
General Introduction

Preliminary Comments

For many who teach the Christian Scriptures, an often troubling aspect of Introductions to the Bible is their tendency to focus less on making the content of the Bible clear to readers than on clarifying current critical theories *about the Bible*. While such information is interesting, and does have a place in introductory texts like this one, it should not predominate to such an extent that readers do not first receive an adequate introduction to what is *in the Bible*. Likewise, scholarly interest in theories regarding the Bible's origin and history has long forced to the sidelines discussion of the Bible's basic interest, theology, reflection on the nature of God and of humanity in relationship with God.

We hope to have produced an Introduction that avoids this twofold error. To do so we have brought to the forefront of our Introduction the neglected practice of guiding readers carefully and completely through the biblical text. With very few exceptions, the chapters of this textbook provide section-by-section surveys of the biblical text called "A Walk through [Name of Book]." We hope that these relatively leisurely strolls through the books of the Bible will serve as roadmaps for students as they read the Bible itself. We have found

this to be a helpful tool in our own teaching, and we suspect it will serve our readers well too.

We also place in bold relief reflections on the theological implications and claims of the biblical books. For each biblical book we offer a section titled "Theological Themes in [Name of Book]." Here too we hope to give our readers something they often miss in contemporary Introductions. For a variety of reasons, this aspect of the Bible has been left aside altogether or relegated to separate, "specialized" introductions. We understand the Bible as an intrinsically theological book, one that begs to be read as such, just as much as instructions for assembling a child's new toy demand being read as technical writing. To us, it makes no sense to introduce students to the Bible merely as history, literature, a record of political or ideological history, or a testimony to societies living or dead. The Bible may be read with all those questions and concerns in mind, but it must first and foremost be read as the text it presents itself as, a theological witness.

Lest readers expecting the more typical fare be disappointed, we also provide between our walks through the biblical books and our surveys of their theological themes a section titled "Critical Issues in [Name of the Book]." These include coverage of the most significant issues, theories, and hypotheses that modern critical

scholarship has developed in studying the Bible. In this regard, though, we confess to having practiced restraint, providing students with only an introduction to the topics evoked by the last centuries' study of the Bible, not a comprehensive survey of those topics.

In treating the books of the Bible according to these three simple headings we hope to please a greater number of readers than those we vex. We also hope to have given our Introduction some distinction that sets it apart from others, that saves it from joining the ranks of the common.

Our Approach to Writing This Book and a Framework for Using It

Having distanced ourselves from the norm of privileging reports of historical criticism's results over rehearsing the biblical text and its theological implications, we hasten to reiterate that we have not ignored the fruits of critical scholarship, and to point out that they do not appear only in the "Critical Issues" section of each chapter; we have integrated the fruits of critical scholarship into the walks through the biblical books and the discussions of theological themes. In the following paragraphs we explain how we did that, and in doing so we provide readers with a framework for appreciating more fully the contents of this book.

Biblical scholarship's many critical methods — most of which we introduce you to in the course of this Introduction — have yielded results that can appear daunting in their complexity to those who are not professional scholars, who just want to understand the Bible better. The good news, though, is that it is possible to reduce most of that complexity to two basic angles of vision from which to make sense of the Bible, those of its "implied authors" and "implied readers."

In general, biblical scholarship has been concerned to determine what authors intended in writing the texts that have come down to us, as well as to establish the meaning that their audiences derived from receiving those texts. To be sure, there are many other issues that concern scholarship: when and where a text was written, what editorial processes it underwent, what earlier sources it incorporates, and so on; but the answers to virtually all of these questions stand in service of elucidating the texts' authors and audiences. As a consequence, whenever one speaks straightforwardly of a biblical text's author or its recipients, one is synthesizing much of the complex evidence produced by critical scholarship. Likewise, inasmuch as our walks through the books of the Bible, surveys of critical issues, and discussions of theological themes entail in large part

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talk about the Bible's authors and recipients, we pass on to our readers the results of modern historical criticism in the simplest form possible.

That said, it is also important to be clear about what we mean when we write in the pages that follow about texts' authors and earliest readers. In reading the Introduction it will quickly become apparent that the authors and audiences we speak of are only approximations of the actual authors and earliest recipients of the biblical texts. Indeed, we cannot speak of named authors for Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or even Deuteronomy (where Moses might be a good candidate, but for the fact that the book narrates his death in ch. 34!). Nor is it possible to make anything of the much later attributions of the Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And although we know Paul's name, the tensions between the little he reveals of himself in his letters and the accounts of him in Acts confuse critics as much as they enlighten them. Clearly, then, to reconstruct the authors of any of these texts in any substantial way requires primary reliance on the texts they produced. We must "imply" the authors from the texts they wrote.

Just so, although we can know something of Paul's audiences in Corinth, Rome, Philippi, Galatia, and so forth from archaeological and historical sources, we have to rely mostly on the clues left in Paul's letters to grasp his target audiences' concerns and interests. This is all the more true with respect to texts where we are altogether uncertain as to who were their intended addressees (the Gospels, the books of the Torah, the prophetic books, etc.). Just as we must imply authors from texts, we have to imply the authors' target audiences from the books they wrote. For example, when we read First and Second Kings we imagine an author who was a historian, a collector and redactor of tales and traditions, but one who had a clear agenda in retelling the past (e.g., to suggest that the failure of Israel and Judah resulted from faithlessness vis-à-vis their God). Likewise, we can infer that his audience may have wondered about the question his history answers, why God allowed the chosen people to fail utterly as nation-states. When we read the Gospel of John we construct an implied author who is meditative in the telling of Jesus' story, who reflects upon events, and we infer an audience able to appreciate the text's subtle dependence on larger intellectual and religious traditions in this account of Jesus (e.g., "proto-Gnosticism"). When we read the Gospel of Matthew we imply an author who wants to link Jesus closely to the major traditions of Judaism, and we imagine an audience that knew those traditions and would somehow appreciate that Jesus could be tied so closely to them. And so on goes the story of the Bible from this perspective.

Examples of Implied Readers from Proverbs 1-9 and 1 Corinthians

The books of the Bible come in widely varying genres. Does this approach work well for all of them? Examples from such different genres as Proverbs in the Old Testament and Paul's letters in the New Testament help us here.

After introductory verses that attribute the proverbs to Solomon and describe their purpose as service to the wise and the simple in living their lives, a speaker announces, "Hear, my child, your father's instruction and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head and pendants for your neck" (Prov 1:8-9). The speaker implies that his readers are youth requiring instruction, and the masculine gender of the word for "my child" makes it plain they are sons. Moreover, the speaker indicates that heeding the instruction that follows will bring honor and recognition to his readers. Reading the rest of Proverbs 1-9 lets us understand that the speaker is also fearful that sons will *not* listen to their parents, but to the alluring voices of women who tempt them to go a different way. But of course, we see this temptation from the perspective of the implied author of the text who understands himself to be in a competition for the souls of the young!

Paul's letters also give some good examples of "implied readers" in non-narrative texts. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul makes this appeal to the readers: "Now, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor 1:10). Paul implies that his readers are having disputes among themselves. What are these disputes? By reading the letter we can build up a mental picture of the disputes and concerns among the readers. We also see the picture of the dispute solely from Paul's perspective. The actual readers of the first century could have understood the dispute differently (and probably did).

We share this framework for understanding the Bible with our readers at the start not only because it shaped how *we* synthesize and present the results of critical scholarship. We do so because we think it is also a convenient framework for *you* as a reader to make sense of the Bible and of the Introduction you hold in your hands. It is easy to be put off by the uncertainties expressed by scholars regarding the date, provenance, authorship, audiences, and meaning of biblical texts. But if readers keep in mind the vagaries we have just described in attending to these matters and embrace the

Actual Reader



Text → Implied Reader



Implied Author

reality that we may only imply or infer authors and audiences, the uncertainties are not only more understandable, but the interpretive possibilities that come with such a freer approach to assessing the text are positively enriching to our contemporary theological imagination.

Putting it All Together, and a Word of Advice on Using the Introduction

Throughout this Introduction we put the approach explained here to use. Do not expect, however, repeated references to "implied authors" and "implied readers." Instead, readers of the Introduction can trust that especially our walks through the biblical text have been informed by this approach, and are reflections of its fruits. We hope this way of coming to know the Bible is as useful to our readers as it has been to us, and to our students.

To instructors and students we offer this additional encouragement. We realize the size of this book can be daunting. However, we hope users — especially students taking direction from their instructors! — will feel free to use only parts of the book as they wish. One option for reducing the amount of time spent reading the Introduction for the sake of increasing time spent with the Bible itself is to omit for some or all books one or more of the three parts devoted to each. Occasionally the walk-through section will be unnecessary, at other times the critical issues section can be ignored, in other instances the discussions of theological themes can be overlooked, and in some cases two sections can be omitted. Another way to reduce the burden of the book, of course, is not to treat in a single- or two-semester course on the Old and New Testaments every book of the Bible. Another way to make the Introduction less daunting lies in recognizing that readers can start anywhere their reading of it and do fairly well; cross-references abound, and most chapters stand alone well in any case.

A Note about Order of Presentation

Note that, for reasons that will soon become apparent, the books of the Old Testament are presented in their canonical order, rather than by genre or date of composition. By contrast, the New Testament books are generally treated according to genre, and within the genres, according to our best guess regarding their order of composition or the logic of their theological relationships.

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- 1 Cut out the same story from two different newspapers. Compare the two articles and try to discern the sources that they used. Can you identify the viewpoint of each writer as well as what had been omitted from each article? What sort of authors and readers do the two articles imply?
- 2 Examine the accounts of creation in Genesis 1–2. Identify what is similar and what is different. How do the viewpoints of the two accounts differ, and what do they suggest about implied authors and readers?