

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Book Critique: How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

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Hermeneutics

by

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### *Summary*

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have set out with their book, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, to give the reader tools for how to get the most out of their Bible. To do this, they focus on guiding the reader through various methods and tools for study, as well as the issues, scholarly debates and an overview of critical terms.

Fee and Stuart state, summarizing one of the critical values behind this book, “The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the ‘plain meaning of the text.’ And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart.”<sup>1</sup>

The authors lead off the book with an argument for the critical need to be able to interpret. They warn against different mistakes and assumptions many students of the Bible make, whether it is digging in too deep initially, or not bothering to dig at all and instead relying on their own intuition to understand what scripture has to say. Other times, the danger is in trying to find some new meaning, previously undiscovered, perhaps to stand out from other students of the Bibles or to gather attention – however, there is great danger in such an intention, and as Fee and Stuart rightfully point out, “the aim of good interpretation is not uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has ever seen before.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, the “aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the ‘plain meaning of the text.’”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Fee, Gordon D., and Stuart, Douglas. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Third Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003. Location 277.

2 Ibid., location 257.

3 Ibid., location 257.

One of the critical things to understand, however, is that the “plain meaning” is not always as plain as some might assume.<sup>4</sup> Hence the authors intent with this book to equip the reader with tools that will allow them to come as close to the original intent of the passage as possible. The reality that there is so much debate throughout the church as to the true plain meaning of various passages in scripture point to the reality that as long as we are fallible, imperfect human beings we will never have all the answers.

Before launching into the various sections of the scriptures, the authors work their way through some of the critical issues in studying scripture. They define exegesis – “the careful, systematic study of the scripture to discover the original, intended meaning”<sup>5</sup> - and lay the groundwork that proper exegesis involves the context and the content of the passage. The closer the present day reader can come to understanding how the original reader would have received and understood the passage, the stronger the understanding of the passage will be.

From there, the authors take the reader through an explanation on the importance of translation, what style it is, and what they are using it for. Part of the focus is the intent of the translators; for example, a functionally equivalent translation of the Bible tries to preserve the meaning of the original text in a way that is easily understood by today’s reader, while a formally equivalent translation seeks to preserve the original grammar and wording of the original document, resulting in a technically more accurate translation that is often times more difficult to understand for today’s reader than a functionally equivalent translation.<sup>6</sup> They also walk the reader through an assortment of other terminology, theories of translation, and how to decide which translation is best for the reader.

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4 Ibid., location 303.

5 Ibid., location 379.

6 Ibid., location 677.

Having laid a groundwork for understanding the roots and history of the Bible itself (not the content, but the literal book), the authors then begin to work their way through the different sections of the Bible and give practical advice on how to study the different styles of writing represented throughout the Bible.

Leading the way is two chapters on the Epistles, in part because they are easy to understand, but also because they are sometimes mistaken for being easy when in fact they are very complex.<sup>7</sup> While at first glance they may seem straight forward, we are reading something written in a specific time and place, far removed from our culture and experiences, to recipients who often times understood exactly what the Epistle was in response to while we are left to speculate. In a way, it is like hearing one side of a conversation and trying to guess the content of the other side based on that half that is being heard.<sup>8</sup> The authors speak of the importance of knowing the historical context, as well as developing the habit of reading the entire letter first before going deep with portions of it so as to get a feel for the tone and overall emphasis of the letter.

They also give guidelines for dealing with some of the more difficult passages, as well as advice on Paul's writing in particular. In addition, they dive in to some best practices for hermeneutics in regards to the Epistles. One of the things they call out is the practice by some of selectively applying and rejecting different parts of the Epistles without a legitimate rationale. They also warn the reader against using a passage for something it was never intended to mean or apply to with the original author or recipient. While the modern day believer may be well intentioned, it is an abuse of scripture to do so.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., location 927.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., location 973.

The next section of the Bible to be tackled is the Old Testament narratives. As described by Fee and Stuart, the “narratives are stories – purposeful stories retelling the historical events of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the present.”<sup>9</sup> It is the most common style in the Bible with over 40 percent of the Old Testament made up of narratives, and the Old Testament represents three fourths of the Bible. Ultimately, the narratives give us a historical view of the past, reciting events, key people, the challenges and their stories.

The danger for the modern reader in regards to Old Testament narratives is reading too much in to them. They are not metaphors for today, or necessarily even intended to teach moral lessons. While lessons can be learned from some of the stories, they are at their core a look at the history of Israel, mistakes and triumphs. While some portions can supply applicable lessons for today, ultimately the goal is for us to know the story of God’s working in His plan for redeeming mankind. Having said that, frequently the Old Testament does illustrate principles that are spoken to and taught directly in other places of scripture.

From there, the authors move on to the topic of Acts and the best approaches to it. The danger with Acts is to read it as prescriptive for the church today, or as being able to apply all the spiritual occurrences that happen there to modern churches. In reality, Acts is more history than prescriptive, revealing a body of believers in transition from Judaism to Christianity. The early church had a lot of contrasts, difficulties, and unique aspects to it which are valuable for history but not necessarily theological study. An important aspect to the study of Acts is delving into Luke’s purpose for each of the passages and the book as a whole. Seeking out his intent, as well as knowing the context of the passages will help give the reader today much better perspective.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., location 1539.

Ultimately, if the modern day reader hopes to find application for today, it should be verified elsewhere in scripture rather than just in Acts.

Having tackled Acts, the authors deal with the gospels, pointing out the cultural realities and context of each one. They comment on the similarities between Mark, Matthew and Luke, pointing out that most likely Mark was written first, with the other two being versions of Mark with different emphasis and target audiences, while at the same time having an incredible amount of similarities. John, meanwhile, was written much later and while John would have been familiar with the other gospel books, he takes a different focus and seems to intentionally avoid the stories that have already been shared and ends up writing something with only a little bit of overlap with the other three.

Fee and Stuart continue to make similar observations on study methods and appropriate approaches to hermeneutics in the remaining chapters as they focus on the Parables, The Law and its connection to us today, the Prophets and their writings, the book of Psalms, Wisdom, and ultimately, the book of Revelation. Revelation in particular represents a unique set of challenges in that while it is canon, its prophetic nature and rich and diverse symbolism make it stand out from the rest of scripture when it comes to interpretation.

### *Analysis*

Throughout the book the authors stress the importance of understanding what the original authors intended the original audience to hear, and being realistic in our approach to applying that to life today in a culture far removed from the one it was written in. The point of view of the authors seems to be that with proper methods, believers today and properly study and search out the intended messages found within the Bible even though it was written in a culture far removed from ours, in a time and language separated from us by thousands of years.

One of their opening statements lays out the case for why they believe learning the methods included in this book is critical for believers; “whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter. That is, most of us assume as we read that we also understand what we read. We also tend to think that our understanding is the same thing as the Holy Spirit’s or human author’s intent. However, we invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas. Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text.”<sup>10</sup>

For the modern believer, there is great potential for misunderstanding the scriptures, even in cases where the plain meaning seems obvious. Much of the evidence provided by the authors to substantiate their viewpoint comes in the form of explaining the writing styles, the context of the various passages of scripture, the culture within which they are written, what the intended audience would have looked like and how they would have heard it. In doing so, they painted a picture of how different sections of the Bible would be received differently, and how it would have been understood. By providing tools, questions, and things to look out for, they teach the reader to be aware of these kinds of culture and context related issues. By pointing out how a modern day reader may interpret a passage based on our culture, and their best guess as to how a reader two thousand years ago would have interpreted that same passage, the authors make a compelling case for the need for training, understanding, and awareness of the many issues that impact a proper study of the Bible.

Their presentation has a very logical flow to it. By opening originally with the issue of hermeneutics and general principles to guide in the process, they lay out the foundational tools

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., location 279.

for studying the scriptures. The bulk of the book then follows with how to apply those methods to the very different literary styles and narratives throughout the Bible, both underscoring the importance of a proper respect for the process of interpretation and the incredible variety that God chose to present His message to us in.

While the book is a useful first step in introducing the reader to how to study the Bible, it is only a first step. In the back, the authors lay out a list of recommended commentaries for a more thorough study of the Bible for the reader that wants to go beyond what the book can facilitate.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, Fee and Stuart have put together a solid resource that makes a strong case for the importance of informed study of the scriptures and provide a brief overview for how the reader can begin to grow in their study of the Bible. They effectively define the various terms and methods and do a great job of giving an overview of the Bible as a whole and how the different parts of it should be approached.

As a reader, I loved it. I thought the definitions were solid and a great easy to grab resource as a Pastor. The list of recommended commentaries in the appendix is an amazing list that quite honestly, made me want to go online and purchase the lot of them! The book is well written, with a logical flow and an easy to read style in spite of some of the heavier sections. Overall, I would highly recommend it to any believer who wants to deeper in their study and understanding of the scriptures, and it is a must read for anyone who wishes to be in leadership, a teacher or preacher of the Word.