

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

SOMEWHERE ALONG A ROMAN road from Jerusalem to Africa, the Ethiopian eunuch sat in his chariot reading Isaiah, pondering who its suffering figure might be. His chariot was stopped, Philip came up, Jesus was proclaimed, and he went away rejoicing.¹ Eleven centuries later, behind Carthusian monastery walls, the monk Guigo II turned over and over again the beatitude “Blessed are the pure in heart,” as he prayed to know “what is true purity of heart and how it may be had” so that “with its help” he may know God, “if only a little.”² Yet still another seven hundred and fifty years later, in an Arkansas small town, Mamma Cissy sat each day with her well-worn Bible, reading it through her small wire-framed spectacles, finding its familiar words ever new. She likely never heard of Guigo but read like him, and her manner of reading left its mark on her daughter’s daughter, whose own Bible is being worn out in her own quiet morning readings of its words, words somehow still ever new.³

A first-century African official, a medieval French monk, and my great-grandmother, all readers of the Bible. Yet not just readers, but readers of a certain ilk—spiritual readers of Scripture who, like Guigo, seek to know God through their reading. Even as most Christians throughout the ages have encountered the Bible primarily through the communal life of the

1. Acts 8:26–40.

2. Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks*, 78. Guigo often pondered biblical texts closely, a practice that led to his writing *The Ladder of Monks*, a guide for other monks on how to seek God in Scripture through intentional ways of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

3. Flannery O’Connor points out that while the American South is no longer the Bible Belt it once was, the region is still made up of “the descendants of old ladies” who read the Bible on their knees—“You don’t shake off their influence in even several generations.” O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 202.

church (in its preaching, teaching, liturgy, music, and art that have centered upon Scripture), ever since its writing the Bible has had its passionate readers, as the Bible itself illustrates in Acts' story of the Ethiopian. These readers are those who pick up and read the Bible on their own, trying to make sense of its words and understand what is being said of God through them—even more so, trying to come into a better love of God through them. The point of such reading is more than to know Scripture; it is to know and love God.

Flannery O'Connor once noted, "The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location."⁴ It seems her words apply just as readily to the reader, especially to the spiritual reader of Scripture, one who looks out from her place onto the past and onto eternity. I seek in this study that peculiar crossroads where God, the Bible, and practices of reading somehow all meet today; the problem of this location shapes my work. In this meeting eternal realities mingle with temporal ones, as the work of God and the work of humans come together and merge (at times indistinguishably) in the reading of the Bible. The landscape of the spiritual reading of Scripture is constantly changing according to contingencies of time and place, and my interest here is to study but one segment of it: the spiritual reading of the Christian Bible that takes place in a literate, western culture today. This work is a theological exploration of the realities of God and the postures of biblical readers that enable a good spiritual reading of the Bible in this present day and place; I seek a theological understanding of the work of God and the work of humanity in reading Scripture.⁵

As the wider currents that make up this crossroads are immense, the particular focus of my interest is important to trace out from the beginning, for there are unending ways that one may pursue the nature of God's involvement with the Bible, the nature of Scripture itself and how to interpret it, the nature of spiritual practices, and the nature of the act of reading. Fields of theology, biblical studies, spirituality, and the study of reading are vast, and my work crosses through small sections of all of them. But while touching upon all these areas, the object of my study is focused nonetheless: it centers upon the contemporary western reader of Christian Scripture who seeks to know and love God in and through the practice of individual biblical reading. How is God encountered in reading the Bible this way? How do God's work and humanity's merge in biblical reading? My central concerns

4. *Ibid.*, 59.

5. I follow John Webster in understanding that all theology is occasional; there are "occasions" towards which theology directs itself." And so theology is to "interpret its present situation . . . as an episode in the history of the gospel's dealing with humanity, as one further chapter in the history of holiness." Webster, *Word and Church*, 5.

are what it means to be a Christian reader, how one reads with awareness of the Triune God, whether there might be a distinctly Christian way of reading Scripture, a way of reading that stretches beyond good practices for reading any other work of classic literature. And I aim to work out these concerns as much as possible in concrete ways, as what I am interested in is “the ultimately practical and formational task of actually reading the text in front of us.”⁶

I begin in the next two chapters by setting out some of the issues of what it means to read the Bible well, and what it means to read literature in general well. Chapter 2 considers the role the church has in the spiritual reading of Scripture, as the church is the originating context of Scripture and its natural home. I examine the manner in which the church is necessary to provide a framework and guidance for reading the Bible well, and I contrast this setting of the church with two other settings in which the Bible is often placed, namely, the setting of modern, historically-oriented biblical scholarship, and the setting of reading the Bible as a classic work of western literature. Chapter 3 delves more deeply into the issue of reading great works of literature by considering the spiritual dimensions of reading and the spiritual impulses behind certain forms of the study of western literature. I also consider there how literature might be approached through a Christian frame of reference (through exploring the work of C. S. Lewis and Alan Jacobs), and what might be said about the reading of religious works in general (via the work of Paul Griffiths).

With this background of the Bible’s setting in the church, and the spiritual dimensions of the practice of reading, my next two chapters center upon how God is involved and working in Christian Scripture, and how Christ is its object. Chapter 4 takes up the question of how it is that God encounters the reader of the Bible; there I follow Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* I.2, §21, and his *Evangelical Theology* lectures. Barth, as one ever pressing for the starting point and object of God in all theological work, sets out an orientation towards God that is necessary to ground the spiritual reading of Scripture. He offers practical marks, as well, of what such a reading looks like, and he points out the necessity of the reader’s faith in biblical reading. In chapter 5 I consider the specifically Christ-centered nature of Christian biblical reading, and draw upon another leading mid-twentieth century theologian, Henri de Lubac. In his studies on the medieval exegesis of Scripture, de Lubac highlights the place Jesus has held in traditional Christian readings and interpretations of Scripture, and he advocates a renewed understanding of spiritual reading in the modern world.

6. Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 10.

In chapters 6 and 7 I turn towards a leading proponent of spiritual reading today, the biblical scholar Ellen Davis. As one who writes from the academy but looks constantly towards the church, Davis considers the form that spiritual reading might take today and she pays attention to the ever fresh and surprising reality of God that the Bible conveys. Chapter 6 is an examination of Davis's background and her theological reading principles, while chapter 7 is an examination of her practices of exegesis. Through several examples of her Old Testament exegesis, I trace out how her manner of spiritual reading works on the ground and how it might provide guidance for spiritual readers.

My conclusion moves from these many thinkers to draw these strands of spiritual reading together in the context of the western church today, and I find that in particular, a renewed understanding of faith is needed for the spiritual reading of Scripture. More than a spiritually-oriented reading, a greater faith in the work and presence of the Triune God in Scripture is needed.

Before entering into the flurry of these issues of spiritual reading and its promising proposals, it is necessary in this introduction to make a few comments pertaining to some background matters on the spiritual reading of the Bible, and the assumptions under which I operate. First is my use of the term "spiritual reading" and the theology of spirituality behind such a biblical reading; second is the manner in which the kind of spiritual reading I propose relates to two significant currents of modern scholarship, that of the theological interpretation of Scripture (a topic debated predominantly in the academy) and of *lectio divina* (a recent lively discussion in the church); and third is the history of the individual reading of Scripture and its place in the modern western church and world.

"Spiritual Reading"

"Spiritual reading" is the term I use to describe the kind of spiritually engaged biblical reading I explore in this work, as this term emphasizes the actual act of reading and the way in which it is oriented. It is the *practice* of reading the Bible that I search out here, that spiritual practice at the heart of the Christian life. While there is no such thing as pure and interpretation-less reading, my interest is less focused upon biblical interpretation as such and more upon the way that one actually goes about reading the Bible—how that reading takes place and to what end. I make a distinction between interpretation and reading here to consider reading as primarily (though not

always) an interior activity, whereas interpretation is directed more towards communication.⁷

George Steiner notes that it is difficult to say anything useful about reading in that sense: “Criticism is discursive and breeds discourse. ‘Reading’ yields no primary impulse towards self-communication. The ‘reader’ who discourses is, in a certain manner, in breach of the privilege. . . . Reading is done rather than spoken about.”⁸ Yet here I will try to speak about reading, as I am concerned with the reading practices that enable good understanding and good living of Christian Scripture.⁹ For my purposes here, “understanding” might be a better term to use than “interpretation,” as my focus is upon readers struggling to understand God and the Christian life through reading Scripture, as opposed to readers who are in positions of leadership and strive to provide biblical interpretations for the church.¹⁰ My envisioned biblical readers are those who more often fill pews than ivory towers (though some are in ivory towers, too).

My understanding of spiritual reading is reading the Bible with a striving towards God throughout the entire process of one’s reading. Eugene Peterson, in *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, has shaped my use of the term “spiritual reading,” as Peterson explains spiritual reading as a formative manner of reading, one that is aware of the Spirit of God. He maintains, “spiritual writing—*Spirit*-sourced writing—requires spiritual reading, a reading that honors words as holy;” reading the Scriptures formatively is reading them in such a way that “the Holy Spirit uses them to form Christ in us.”¹¹ Spiritual reading is an approach of reading that looks for the activity of the Spirit of God in Scripture, that recognizes something holy is happening in the words and readings of the Bible. It strives to be in keeping with the Spirit, to make holy its reading and its reader.

7. Similarly, John Webster explains that he prefers the term “reading” to “interpretation” because reading is “a more practical, low-level” and “modest term,” one less “overlain with the complexities of hermeneutical theory.” Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 86; and “Reading Scripture Eschatologically (I),” 247.

8. Steiner, “Critic/Reader,” 20. Steiner notes, however, on 34, that his heuristic roles of “critic” and “reader” are near-fictions. “Neither can be found at all readily in a pure state. . . . In the ordinary run of things, ‘criticism’ and ‘reading’ interpenetrate and overlap.”

9. As J. Todd Billings points out, “how we think about our reading of the Bible as a book can have profound effects on how we end up interpreting the Bible as Scripture.” Billings, *Word of God*, 32.

10. A point made clear to me through conversation with Francis Watson.

11. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 4, 59, emphasis his.

Although this kind of reading is basic to the Christian tradition, Peterson notes the difficulty of spiritual reading for many western Christians today:

[I]n the business of living the Christian life, ranking high among its most neglected aspects is one having to do with the reading of the Christian Scriptures. Not that Christians don't own and read their Bibles. And not that Christians don't believe that their Bibles are the word of God. What is neglected is reading the Scriptures formatively, reading in order to live.¹²

At the start of her own introduction to spiritual reading, Ellen Davis similarly states that “spiritually engaged reading . . . [is] largely unfamiliar to Christians.”¹³ It is not that Christians have stopped reading the Bible, Davis explains, but that their spiritual engagement with it has declined; many Christians do not know “how to read it for the sake of our souls.”¹⁴ Chapters 3 and 6 will briefly explore cultural obstacles in reading Scripture today, but here may it be noted that prevalent patterns of reading in general are often used negatively to define spiritual reading. Spiritual reading is in contrast to manners of reading for information alone, reading in a detached way apart from “the sake of our souls.” Peterson notes that “not everyone who gets interested in the Bible and even gets excited about the Bible wants to get involved with God;”¹⁵ his approach intends to counter a perceived common lack of interest in becoming involved with God through biblical reading. Peterson and Davis both use the terms “spiritual reading” or “spiritually engaged reading” to reclaim a self-involving manner of reading Scripture that they feel is lost to many in the present-day western church; their emphasis on spiritual reading is an emphasis on a *way* of reading that is concerned with the formative aspects of reading, of reading with awareness of God and his work through Scripture, work done on each of its readers as they read.

John Webster is another who has recently advocated such an approach to biblical reading; he describes spiritual reading in various terms of “faithful reading,” “reading in the economy of grace,” and “eschatological” reading.¹⁶ His most helpful description of spiritual reading is perhaps “reading in which we keep company with the holy God.”¹⁷ Here lies the essence of

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

13. Davis, *Getting Involved With God*, 1.

14. *Ibid.*, 122.

15. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 30.

16. Webster, *Word and Church*, 43; *Holy Scripture*, 68; “Reading Scripture Eschatologically (I),” 248.

17. Webster, “Reading Scripture Eschatologically (I),” 246.

spiritual reading—keeping company with the holy God of the Christian faith. Following Karl Barth, Webster emphasizes the centrality of God to biblical reading; as Webster argues, “the Christian activity of reading the Bible is most properly (that is, Christianly) understood as a spiritual affair . . . a Christian description of the Christian reading of the Bible will be the kind of description which talks of God.”¹⁸ The starting point for talking about reading, Webster maintains, is not the field of hermeneutics or of reading theory, but rather, dogmatics—particularly, who God is and how God has made himself known.¹⁹

Thus undergirding the broad understanding of spiritual reading that Peterson, Davis, and Webster, among others, set out, and that I follow them in, are many core beliefs about the nature of Scripture and God’s involvement with it. As Webster argues, a Christian theology of reading Scripture is best worked out of “the language and belief structure of the Christian faith.”²⁰ I aim here not to argue for, or even to outline, all of that belief structure, but simply to highlight a few Christian beliefs as particularly important for guiding spiritual reading.

The first core belief is an orthodox understanding of God and the Bible—that is, that the Bible is inspired by God and that God is speaking through it still. Precise definitions of inspiration are not needed here, but simply a basic belief that God has worked and is working through Scripture, and that the Bible is central to the understanding of the Christian faith and the living of the Christian life. (More will be said in chapter 4 on Barth’s understanding of the nature of God’s involvement with the Bible, and inspiration will be returned to in the conclusion.) With this starting point of the Bible as the work of God, also central is the place that Jesus holds in Scripture and its reading. Jesus is more than one of the many subjects of the Christian Bible, but is its proper center, and is its true end, as he is the fullest revelation of God. (More will be said on this in chapter 5, with de Lubac’s understanding of medieval exegesis.) And also at the center of spiritual reading is the Spirit of God, the one who both inspired the writing of Scripture and who enables, sustains, and furthers all growth and sanctification. The Trinity is thus behind the spiritual reading of Scripture, as the

18. Webster, *Word and Church*, 47.

19. And so, Webster holds that more important than “general theories of religion, textuality, reading or reception” are “the church’s dogmatic depictions of encounter with the Bible, depictions which invoke the language of God, Christ, Spirit, faith, church.” What is especially needed is to give attention to Jesus, “of whose risen and self-communicative presence in the Holy Spirit the Bible and its reading are a function.” *Ibid.*, 48.

20. *Ibid.*, 76.

work of God, the centrality of Christ, and the help of the Spirit are primary to any attempts to read the Christian Bible spiritually.

Beyond this basic confession of the Trinity's activity in the Bible, what is needed is discernment on which other beliefs of the Christian faith are the most fruitful for making sense of this spiritual practice of reading Scripture. Here, I maintain, theological understandings of spirituality and sanctification come in. Spirituality is "the *lived* quality" of the Christian life,²¹ how the faith is worked out in the daily lives of Christian believers, and this working out involves both the work of God and the work of believers. In this cooperation, the primacy of God is important ever to bear in mind, as spirituality is not about spiritual self-heroics of individuals, but rather, individuals being increasingly drawn to God. Evelyn Underhill's description of the spiritual life is fitting:

Any spiritual view which focuses attention on ourselves, and puts the human creature with its small ideas and adventures in the centre foreground, is dangerous till we recognize its absurdity. . . . For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of His will.²²

And so, even though a tendency exists for western Christians to become "obsessed with their wonderfully saved souls, setting about busily cultivating their own spiritualities,"²³ all genuine spiritual life and growth is in response to God. What this means when it comes to reading the Bible spiritually is that even "sincere and devout" purposes for biblical reading are displaced, as these can be "self-sovereign" and not in response to God.²⁴ Spiritual reading is more than having a spiritual agenda; it is a reading

21. Peterson, *Christ Plays*, xi, emphasis his.

22. Underhill, *Spiritual Life*, 12, 32.

23. Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 243. Abbot Christopher Jamison similarly notes a "tendency to be self-absorbed . . . characterises so much current western spirituality." Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary*, 170.

24. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 59. Peterson contrasts spiritual reading with three other dominant approaches: reading the Bible for the intellectual challenge, reading for the acquisition of morals, and "devotionally cozy Bible reading." Although these are aspects of biblical reading, they are not at its true center. "It is entirely possible to come to the Bible in total sincerity, responding to the intellectual challenge it gives, or for the moral guidance it offers, or for the spiritual uplift it provides, and not in any way have to deal with a personally revealing God who has personal designs on you." *Ibid.*, 30. Billings calls such angles "well-intended reading practices that nonetheless point to a lesser story than the gospel of Jesus Christ." Billings, *Word of God*, 197.

which (in Underhill's words) is "soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim."

As the spiritual reader of the Bible sets out to read, her essential task, then, is one of participation with God, taking part in the work God is doing. Spiritual reading is working with God, as is the spiritual life as a whole. Orthodox and Wesleyan branches of the church have perhaps best articulated this kind of cooperation between an individual believer and God, as they hold that sanctification is a process of a believer working out his salvation as God is working in him. In Orthodoxy, cooperation with God, or *synergia*, is essential; salvation is a process of *theosis* in which the believer grows in God by cooperating with what God is doing in him. Wesleyan theology likewise believes that Christian perfection hinges upon the believer responding to the grace of God ever at work.²⁵ The reading of Scripture is one of the most tangible ways that this cooperation between God and the believer may take place, as in the human effort of reading the Bible and seeking to understand it, both the individual's work and the work of God are operative.²⁶ In the same way that both human and divine processes came together to form the Bible, so too both God's work and the reader's own forms its spiritual reading. Guigo articulates this balance well, "we can do nothing without Him. It is He who achieves our works for us, and yet not entirely without us."²⁷

Spiritual reading requires effort, then, but it always holds that effort beneath the sovereignty of God. Illusions may persist that a spiritual reading of the Bible hinges only upon the hard work of the reader. An inclination towards a spiritual reading of Scripture would soon be lost amidst the tide of other desires were it not for the grace of God at work. Spiritual reading is thus not only, as Sandra Schneiders argues, "pre-eminently a reader-centered approach to scripture,"²⁸ but it is an approach centered upon God's work in the reader. What is necessary is to cultivate the efforts to read well, but to remember that the grace of the Spirit of God is what makes good all

25. As Peter C. Bouteneff expresses, Wesleyan perfection is "perfection in love, something that is initiated by the Holy Spirit in us and needs cultivation by us, something dynamic, proceeding from glory to glory in this world and, in a more radical way, from glory to glory in the next." Bouteneff, "All Creation," 197.

26. This is in contrast to Webster's view that "sanctification is not in any straightforward sense a process of cooperation or coordination between God and the creature, a drawing out or building upon some inherent holiness of the creature's own. Sanctification is *making* holy." Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 27, emphasis his. Against Webster, I find cooperative understandings of sanctification are useful at this point to bring together the work of God and the work of the biblical reader.

27. Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks*, 81.

28. Schneiders, "Gospels and the Reader," 103.

strivings and desires. Only the coming of God gives life to reading; there is no intensity of desire strong enough nor any reading approach spiritual enough to guarantee God's presence.²⁹

The Theological Interpretation of Scripture and *Lectio Divina*

Many of these thoughts on the nature of spiritual reading find a home in both fields of theological interpretation and of *lectio divina*. A growing field within theology/biblical studies is the theological interpretation of Scripture—Kevin Vanhoozer describes it as “a new kind of interpretation of Scripture that combines an interest in the academic study of the Bible with a passionate commitment to making this scholarship of use to the church.”³⁰ Some of the main characteristics of theological interpretation³¹ are taking seriously the text's historical context, bringing together biblical studies and theology, and being governed by an interest in God, both his word and works. Vanhoozer insists that “God must not be an ‘afterthought’ in biblical interpretation. . . . A properly theological criticism will therefore seek to do justice to the priority of the living and active triune God.”³²

An array of articles and monographs has been devoted to exploring what “theological interpretation” might mean.³³ In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (2007), its editor Joel B. Green states,

29. David Kelsey articulates this well: “No ‘hermeneutic’ and no doctrine of the authority of Scripture could hope to discover the key to [Scripture's] perfect employment. Surely, Christianly speaking, it would be improper even to hope for that. For the full discrimen by which theological proposals are finally to be assessed includes the active presence of God. No ‘theological position’ would presume to tell us how to use Scripture so as to ‘guarantee’ that God will be present to illumine and correct us. Theological proposals are concerned with what God is now using Scripture to do, and no degree of sophistication in theological methodology can hope to anticipate that!” Kelsey, *Uses of Scripture*, 215.

30. Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 13. Earlier works, however, have held these same concerns—see, e.g., Abraham, *Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture*.

31. Or “theological exegesis” or “theological hermeneutics”—there seems little difference between these terms, other than that “theological interpretation” is more widely used.

32. Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 20.

33. See, e.g. Treier, “What Is Theological Interpretation?”; Sarisky, “What is Theological Interpretation?”; Moberly, “What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?”; Billings, *Word of God*; Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*; Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*; Adam, et al., *Reading Scripture With the Church*; Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*; Fowl, ed., *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. In addition, other works significant for this movement are Watson's *Text, Church, and World* and *Text and*

A theological hermeneutics of Christian Scripture concerns the role of Scripture in the faith and the formation of persons and ecclesial communities. . . . Biblical scholarship in the modern period has not oriented itself toward approaches or development of means that would enable us to tune our ears to the voice of God. How do we read the texts as Christian Scripture so as to hear God's address?³⁴

Although a desire to hear God's address is at the heart of much theological interpretation, other concerns alongside that desire which are often noted (and can become overriding) are the failings of modern biblical scholarship, and the challenges of negotiating the gap between the academy and the church. Much theological interpretation is caught up with resolving how academic pursuits connect with the life of the church, whether it is possible "to hear God's address" through modern, university-based forms of biblical studies. Those drawn to theological interpretation are often ones who have struggled to articulate their own theological concerns within the perimeters of the academic study of the Bible.³⁵ Vanhoozer perhaps overstates the situation that prompted the movement of theological interpretation, however, as he likens this "growth industry of late" to the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1893 "when settlers rushed into virgin territory to stake a claim," hoping to find relief from their dire situations: "The recovery of theological interpretation of Scripture is about emerging from the desert to settle in and inhabit the promised land."³⁶ His imagery is surprisingly careless, as the "virgin territory" of 1893 Oklahoma had, in fact, already been well inhabited—by native peoples whom those settlers of the Land Rush conveniently ignored. Any analogy fails when it is pushed too hard, of course, but Vanhoozer may have unintentionally hit upon a truth in his chosen analogy for theological interpretation—the area of biblical understanding that academic theological interpreters are rushing into is truly an area that has long been inhabited by other readers of the Bible, ones more native to its land. Even when

Truth, and the nine theses and collection of essays in *Art of Reading Scripture*.

34. Green, "(Re-)Turn to Theology," 2.

35. Treier suggests theological interpretation's "most natural home . . . with its mix of 'evangelical' and 'catholic' elements tamed by Barthian and postmodern whips, will be among 'higher church' evangelicals and the relatively conservative mainline Protestants associated with the term 'postliberal.' No doubt other evangelicals and Catholics can appropriate some of the movement's language and offer their own contributions; for instance, a Pentecostal scholar could resonate with openness to spiritual exegesis. But that scholar is likely to associate appeals to the 'spiritual' with a non-sacramental framework or a less sacramental one than the classic heritage." Treier, "What Is Theological Interpretation?" 156.

36. Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 13–14.

segments of the modern academy have lost interest in hearing God's address in Scripture (though not to say all the academy, as it has ever had its Rudolf Bultmanns and Gerhard von Rads—ones whose scholarly rigor is governed by interest in God³⁷), "the promised land" of the Bible has been dwelt in still. As those within the academy turn to listen, they are rejoining, rather than reviving, a tradition.³⁸

Within theological interpretation, a striving to listen to God is not always at the forefront, however. In a review of recently-published theological commentaries on Scripture, Steven J. Koskie finds them curiously lacking the feature of "reading as if Scripture is addressed to the church that is reading right now."³⁹ What is missing in these theological commentaries, Koskie argues, is the immediacy of address that Barth saw in Calvin and sought for himself. Theological interpretation/commentary can translate for some into paying attention to certain theological issues (e.g., the nature of salvation or community ethics⁴⁰), not necessary to the pressing address of God in a

37. Schneiders points out, "In reality the most intellectually rigorous and spiritually fruitful work on the biblical texts throughout history has been done by those who were not only speaking competently and even authoritatively to their academic peers but were also passionately concerned with spirituality: Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Bernard, Luther, Calvin, Bultmann, Barth, Lagrange, Raymond Brown, and many others." Schneiders, "Biblical Spirituality," 141.

38. Briggs notes, "It is a regrettable part of the rhetoric of academia that some who advocate theological interpretation today exaggerate the absence of theological dimensions in earlier biblical studies." Briggs, "Christian Theological Interpretation Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets," 311n4. Likewise, Treier argues, "[E]vangelicals have primarily excelled at practicing elements of theological interpretation rather than theorizing about it—maintaining, for instance, forms of canonical reading such as typology or 'Scripture interpreting Scripture' popularly even during their eclipse within mainstream Protestant theology. The renaissance of evangelical biblical scholarship during recent decades undoubtedly galvanizes interest in theological interpretation as a possible provider of the theoretical language within which to articulate or defend how some already pursue biblical theology." Treier, "What Is Theological Interpretation?" 151. Similarly, Billings argues, "The theological interpretation of Scripture is, in many ways, simply the church's attempt to read Scripture again after the hubris and polarities of the Enlightenment have begun to fade." Billings, *Word of God*, 224. Billings's book was the cover story for the October 2011 issue of the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*: "How to Read the Bible: New Strategies for Interpreting Scripture Turn Out To Be Not So New—And Deepen our Faith."

39. Koskie, "Seeking Comment," 244.

40. Examining Hermann Schelkle's commentary on Romans, R. R. Reno notes that "theological abstractions such as 'redemption,' 'sonship,' and the 'the new, transfigured corporeality' dominate. This approach is typical of much of what we think of when someone commends 'theological exegesis.' Modern theological interpretation relies on words and concepts ('redemption') that stand at least two removes from the text. That is to say, Schelkle is glossing the text with broad generalizations about 'the Christian view of salvation,' a view that seems to float in an ether of ideas." "Biblical Theology," 389.

passage of Scripture. In his article “What is Theological Interpretation?” R. W. L. Moberly questions how wedded one must be to the term “theological” for the task of theological interpretation, asking if other terms might as readily (or better) apply, such as “Christian reading” or “spiritual understanding.” The modifier “theological” has become a “high-value term”⁴¹ which can, ironically, detract attention away from God. (And many whose work might be considered in the camp of theological interpretation, such as Ellen Davis, tend not to employ that term.) Moberly is moreover troubled by the lack of exegesis in some recent proposals for theological interpretation,⁴² a problem that also bothers R. R. Reno:

[O]ne of the impediments to clear thinking about theological exegesis on the part of theologians is a drift towards abstraction. To exhort one and all to read the Bible “theologically,” or to read it “for the church,” offers little insight into what is necessary. Furthermore, digressions into Ricoeurian, narrative and postmodern hermeneutical theory seem to produce more ideas than exegesis.⁴³

Thus, as Stephen B. Chapman states, “The problem . . . is not that theological interpretation has been ignored but rather that the *right kind* of theological interpretation has not been done.”⁴⁴ More attention to God and to biblical texts themselves are recurring concerns for theological interpretation.

While my interests cross into much that is passionately debated in circles of theological interpretation, nonetheless I retain the term “spiritual reading” for my purposes here, so as to make clear my primary aims. Rather than the dislocations between the university and the church, and between the fields of biblical studies and theology, my concern is with the separation between the biblical reader and God, and again, with reading more than with interpretation. How is closeness to God found in the practice of reading Scripture? That question is well-addressed in another area of scholarship that has undergone much recent growth (mostly from church quarters), the area of *lectio divina*, the church’s “divine reading” or “reading that is from God.”

41. Moberly, “What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” 169.

42. “There tends to be more discussion about the nature of theological interpretation and theological hermeneutics than there is demonstration in persuasive and memorable readings of the biblical text.” *Ibid.*

43. Reno, “Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis,” 386.

44. Chapman, “Imaginative Readings,” 410, emphasis his.

It is hard to capture the meaning of the expression *lectio divina*. Mariano Magrassi explains that “reading” and “studying” are both inadequate translations of *lectio*, as this kind of *lectio* is closer to meditation, but a meditation that is a loving attention and deep listening while bent eagerly over pages.⁴⁵ Magrassi quotes Louis Bouyer to find a more precise definition, explaining that *lectio divina* is “a reading in faith, in a spirit of prayer, believing in the real presence of God who speaks to us in the sacred text.”⁴⁶ Reading in the way of *lectio divina* is above all else, reading in a posture of prayer, attuned to the presence of God in the text and ready to listen and respond. Early on in church tradition this posture was taken—Cyprian’s letter to his friend Donatus, c. 256, was often quoted in the Middle Ages, as Cyprian exhorts Donatus, “Be constant as well in prayer as in reading; now speak with God, now let God speak with you.”⁴⁷ The close relationship between biblical reading and prayer is central to *lectio divina*; its reading is a deep listening and prayer.

While *lectio divina* is not a precise hermeneutic or rigid practice, beginning in the twelfth century, monastic communities came to give structure to *lectio divina* to guide monks’ reading of biblical texts. As mentioned above, the twelfth-century monk Guigo II gives one of the most illuminating looks into medieval practices of *lectio divina*. In his short treatise *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo outlines the stages of *lectio divina*, reflecting both ancient ideas (such as the ladder of contemplation and the multiple layers of meaning in a biblical text), and fresh outpourings of medieval spirituality.⁴⁸ Guigo explains these four rungs of *lectio* being reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation: in reading one encounters a biblical text and seeks its meaning; in meditation one comes to perceive that meaning; in prayer one asks for the reality of that meaning to be his own; and in contemplation one gazes upon God.

An ancient way of reading the Bible, *lectio divina* never died out as a spiritual practice, surviving through the Enlightenment, the Protestant Reformation, and the growth of modern biblical studies (although much of its survival was in a monastic context still). In the past few decades, however, a

45. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 17.

46. Bouyer, *Parola*, 17, translated and quoted in Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 18.

47. Cyprian, *Letter 1.xv*, as quoted in Dumont, *Praying the Word of God*, 1.

48. It may be, however, that Guigo’s *Ladder* set out a monastic manner of reading just as meditative practices were heading into decline at the end of the twelfth century. See Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary*, 65. In this regard Guigo’s guide is similar to Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*, also written roughly in the mid-twelfth century, and thus also at the end of an era of reading, as Illich argues in his work *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 64, 96.

particular revival of interest in *lectio divina* has taken place in many diverse areas of the church, across denominational lines.⁴⁹ In Protestant circles interest in *lectio divina* has grown as part of a larger movement of many mainline denominations and evangelicals in the west reclaiming traditional practices of spiritual formation.⁵⁰ On the Catholic side, Archbishop Magrassi traces the Catholic revival of interest in Scripture to the larger renewal work of Vatican Council II and the 1985 Synod of Bishops. Pope Benedict XVI indeed reflects this ongoing work, as on the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, he urged a renewal of the practice of *lectio divina*:

I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*: the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer. . . . If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church—I am convinced of it—a new spiritual springtime. As a strong point of biblical ministry, *lectio divina* should therefore be increasingly encouraged, also through the use of new methods, carefully thought out and in step with the times.⁵¹

Lectio divina is thus a promising way the church might find again the freshness of spring in its ancient Scriptures. Yet just as the term “theological interpretation” did not fit what I am aiming at in this work, so too the term *lectio divina* is close to, but not quite the right fit for this study. *Lectio divina* indeed captures the attentiveness to God that marks the posture of spiritual reading, but the term stretches past the actual act of reading to include

49. Studzinski offers a helpful survey of the surge of literature on *lectio divina* from the 1970s to the 1990s in *Reading to Live*, 194–95. Most that has been written on *lectio divina* has come from Catholic and Protestant fronts, as traditional Orthodox understandings of Scripture approach its reading in ways more centered upon the ecclesial life of the church. John Breck recently has attempted to bring *lectio divina* into relation with Orthodox theology. He explains, “Any ‘personal’ reading of Scripture . . . takes place within the Church, as a function of the life of the Church. Like prayer, it draws us into a living communion with the universal Body of Christian believers. Our quest will lead to a *lectio divina* faithful to Orthodox tradition, therefore, only to the extent that it confirms and deepens our commitment to the ecclesial Body.” Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 67.

50. Both Eugene Peterson (a Presbyterian) and Richard Foster (a Quaker), prominent figures in this movement, have written on the importance of *lectio divina* in spiritual formation. Peterson sets the traditional four-fold movement of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* at the heart of his spiritual reading (though contemplation is explained as the living of biblical texts). He envisages the four parts as non-linear, however, but rather thrown together in “a kind of playful folk dance.” Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 91. Foster takes a similar approach in *Life With God*.

51. Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI.”

practices of meditation, prayer, contemplation, and Christian living.⁵² Such is the real end of biblical reading, and these things are close to my interests here. However, my aim is more modest in thinking more directly and concretely about the practice of reading itself, about how the reader's eyes move over the biblical text and come to be lifted towards God. I search out primarily, then, the meaning of the first step of medieval *lectio divina*—that of *lectio* itself—and to a certain extent, also the meaning of the second step of meditation—yet the kind of meditation I have in mind is, as Sandra Schneiders explains, a modern type of meditation that might entail the use of commentaries or other biblical aids—a meditation aided by scholarship to understand the meaning of texts.⁵³ My interest is in the type of scriptural reading and thinking that heads toward God.

The Individual Reading of Scripture in the Christian Faith

As the church has sought God in Scripture, the Christian faith from its beginning has had a textual predilection for doing that seeking. Early Christians had almost “an addiction to literacy;”⁵⁴ the church inherited a high regard for written Scriptures from Judaism and soon broadened their Scriptures to include Mark with Moses, the epistles with the prophets, Acts with Exodus. Writing was central to the start of the Christian movement, and early Christians even broke with cultural norms in how they went about that. Texts played a role in early Christianity in an anomalous way, as ancient Christians had a strong preference for the codex, which was at odds with the wider culture's use of scrolls—in the second-century, over 70 percent of Christian manuscripts are codices, whereas of all second-century manuscripts, 74 percent are rolls.⁵⁵ This codex preference is still perplex-

52. Foster explains the practice of *lectio divina* by relating a story of Henri Nouwen once showing him a painting of a woman with an open Bible in her lap, her gaze lifted upward. This, Foster describes, is the essence of *lectio divina*—looking past the text to God. Foster, *Life With God*, 63.

53. Schneiders further points out that *lectio divina* is, in essence, more widely practiced than realized: “I have found that many people who have never heard of *lectio divina* practice this kind of prayer on a daily basis . . . In other words, even though the term ‘biblical spirituality’ may be unfamiliar to many people, the reality of biblical spirituality as a practice is not.” Schneiders, “Biblical Spirituality,” 140.

54. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 123. He continues by pointing out, “even in the face of attacks by outsiders and heretics who themselves cited scripture as a proof text, the young church never resorted to attempts to limit study and circulation of scripture among the laity.”

55. Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 49. He concludes on 53, “[T]he slow but

ing scholars. Larry Hurtado argues that practical reasons often suggested for the Christian use for the codex do not stand up (the codex was neither easier to make or less expensive than a roll, nor was it easier to flip through to access a portion of a text, and nor was transportability a pressing issue). He finds that there is, however, a marked difference in the codex's layout: in contrast to the unbroken form of classical Greek texts, many Christian codices have a layout that aids in reading, with wider margins, punctuation marks, devices to mark off sense-unit sections. Hurtado understands these moves as efforts to help facilitate the public/liturgical usage of texts (and though he does not mention it, these moves may have helped the individual reader, as well). Although such "readerly aids" would come to be common in book production, in their time, "the earliest Christian manuscripts represented the leading edge of such developments in book practice."⁵⁶

Ancient Christian manuscripts attest to an early Christian concern with how its texts are actually read, then, as part of its everyday practices of faith. It seems self-evident that reading sacred writings is a core part of religious practice, but the act of reading itself is not necessary for the Christian faith, or any other faith. William Graham cogently argues that western ideas of sacred texts too often view texts primarily as written objects, and overlook how much scriptures are recited, memorized, chanted, sung, and otherwise engaged orally and aurally; he points out "the historical novelty of our modern relationship to words and books."⁵⁷ Paul Griffiths likewise maintains that religious texts may be engaged by modes other than visual reading: "Religious readers, paradoxically, need not know how to read."⁵⁸ The importance a religion gives to its sacred writings does not necessarily mean an importance given to the practice of reading its texts, then.⁵⁹ Henry

steady advance of the codex in general usage across the first three centuries CE contrasts sharply with the early and rather wholesale embrace of this book form in Christian usage." Frances M. Young suggests that the Christian copying of Jewish Scriptures along with their own texts into codices seems to be "not the gradual elevation of recent Christian books to the sacred status of Jewish scriptures, but rather the relativising of those ancient scriptures. They have become secondary to the Gospel of Christ. . . . Jews have never transferred their sacred text from the scroll format." Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 15, 289.

56. Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 179. Alan Jacobs wants to take a step further than Hurtado, and he suggests theological reasons are behind early Christian preference for the codex, namely, that "the codex is the technology of typology—just as it is the technology of Biblical integrity." Jacobs, "Christianity and the Future of the Book," 26.

57. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 30.

58. Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 40.

59. As an example, Graham points out that in Hinduism the Veda was long transmitted only orally to certain castes, as its words were thought too holy to be put into

Gamble thus finds, “It may seem paradoxical to say both that Christianity placed a high value on texts and that most Christians were unable to read, but in the ancient world this was no contradiction.”⁶⁰

As the early Christian church used written means of spreading and confirming its beliefs, it was choosing the medium of writing and reading to be central among other possible modes of communicating.⁶¹ This medium of writing in turn had effects upon theological understandings of the Bible; as Jonathan Z. Smith argues, “canonization, in the case of the Bible, is inseparable from modes of production, being as much an affair of technology as theology. The perceived singularity of *the* Bible would have been impossible without the adoption of the codex form; the perceived uniformity of the Bible, impossible without the invention of the printing press.”⁶²

Although the practice of individually reading the Bible is in many ways a modern practice (“the historical novelty” that Graham notes), from early on the church’s members have been encouraged to read Scripture on their own. As early as the fourth century John Chrysostom took up Acts’ story of the Ethiopian eunuch as a means to urge his congregation to read Scripture. He asks his hearers to consider “what a great effort” the eunuch made “not to neglect reading even while on a journey,” and he admonishes them, “Let this be heeded by those people who do not even deign to do it at home but rather think reading the Scriptures is a waste of time.”⁶³ Jerome’s advice to Eustochium, c. 384, likewise insists on individual reading: “Read often, learn all that you can. Let sleep overcome you, the roll still in your hands; when your head falls, let it be on the sacred page.”⁶⁴

Yet even with the fathers’ common admonition to hold the written Scriptures in high regard and to read them frequently, Chrysostom nonetheless understands that reading itself is not the aim:

It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit.

writing or to common use. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 72–73.

60. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 8.

61. Gamble notes, “No Greco-Roman religious group produced, used, or valued texts on a scale comparable to Judaism and Christianity.” *Ibid.*, 18.

62. Smith, “Religion and Bible,” 26. Philip Esler offers a different take on the historical significance of Christian texts than I chart above; he argues that a recovery of the oral dimension of New Testament texts is key to their proper understanding. See Esler, *New Testament Theology*, 169.

63. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 35.3.

64. Jerome, Letter 22.17,37.

But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course.⁶⁵

Chrysostom holds that the ultimate aim of encountering Scripture is to embody it oneself; it is actually a “second best course” that it must be written to enable that. Early on in the Christian tradition, then, there was both a high regard for written Scripture, and awareness that Scripture was in the service of the greater purpose of knowing God. David Lyle Jeffrey cites Augustine’s point that one with a steadfast hold upon faith, hope, and love “has no need of the scriptures except to instruct others,” and Jeffrey argues that as a Christ-like life is the goal of reading Scripture, there is “a sense in which the unlettered believer already living this life—one might think of peasant converts in modern China as readily as in the largely oral culture of Europe or Africa during the first Christian centuries—would not himself need the actual Book.”⁶⁶

The Christian faith, then, has an almost paradoxical use of its sacred writings—“an unusual complexity and even ambiguity in its treatment of the divine word.”⁶⁷ While it inherited its understanding of written Scriptures straight from Judaism, these Scriptures were cast in the light of Jesus Christ as one who gives new meaning and new purpose to all of Scripture. On the one hand, the early Christian movement was eager to write and to circulate and to read publicly its sacred texts, but on the other hand, its Scripture was always subsidiary to the greater goal of knowing Christ and becoming more like him. Not just the writing but the proclamation and the living of the Word were key. Such a dynamic of Scripture carried over even into the Reformation; as Graham argues, the Protestant Reformation sought to recover the preaching and teaching of the word of God, the early kerygmatic orientation of the Church, even though that Word was being set in writing more than ever before.⁶⁸

Setting aside time to read the Bible individually has long been a part of Christian devotional practice in the western world. Edward Wettenhall, for example, gave instructions for devotional reading in *Enter Thy Closet*, written 1666. He explains, “By *Reading* here I understand reading the sole word of God: and this as it should constantly (for the main at least, if not every) have a place in my daily devotions in privated [*sic*].”⁶⁹ Wettenhall’s advice

65. Chrysostom, *Homily 1 on Matthew*.

66. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.39.43; Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, xvi, xv.

67. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 122.

68. *Ibid.*, 120.

69. Wettenhall, *Enter Thy Closet*, 39, emphasis his. Wettenhall recognizes that not everyone can read or has the time to read, and so the title of his first chapter is, “That

comes after a prolonged struggle for the Bible to be made accessible in English for individual readers, as before the English Reformation it was a crime to publish the Bible in English, or even own a copy of such publication. Wettenhall's instructions reflect just how far the translation and publication of Scripture had come. Although there have been common elements in private devotional practice from the early church to the present, many of the ways in which biblical reading has been done have changed in each new age, as practices of biblical reading are shaped not only through convictions of faith but also through religious and political culture, as well as conventions of type and technology. It is important to recognize the particular time and place in which the spiritual reading of the Bible is considered, then, for spiritual readers today read both like and unlike their fathers and mothers. The particular context in which I pursue the possibility of spiritual reading is the early twenty-first century, western church, enmeshed in a broadly literate and post-Christian culture. Western culture is one whose great literature has historically been influenced by the Bible (a situation not found in every culture), and it is a culture in which books and reading have a common and casual place in everyday lives (again, not a situation found in every culture). Reading is intrinsic to a society increasingly oriented around visual media such as the internet, a primary source of information and consumer goods.

Yet fears have been sounded that modern western culture is becoming postliterate, and for this reason the act of reading has received much attention. "Reading has become one of the hottest subjects in the humanities," Harvard University's library director announced in 2010 with the unveiling of their new online open collection, "Reading: Harvard Views of Readers, Readership, and Reading History."⁷⁰ This project compiles vast materials on the nature of reading, all accessible online for free. Its online dimension reflects the scholarly interest in the practice of reading that has been generated by the increasing use of computers for reading. In a computer age, the book is coming into question for its use and permanence, and the textuality of the modern west is akin to how Marshall McLuhan described modern

if I am a person of leisure I ought daily twice in day to retire into my closet for devotion sake." Gregory O. Johnson notes that closet prayer was of great importance in early modern Anglo-American Protestant spirituality; "[t]he growth of individualism and privatization in spirituality are significant themes in British—and especially in American—religion." Johnson, "From Morning Watch to Quiet Time," 18, 22. Johnson's work is an engaging history of "the quiet time" and the wider cultural factors that have shaped it.

70. Darnton, "Reading."

life as a whole—it is “dissolving and resolving” at once.⁷¹ The book is in flux and ironically, books are being written to ponder the future of the book.⁷²

Within the church and the academy the Bible is now read both through traditional books and through a myriad of forms of modern electronic forms, such as Kindles, iPads, smart phones, personal computers, and online Bibles.⁷³ Alan Jacobs insists that although “shiny new technologies tend to draw the bulk of our attention,” a neat contrast cannot be made between a classic codex and all modern technologies, and a more important difference is that between a codex Bible and a biblical text projected onto a screen. Jacobs finds that e-readers such as Kindles “preserve many of the essential features of the codex”—a Kindle is still “a flat surface on which ink appears.”⁷⁴ However, the screens used in a growing number of western churches for projecting biblical readings (among other parts of the worship service) are a marked break from biblical codices, and these screens have “a greater influence on Christian encounters with the Bible:”

71. McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1.

72. This has been going on for two decades now; see, e.g., Nunberg, *Future of the Book*. In his introduction Nunberg notes, “One could be forgiven for assuming that anyone who talks about the future of the book nowadays will be chiefly interested in saying whether it has one.” Yet Nunberg is “willing to venture . . . by the end of the decade [the 1990s] all our current talk of the ‘end of the book’ will sound as dated and quaint as most of the other forecasts of this type . . . photography will kill painting, movies will kill the theater . . . and so on.” *Ibid.*, 9, 13. Anecdotaly, the oddness of this moment in time particularly struck me in 2010 when I was trying to locate Blackwell’s *Companion to the History of the Book*. Although the Durham University library catalogue (which I searched online from my home) told me there was not a physical copy of this book in the university’s collections, there was a link to “Blackwell Reference Online” with this book’s electronic version. How peculiar it was then to read this book on the history of the book by pixels on my laptop screen, unknown miles away from any physical copy of this book I was reading.

73. Some church leaders are seizing on new technologies (at times, recklessly) in attempts to make Scripture appealing. A recent movement in the UK that encourages biblical reading, “Biblefresh,” intentionally chose not to present visually the Bible as a codex book. Krish Kandiah explains, “You will see on all of the Biblefresh material that we haven’t put a picture of a book and that’s because we want to say to people that there are so many great digital ways to engage with God’s word today—whether that’s through WordLive, smartphones, YouVersion or whatever means you can engage with God’s word . . . Paul talked about doing whatever it takes, that he would become a Jew to reach the Jews and a Greek to reach the Greek so that by any means possible he might win some for Christ, and I think that’s got to be our opportunistic attitude to these new technologies.” “Krish Kandiah and the Weightwatchers Approach.”

74. Jacobs acknowledges, “It is true that the e-ink comes from below the surface rather than being impressed on it, but it really is a kind of ink, and must be read under the same lighting conditions that we read paper codices.” Jacobs, “Christianity and the Future of the Book,” 35, 31.

[T]he enormous white screen that hangs somewhere near the pulpit of many thousands of churches . . . [is] the *primary* way many millions of Christians today encounter Scripture. . . . When you consider how thoroughly such a presentation decontextualizes whatever part of the Bible it is interested in—how completely it severs its chosen verse or two from its textual surroundings—how radically it occludes any sense of sequence within the whole of the Bible . . . it becomes, I think, difficult to worry about the pernicious effects of iPads and Kindles.⁷⁵

Jacobs might consider more fully that most Christians throughout the ages have encountered the Bible primarily aurally in a church—they did not have their own copies of the Bible to follow along, and so the biblical readings they heard were, in a different way, removed from their “textual surroundings.” (Although perhaps the codex Bible from which a reading was done still visually conveyed a wider context of that reading.) Yet Jacobs rightly points out the close relationship between Christian Scripture and the codex—“the interweaving of technology and theology is extremely complex.”⁷⁶ As the Bible is experienced more and more through technological sound bites, its cohesiveness and its role in the Christian life are harder to grasp. While it is too early to see where our new technologies of reading are leading us (and I will not be delving into analysis of them), they are important to recognize as a factor affecting the direction of spiritual reading.

Moreover, the Bible is also caught up with the immense consumerism of the west, as the glut of Bibles on the shelves of Christian bookstores and online can attest.⁷⁷ One result of the explosion of Bible publishing in the past century has most recently been the making of niche Bibles, Bibles marketed for specific demographic groups and interests—a questionable phenomenon in the church.⁷⁸ Yet as Graham notes, “we can observe in the past cen-

75. *Ibid.*, 33–34, emphasis original.

76. *Ibid.*, 23.

77. In a 2006 essay for *The New Yorker* Daniel Radosh reports, “The situation [of Bible publishing] worries some people. Phyllis Tickle . . . told me, ‘There’s a certain scandal to what’s happened to Bible publishing over the last fifteen years.’ . . . The problem, as she sees it, is that ‘instead of demanding that the believer, the reader, the seeker step out from the culture and become more Christian, more enclosed within ecclesial definition, we’re saying, ‘You stay in the culture and we’ll come to you.’ And, therefore, how are we going to separate out the culturally transient and trashy from the eternal?’ . . . In Tickle’s view, reimagining the Bible according to the latest trends is not merely a question of surmounting a language barrier. It involves violating ‘something close to moral or spiritual barriers.’” Radosh, “Good Book Business.”

78. In a *Christianity Today* review of one such Bible, the environmentally conscious *The Green Bible* (released 2008), Telford Work calls it an “ideological fashion accessory,”

tury or more that, just as availability of the biblical text has greatly increased through growth of literacy and the ubiquitous presence of printed Bibles, the strong biblical saturation of Western culture has sharply decreased.⁷⁹ Somehow the Gutenberg revolution has stalled as concerns its first printed text; the Bible is printed on more pages, but on fewer lives.

With emerging technologies of reading and increasing consumerism, there is as well a great proliferation of modern biblical scholarship. While biblical scholarship has existed for some two thousand years, it has grown exponentially in the past century and lodged itself within the modern university context. Yet still there is still a declining biblical literacy in the church and in the broader culture. Robert Jenson remarks, “The scholarship devoted to explaining it, to interpreting it, to applying it, to devising hermeneutical metatheories about it, increases exponentially and becomes ever more desperate; while in the church the Bible nevertheless becomes ever less accessible.”⁸⁰ The same might be said of the publishing industry devoted to producing new copies of the Bible, both in traditional forms and in new media—biblical publishing and biblical scholarship are increasing ever-rapidly, but a basic biblical literacy in western church and culture is sinking, if not already sunk.

So in this time, in these places, what might it mean to read Scripture well? The situation might seem dire (indeed, Griffiths and others worry about it, as will be considered below), but I hold out there is yet good hope for the spiritual reading of the Bible. The challenge is to understand Christian spiritual reading of Scripture as a spiritual practice that is embedded in cultural practices of reading and yet transcending them; the problem is to perceive

yet admits, “I seem to be pointing out the speck in my brother’s eye. After all, the Bible is already a fashion accessory. It is available in every shape, size, and price range to suit a dizzying variety of target markets: Bibles for men, for women, for newlyweds, for parents, for children, for teens, for various ethnicities—and of course, Bibles for us academics. In my circle, basic black is the rule, red letters gauche, and utility is its own elegance. First-year students marvel at my bilingual Hebrew and Greek editions, and majors admire my voluminous Bible software. And I can’t say I mind it when they do. Why should I begrudge Prius-driving disciples the same satisfaction?” And yet, Work points out that the proliferation of such Bibles is troubling, as niche Bibles are vehicles that “disperse out fellowships into scattered interest groups who represent the various causes and subcultures that rise, clash, and fall in a democracy . . . These are no longer the Word of God for the whole people of God, a whole congregation, or even a whole person. Are they even Bibles?” Work, “Meager Harvest,” 30–31.

79. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 167.

80. Jenson, “Strange New World,” 25.

how the activities of God and of believers come together over Scripture. It is a bold thing that God has done in placing his Word in ever-turning pages of human words—it seems a risk to use forms of writing and reading, as practices of writing and reading change in every age and culture. Especially evident today is just how much the practice of reading is ever changing, and the Bible is swept up in those changes. But in this risk the spiritual reading of Scripture begins.

SAMPLE