the nature of the Bible. There are many misconceptions about the Bible—even among Christians. For example, despite what some may think, the Bible is not a “magic-answer” book for decision making in life. Nor, at its heart, is it a list of commands to obey or promises to claim. Rather, the Bible is God’s story, the drama of redemption, setting out the fundamental problem and solution to humanity’s dilemma. The Bible teaches us who God is, who we are in relationship to him and to one another, and what his purpose is for us and for the world. As we grow in our knowledge of what it means to be part of God’s story, we will learn to make good and godly decisions in life.

The chapters that follow will set out a “heart-of-God” approach to the Bible, where the goal of Scripture reading is to discern the heart of God and the mind of Christ. This discernment allows us to think God’s thoughts after him and to determine his truth and his purpose in the changing world around us.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Has the Bible had a transforming influence in your life? In what ways? What does the Bible mean to you?

2. How would you define what the Bible is?

3. What are some ways the Bible has been misread and misapplied throughout history?

4. Is it true that the Bible can mean anything you want it to mean? Is there a “correct” meaning in the Bible? If so, how do we discover it?

5. What was your reaction to the “Dr. Laura” letter in this chapter? Were you angry? Offended? Confused? Why?

6. Is every command and promise intended for us today? How can you tell which apply to us and which don’t?