MATTHEW MULLINS

ENJOYING *the* BIBLE

LITERARY APPROACHES TO LOVING THE SCRIPTURES

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Preface

Throughout the year and a half or so in which I worked on this book in earnest, friends, colleagues, and students who knew I was writing about the Bible and poetry would frequently ask me a question that went something like this: "So, how's the Psalms book coming?" The first few times, I tried to explain that it wasn't really a book about the Psalms but a book about how the Psalms remind us that understanding the Bible requires more than one kind of reading. Eventually, I gave up on reframing the question and would simply offer an update on my progress. I begin with this anecdote to dispel any notion readers may have that this is a book about the Psalms. While I will spend a good bit of time referencing and analyzing various psalms, my interest in poetry here is not merely an interest in the actual poems found in the Bible. In short, this book is about the pleasure of understanding. By that I mean two things. First, I mean that understanding what we read can be pleasurable. But second, I mean that, sometimes, you must take pleasure in something *in order to understand it*.

I said that I worked on the book in earnest for about a year and a half, but I've been writing it in my head, in my class lectures, and in my conversations with students and colleagues for at least half a dozen years. I teach at a confessional liberal arts college housed at a Southern Baptist seminary. Many of my students have been reading, studying, even teaching the Bible from a young age. They have listened to countless sermons and devotions. Most can probably recite the

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names of the books of the Bible in canonical order and can quote many individual verses from memory. My students, in other words, are not typically novice Bible readers. And yet, when they show up in my survey of American literature and pick up their first poems by Anne Bradstreet or Phillis Wheatley, I hear the same protestations year after year:

> Why doesn't the author just come right out and say what she means?
>
> What's she *really* trying to say?
>
> It seems like she's making it difficult to understand on purpose.
>
> If *that's* what the poem's about, then why isn't that idea in the title?
>
> Okay, okay, but what's the point?

My students, like most people, expect poetry to function like explanatory prose, perhaps because both take the form of printed words on paper. The problem is that poetry is not usually trying to explain an idea. It has a different purpose, which is why the writer chose to write a poem rather than a sermon, speech, or research essay.

The longer I've taught poetry in this Christian context, the more I've become aware of how rare it is to have a student who truly enjoys poems, and rarer still that I encounter a student who knows how to read them well. And then one day it dawned on me that if most of my students, self-proclaimed lovers of the Bible, do not know what to do with poems, then it would follow that most of them would not know what to do with a significant portion of the Scriptures. And yet, they did not seem to struggle with the Bible in the same way they struggled with the poetry in my literature classes. To me, this was dissonant, or, as I more likely thought of it, weird. If you had no problem reading John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" but couldn't feel the vulnerability in Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book," it was evident to me that you were equipped to read the sermon but not the poem. If that was the case, then why wouldn't you experience the same disconnect when going from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians to David's psalms of lament? There were two possible answers: either students were struggling to apply principles

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of reading biblical poetry to nonbiblical poems, or they were not reading the poetry of the Bible as poetry. For a number of reasons, I concluded the second was the more likely answer.

When reading the Bible, my students approached everything in the book as if it were explanatory prose. They would ask the same questions of Psalm 23 as they would of Ephesians 1. They would look for the main idea and try to draw an application for their own lives out of that main idea. Of course, they didn't come up with this approach or with this idea of what the Bible is on their own. They were taught this way of reading implicitly and explicitly over the course of their lives. I slowly began to realize just how thoroughly most Christians thought of the Bible itself as an instruction manual and of reading it as a process of looking for instruction or information. This revelation was personal as well. I recognized a deep divide in my own reading life between the works of literature I spend so much time with and the Bible. The problem with this dissonance is that the Bible is not only an instruction manual. It is so much more. Thus, to read it always for information is to miss out on the other forms of meaning it has for us, most especially the kind of relationship with God it seeks to foster.

The basic argument of this book is that much of the Bible is written to be enjoyed. The implication is that if reading the Bible does not enact pleasure in you, then you may not understand what you have read. By "understand" here I don't mean that you simply realize you *should* be comforted as a result of reading Psalm 23. I mean that the act of reading Psalm 23 should literally make you feel comforted. The Bible is our most direct access to God's words—it was written not only to convey information about him but also to provide a way for us to commune with him, to meet him in his Word. But in a world that largely separates information from enjoyment, we've come to experience the Bible primarily as a textbook or handbook, missing out on many of its more pleasurable aspects. The result is that we don't always love it like we could, or through it love God as we should.

Therefore, this book has two purposes. First, it seeks to change the way we think about the Bible itself as a text, to expand our sense of it from instruction manual to work of literary art. Second, it attempts to teach us how to read the Bible as a work of literary

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art. These purposes presuppose a radical assumption: that understanding what we read is not merely an intellectual exercise, and so we need more than our brains to understand the Bible. Because of their appeal to our emotions and imaginations, works of literature offer excellent models of texts that require a more comprehensive mode of reading. So the argument and purposes of the book come together in its method, which is to teach us how to think about and read literature in an effort to revolutionize our reading of the Bible. In other words, if you can learn how to enjoy a poem by Robert Frost, you're more likely to enjoy the Scriptures. And my prayer is that if you can learn to enjoy the Scriptures, then you will come to love them like you love other things: good food, your favorite film, a binge-worthy show. Just imagine if you delighted in the Bible like you delight in those things . . .

A quick note about the literary examples you'll find throughout the book: Because I am a professor of American literature, most of the poems we'll practice reading come from the American literary tradition. I was also trying to keep the cost of permissions down, and so nearly all the poems are old enough to be in the public domain. Ultimately, I think this works out well, because these poems will likely not be as far removed in time and culture as the Bible from many of my readers, but there will still be some distance, so they offer a kind of half step in terms of familiarity. In other words, we will practice reading literature via texts that are somewhat alien to us as we step toward reading the Bible, a text far removed from us in time and culture. My hope is that there will be an added benefit of possibly encountering some poets and poems you may not be familiar with.

A word about language: I am not a Bible scholar. When I talk about the Bible and its form, I am (almost) always talking about an English translation of the Bible. (I use the NIV translation throughout, unless otherwise noted, and I sometimes reference scholars who are working with the original languages.) The act of translating from one language to another is always also an act of interpretation. I don't mention this to suggest that those of us able to read the Bible only in languages other than Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek are not *really* reading it. But I do want to call attention to the mediated nature of our reading. We are relying on the linguistic, historical, literary, and

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philosophical expertise *and* wisdom of the translators. If God were to speak to me in Hebrew, I would not understand. I don't speak Hebrew. I am thankful that the Bible has been translated into my language so that I can meet God in his Word, but I also acknowledge that the elements of form that are so integral to understanding a work of literature are unavoidably different in English than in Hebrew. On some level, a philologist could help us think through the complexities of translation, but on another level, there will always remain something of a mystery in this phenomenon. For the sake of this book, I hope you will be able to learn from the principles examined, though I will be talking about the Bible as I know it in English.

I pray that this book will help you come to love the Scriptures like you love your favorite songs. In that spirit, and inspired by James K. A. Smith, I want to close these prefatory remarks by sharing an abridged playlist of the music that was running in the background in my office as I wrote, on the couch as I read, in the kitchen as I cleaned up (and occasionally cooked), and in the backyard as I weeded the garden and played with my kids throughout the time I worked on this book:

Gregory Alan Isakov, "The Stable Song"
Gillian Welch, "Look at Miss Ohio"
Aretha Franklin, "Ain't No Way"
Pedro the Lion, "Yellow Bike"
Josh Garrels, "At the Table"
Al Green, "Love and Happiness"
Sho Baraka, "Love, 1959"
Willie Nelson, "Hello Walls"
Iron & Wine, "Call It Dreaming"
Otis Redding, "That's How Strong My Love Is"
The Avett Brothers, "No Hard Feelings"
Jason Isbell, "If It Takes a Lifetime"
CHVRCHES, "Get Out"
Bon Iver, "8(circle)"

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Jackie Hill Perry, "Better"
Daniel Norgren, "My Rock Is Crumbling"
Kacey Musgraves, "Happy & Sad"
Josh Ritter, "When Will I Be Changed"
TW Walsh, "Fundamental Ground"
Mandolin Orange, "Wildfire"

An early working title of this project was *You Can't Understand the Bible If You Don't Love Literature*. May this book be a joyous experience in cultivating that love and understanding.

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Introduction

The Hatred of Poetry and Why It Matters

When was the last time you visited your local bookstore or logged in online and bought a book of poetry? When was the last time you read a poem, whether because you wanted to or because you had to? Can you name a single poet you didn't learn about in school? Regardless of where you live or where you are from, if you are anything like 93.3 percent of Americans, then the respective answers to these questions may very well be these: Never, I can't recall, and No. The "Survey on Public Participation in the Arts" found that only 6.7 percent of American adults had read poetry at least once in the past twelve months. When Christopher Ingraham reported on this statistic for the *Washington Post* in 2015, he noted that "poetry is less popular than jazz. It's less popular than dance, and only about half as popular as knitting. The only major arts category with a narrower audience than poetry is opera."[1] But even those who fall within the 6.7 percent seem to have a contentious relationship with poetry. The American poet Marianne Moore wrote a famous poem about poetry that begins with the line "I, too, dislike it."[2] Robert Alter, a well-known scholar,

1. Christopher Ingraham, "Poetry Is Going Extinct, Government Data Show," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/24/poetry-is-going-extinct-government-data-show/.

2. Marianne Moore, "Poetry," in *Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 36.

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wrote a book about biblical poetry hoping it "might speak to people who love poetry" but lamenting that "biblical scholars, alas, rarely fall into that category."[3] It seems just about everyone hates poetry, even those who write it and study it for a living.

This hatred is not a recent phenomenon. The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote a short book called *Poetics* in which he defended poetry against the attacks of his teacher, Plato. Plato, perhaps the most significant figure in Western philosophy, famously condemned the poets of Athens in his book *Republic*.[4] In those days, the primary poetic form was tragedy, plays written in verse. He argued that the poets' complicated human characters and flawed gods set dangerous examples for the people. So in his theory of the ideal republic, Plato banned the poets and only allowed poetry to be written by philosophers who would promote his political agenda. Aristotle countered that the purpose of poetry is not to offer perfect models for us to emulate, nor is it to depict horrible models for us to avoid. Rather, he says the best kind of character is "the person intermediate between these," someone to whom most people can relate.[5] After all, most people are not unbelievably noble or outrageously evil. If we can recognize ourselves in a character, Aristotle reasons, then we are more likely to learn the lessons that character learns. Today, tragedy has been usurped by the lyric as the most prevalent poetic form, but the hatred of poetry persists. Just like in the days of Plato, we have our own modern-day Aristotles who defend poetry against hatred and indifference. These defenses can help us better understand why we hate poetry and why that hatred matters.

Why We Hate Poetry

In his short book *The Hatred of Poetry*, poet and novelist Ben Lerner argues that we hate poetry because it inevitably fails to accomplish

3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), x.

4. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1015–26.

5. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin, 1996), 21.

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the one thing it's supposed to do: make the ineffable, well, effable. Poetry is supposed to express the universal feelings that we just can't quite put into words. But, by definition, anything that is ineffable cannot be put into words, and so poetry always leaves us a little (or a lot) disappointed when it fails to fully express those inexpressible feelings. To make matters worse, this disappointment is personal, because, as Lerner observes, we nearly all start out as poets. We write poetry as children and are told by our teachers that we are poets and don't even know it. When we encounter poems as adults, then, we are doubly let down by their inability to do the impossible and by their reminder that we are all failed poets.[6] Add to that the suspicion of poetry dating back to Plato. Add to *that* the modern skepticism toward any work of art that might claim to speak for a universal "we" in the face of humans' diverse experiences. Now you've got quite the obstacle course to traverse if you plan to love poetry. Lerner helps us see that we hate poetry because it inevitably disappoints us.

We also hate poetry because most of us have been trained to read for information, and if that's how you approach a poem, then you will likely find that it's hard to read. I would venture that most of us don't know what poems are for. If you're looking for information when reading a poem, you will probably get frustrated and find yourself asking questions like, What is the point? or What's the author *really* trying to say? The poem itself usually tries to tell us it's doing something other than providing information by the way it's arranged on the page. All that white space should tell us that what we're reading is different from other texts that are crammed margin-to-margin or broken up by bullet points or numbers. Have you ever wondered why some people choose to write poems instead of essays, plays, novels, or reports? Do you ever stop to consider, for instance, why the apostle Paul writes a poem into a letter or breaks out into a doxology? What is it about whatever he's saying at that moment that seems to require him to change the form and style of his writing? The poet Matthew Zapruder argues that our failure to wrestle with such questions contributes to our hatred of poetry: "It

6. Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016).

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seems that our inability to grasp why we are reading poetry, for reasons fundamentally different from why we read all other forms of writing, is what makes poetry hard to understand."[7] Poetry is different from other forms of writing. While poems may very well inform us, they do not appeal primarily to our heads but to our hearts. Perhaps we hate poetry because we're trying to read it just like we read other kinds of writing that are designed to accomplish very different goals.

What's important about the historical hatred of poetry is not simply that we learn to overcome this hatred but that we understand it and what it says about us as humans. In his collection of short essays, *The Book of Delights*, poet Ross Gay recalls reading a review of Lerner's *The Hatred of Poetry* by the eminent reviewer Adam Kirsch that seemed prototypical of an entire genre of poetry defenses. Gay goes on to tally the evidence for the persistence and liveliness of poetry, offering a contrary point of view:

> I live in a Midwestern college town where once a month the line into the poetry slam at a bar actually wraps around the block and inside all variety of people share their poems to an audience of a couple hundred. And a few weeks back I took a cab to Indy and my driver told me that she reads her poems at various open mics two or three times a week. And last week, also in my town, the Poet Laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera, drew an audience of about six hundred people. Not to mention, pretty much every wedding and funeral I've ever been to has included a poem. *Requires one*.[8]

Gay demonstrates that poetry is still a vital part of culture, but this doesn't necessarily dispense with the general sense of apprehension most people feel toward the form.

What's more interesting is how we can feel this reluctance and yet still be drawn to the form in venues ranging from the nightclub to the funeral service. It's that paradoxical thing Marianne Moore describes just after she confesses her hatred for poetry:

7. Matthew Zapruder, *Why Poetry* (New York: Ecco, 2017), xiv.

8. Ross Gay, *The Book of Delights: Essays* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2019), 52–53.

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> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
> discovers that there is in
> it after all, a place for the genuine.[9]

We struggle with poetry, and yet it seems capable of embodying our feelings and thoughts in an authentic way. But what does this love/hate for poetry have to do with understanding the Bible?

So What If We Hate Poetry?

The hatred of poetry poses a unique difficulty for Christians not only because roughly one-third of the Bible is made up of poems but also because it exposes a serious problem with how we read the Bible and understand its purpose. In other words, we have both a reading problem and a hermeneutics problem. *Hermeneutics* is the technical term for the theory of interpretation. So when I say we have a reading problem and a hermeneutics problem, what I mean is that we have problems of both practice (how we read) and theory (how we understand what we are doing when we read). These two elements, practice and theory, are inseparable, but let's address the problem of theory first. The hatred of poetry is a symptom of what I would call a hermeneutics of information. Most Christians come to the Bible with the expectation that it should teach us something practical about how to live our lives as Christians. Our theory of interpretation is to try to understand the main idea in whatever text we are reading and then figure out how to apply that main idea to our own lives, or to our family, or to our church, and so on. There is nothing wrong with this hermeneutic. The problem arises when this approach governs how we read everything. To put it another way, when we operate under the implicit assumption that to understand *every* text is to grasp its ideas and apply them, then we have allowed the hermeneutics of information to become a one-size-fits-all approach that shapes the way we read everything, even texts whose purpose is not only to inform our heads but also to move our hearts. No wonder we hate poems; they're not primarily intended to convey information but to evoke emotion!

9. Moore, "Poetry," 36.

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Unfortunately, in the Western world, we live in an age and a culture that tends to prioritize the head over the heart when it comes to reading and learning. Many of us live our daily lives as if we are what philosopher and theologian James K. A. Smith calls "thinking things." We imagine our minds to be "'mission control' of the human person." Smith argues that such a view "reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick" and wonders why we constantly experience gaps between what we know and what we do if we really are thinking things.[10] If we are thinking things, then why can't we think our way out of our habits, addictions, and routines? You can tell that you have a view of humans as thinking things if you try to change your actions with information. Have you ever tried to make or break a habit by reading, listening to a sermon or lecture, or talking about it? Smith would ask, "Has all of your new knowledge and information and thinking liberated you from those habits?"[11] After all, aren't there all kinds of things you know are right but don't do, and all kinds of things you know are wrong but do anyway? Even the apostle Paul observed this in his own life: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Rom. 7:15). Knowledge doesn't necessarily translate into action; the head doesn't always direct the heart. And yet we live our lives—and, I would add, we read the Bible—as if this were the case, as if all we need is a little more information in order to live the Christian life more fully and joyfully.

Smith describes what I am calling a hermeneutics of information as reading with "Cartesian eyes."[12] The term "Cartesian" comes from the name of René Descartes, a French philosopher of the Enlightenment most famous for his claim, "I think, therefore I am." Or, we might say, "I know I exist because I can think; my existence is based on my thinking." We inherit the view of ourselves as "thinking things," in part, from Descartes. To read with Cartesian eyes is to read with the implicit belief that what's important about whatever you're reading is how it seeks to inform you, meaning how it seeks to give you facts or information. To read with Cartesian eyes is to read looking,

10. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 3.

11. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 6.

12. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 6.

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first and foremost, for information. To read with Cartesian eyes is to read with your head, perhaps even to the exclusion of your heart. But what if the text you're reading was designed to appeal to your heart? What if it intends for your affections to be moved first and for your mind to follow? What if understanding a text means feeling the emotions it wants to evoke? What if to "get it" means that you must delight in what you're reading? What if to understand some texts you must love them? Now we can begin to see a serious problem with a hermeneutics of information. If you read a poem merely to understand what it's about and if you miss out on how it intends for you to *feel*, then you're actually not fully understanding the poem. When we read with Cartesian eyes, we risk misunderstanding some texts dramatically—namely, those that are not primarily intended to convey facts, ideas, and information.

Now that we can see the problems in this theory of reading, let's turn to the practice of reading and how we imagine the Bible itself as a text. When we read with Cartesian eyes, the Bible becomes a mere instruction manual. The Bible certainly offers plenty of instruction, and instruction manuals are great. Many people save them for years so that they have a reference when something breaks on their car, vacuum cleaner, or refrigerator. But how often do you break these manuals out? Who truly *loves* instruction manuals? Who has a favorite instruction manual? Who curls up in bed at night with an instruction manual? They are useful, sure. We appreciate them. We may even enjoy them to the extent that they help us assemble or fix something, but do you long to read them like you long to read your favorite mystery, or like you can't wait to binge-watch the new season of your favorite show, or like you anticipate the next installment in your favorite film series? More to the point, do you love the Bible like you love those things? If not, it may very well be that your hermeneutics causes you to approach the Bible as an instruction manual rather than as a captivating narrative, a love letter, or your go-to song when you're sad or happy. At the same time, your reading practice shapes your hermeneutics. When you sit down to learn your daily lesson from the Scriptures, you are cultivating that hermeneutics of information. Your theory and practice are locked in a loop, reinforcing one another and crowding out other ways of reading.

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To sum up the problems of theory and practice, a hermeneutics of information can cause us to misunderstand texts that are not well suited to our Cartesian eyes, and it can prevent us from loving the Bible by allowing us to imagine it only as an instruction manual. Just as importantly, the practice of reading for information—likely something we don't think about consciously—has shaped our hermeneutics of information. We weren't born with Cartesian eyes; we developed them over years of learning, listening, and reading. Like any other habitual practice, such routines are hard to recognize and even harder to change.

What Do We Do?

We need new reading practices and a more comprehensive hermeneutics. It's tempting to think about retraining our Cartesian eyes as a linear process. Surely, you might think, we need to change our minds first, and then we will read better. But as Smith has helped us see, our practices don't always follow our theories. In reality, the process is both recursive and progressive. Changing your concept of understanding is like taking two steps forward and one step back. You regularly go back to where you just were, but in the grand scheme of things you keep moving ahead. Developing a better hermeneutics and better reading practices is like a line that constantly circles back on itself but continues to move forward. While the question of whether theory or practice comes first is a chicken-egg conundrum, it helps to recognize the power of our hermeneutics of information and to get an idea of the more comprehensive hermeneutics we're trying to develop. This book aims to offer new practices designed to help you read for more than information. In the process, I also hope to expand our hermeneutics of information to something more like what Alan Jacobs calls a "hermeneutics of love."[13]

A hermeneutics of love is based not on a quest for the main idea in the text but on the greatest commandments: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your

13. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (New York: Westview, 2001).

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neighbor as yourself. The purpose of our reading, and our understanding of what we read, should be filtered through the love of God and neighbor. Why should we make these commandments, rather than a search for information, the foundation for our theory of reading? According to Jacobs, such a theory is based on Jesus's astounding remark in Matthew 22 that "all the Law and the Prophets" depend on the love of God and neighbor. Jacobs notes the magnitude of this assertion by pointing out that our reading of the Scriptures presupposes this "law of love."[14] Building on Christ's injunction, he reminds us of Augustine's claim that "anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them."[15] If your reading of the Bible does not result in greater love of God and neighbor, then you do not *understand* what you have read. We must approach the Bible with an attitude of love for God and neighbor, and the result of our reading should be evident in our love of God and neighbor. In other words, to understand what you read is to love better, and to love better is to understand what you read.

This hermeneutics of love is well suited to the Bible. Because so much of the Scripture is, itself, written to captivate, delight, entice, comfort, confound, shock, and even sicken, if we do not love to read it for these attributes, then we do not truly understand it. Or, I might say that if you don't experience delight, comfort, shock, and so on when reading a passage intended to produce those emotions in you, then you don't fully comprehend the passage. The point is not to exchange head for heart, intellect for emotion. The point is to develop a theory and practice of reading that account for both, even blurring the lines between them. There are some things you cannot understand without genuine experience and feeling. For instance, if I write out a clear and concise explanation of how to set up a tent and you are able to do it, then we know you understand what I wrote. Conversely, just because I write a powerful account of a beautiful or

14. Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 9–10.

15. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

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tragic moment in my life, that does not necessarily ensure that you will be able to grasp the height or depth of the experience. Someone can explain what it's like to love a child or lose a parent, but these are phenomena that must be experienced in order to be understood. The Bible communicates the full range of meanings, from the instructional to the experiential. We need a theory and practice of reading that will work for the full spectrum. Perhaps paradoxically, we need a kind of knowledge that only comes from love. This may all seem very abstract. Perhaps we should just ask: How can we develop this kind of hermeneutics, a theory and practice of reading that will help us understand and love better?

Loving Poetry to Love the Bible

This is where the hatred of poetry comes in. Poetry is the ideal form for retraining Cartesian eyes. If you can learn to love poetry, then you can come to understand the Bible much better, because to read poetry well requires us to develop that emotional/experiential end of the reading spectrum. There's also the fact that one-third of the Bible is made up of poetry, so if you learn to love poetry, then you are also learning to love a significant portion of the Bible. But it's really the broader hermeneutic development we're after in this book. The goal is to revolutionize your theory of understanding the Bible so that you can experience its full range of significance and learn to love it more.

There are many great books that can teach you a lot about the literature of the Bible in general and biblical poetry in particular. These books fall into three major categories: scholarly, practical, and devotional. The scholarly books tend to focus on histories and technicalities of form, cultural context, linguistic evolution, and the history of biblical scholarship itself.[16] The authors of these books work with the original languages and have masterful command of the historical

16. Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008; first published 1985 by Indiana University Press [Bloomington]); F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

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worlds in which the poetry of the Bible was written. They engage a long tradition of scholarship and are usually in conversation with one another. That's a scholar's job, after all: to create new knowledge about important things. To understand that new knowledge typically requires an impressive knowledge base cultivated over years of study among experts in the field. Needless to say, these books are often very technical and difficult for nonspecialists to understand.

The practical books have a different purpose. Writers like Robert Alter, Tremper Longman III, and Leland Ryken set out to make the knowledge developed in the work of the scholars more accessible to nonspecialists.[17] Many figures in this category (including those mentioned above) are, themselves, scholars in various fields, but their primary goal is to reach a broader audience with the insights hard-won by scholars. If you have no pretensions to tracing Hebrew usage, unpacking the evolution of parallelism, or parsing the lexical and semantic aspects of ancient poems but want to get a feel for why an image is repeated, what parallelism is, or how grammar affects interpretation, then these books are for you.

The devotional books on biblical poetry often attend to elements of form and language gleaned from the scholarly and practical studies, but their primary purpose is to lead readers through the poetry of the Bible as a means of spiritual encounter. Michael Travers's *Encountering God in the Psalms* is an excellent book in a tradition that also includes such important figures as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and C. S. Lewis.[18] While these books may very well teach you some important things about what poetry is and how it works, they are more focused on the devotional aspects of reading biblical poetry.

This book draws on works from all three categories but belongs most squarely alongside the practical books on biblical poetry. However, it has a very different purpose from most of the practical books

17. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*; Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

18. Michael E. Travers, *Encountering God in the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1974); C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2017).

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and shares with the devotional books an attention to the heart. The practical books tend to focus on making the work of biblical scholars accessible to nonscholars, and that work is usually focused on the form, content, and context of the biblical poems themselves. I am not a biblical scholar. I am a literary critic who is interested in hermeneutics. So whereas most of the practical books are primarily invested in teaching us about the form, content, and context of the Bible, I want to turn our attention to our own perspectives and how those perspectives shape our reading. In other words, I want us to think about how the eyes we bring to the Bible cause us to see it in certain ways to the exclusion of others. To keep the optical metaphors in this chapter going, I don't merely want us to try on a different set of glasses; I want us first to try to look at the glasses we are already wearing. This is very difficult to do, but I fear that without a better sense of the history, development, and implications of reading with Cartesian eyes, we may live our entire lives without ever truly loving the Scriptures. I want to wrap up this introduction with a short diagnostic and what I hope will be a helpful illustration of all that we've discussed so far.

Do You Have Cartesian Eyes?

At this point you may already suspect that you've been reading with Cartesian eyes. But let's try to make these abstract ideas more concrete so that we can get a stronger sense of what that means and begin to imagine how it might change. We'll examine Psalm 119:105 as a test case for how we read and what we think it means to understand what we read. How can you tell if you have an instruction-manual view of the Bible? One way to answer this question is to consider what kinds of expectations you bring to the Scriptures. Take a moment to reflect on the questions you ask of the Bible. Perhaps they sound something like these:

What does it mean?
What is the author trying to say?
What is it about?

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What is the main idea?
Who is the author?
When was it written?
What does it mean for my life?

If you only ask some versions of these questions, then, like most of us, you probably lean toward an instruction-manual view of the Bible. We tend to focus on ideas and arguments because most of what we read is written to communicate an idea or persuade us of an argument. When I sit down to read an email at work or a book about gardening, I am reading to learn, to become better informed. But what if the kind of training a passage has to offer is not merely intellectual? What if a passage, like Psalm 119:105, is intended to train or correct our hearts?

Remember: the head and the heart are not mutually exclusive. After all, Psalm 119:105 certainly communicates an important idea:

> Your word is a lamp for my feet,
> a light on my path.

When we read it with Cartesian eyes, we get a simple but important message: we should turn to God's Word when we cannot see where we are going. (Set aside for a moment the fact that the psalmist represents this message using poetic forms such as metaphor, ellipsis, and repetition, rather than simply saying what I said in my paraphrase.) I can understand the main idea of these lines without much work: lamps light up darkness and allow me to see; God's Word is a lamp; if I am in a dark place in life and need to see, I can look to God's Word to light things up and allow me to see where I am or should be going. But if that's all that matters about the verse, then why doesn't the psalmist simply say, "Turn to God's Word for instruction when you don't know what to do"? Writing under the divine inspiration of God, the psalmist could very well have communicated this idea in any number of ways, and yet poetry was the chosen form. The psalmist chose to write a poem, not a proposition. Does that mean there is no claim in the verse? Of course not! Does it mean there's

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nothing there to instruct our minds? No! What it means is that understanding the verse requires us to know what makes a poem work and what poems are for.

Psalm 119:105 is not merely trying to teach you information; it is trying to evoke a longing for God's Word in you. If you're a Christian reading the psalm, you probably already know with your head that God's Word should be the default guide for your life. The question is, Is it? Do you treat God's Word this way? When you're in a tough spot, is your first thought, I really just want to read the Bible right now? If the answer is no, then the next question is, Why not? If you *know* that God's Word should be as essential to you as the air you breathe, or light in a dark place, why isn't it? Most likely, it's because you've been taught the Bible is something to be understood with your head, not loved with your heart, or that it is something that can be loved by being understood intellectually. In either case, head is imagined as separate from heart, and perhaps even as more important. If Psalm 119:105 does not evoke longing for God's Word in you, then you do not understand it. Let me say that another way: if you don't feel the longing, then you don't truly understand the verse.

But what would it look like to understand the verse in this way? This is where loving poetry becomes vital. The psalmist uses a metaphor in Psalm 119:105, calling God's Word a lamp and a light. Of course, God's Word is not a literal light or lamp. You don't flip it on with a switch or ignite it with a match! "Lamp" and "light" are metaphors. Metaphors use familiar, concrete things to make unfamiliar, abstract things feel more familiar and concrete. You've seen a light; you understand light is helpful in darkness. Great! Your head is in action. But what about your heart? What would it look like to broaden our understanding of the verse to include longing? You will have to allow the metaphor to jump-start your imagination and get your heart running alongside your head.

Try this: You don't know why exactly, but you sit up in bed in the middle of the night. It's very dark. Is it darker than usual? Why can't you see light from the streetlamp outside your window? Did something startle you awake? Did you hear a noise in your sleep? Is that just the refrigerator clicking on in the kitchen? Is it raining? You feel a little flush and your heartbeat is noticeable. You instinctively

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want to turn on the light. The longing is impulsive, even primal. Light would dispel your fear, make you feel safe, slow your heartbeat. Consider how the psalmist uses light in the metaphor, as something to illuminate his feet and light his path. Have you ever tried to walk down a path in total darkness? I am terrified to walk across my living room with the lights out for fear I might step on a Lego and lose my religion! Nothing will make you long for light like finding yourself in darkness. In such moments, you don't merely know you need light as a logical solution to a problem you're trying to solve. You are drawn to it. You love it. You long for it. The longing is instinctual. Psalm 119:105 is not only trying to persuade you that God's Word is illuminating. It is trying to stir up a longing for God's Word in you. That's part of why the psalmist chose this poetic form rather than just telling you to turn to God's Word. You are supposed to feel a desire, maybe even a desperate desire, for the Scriptures. If you don't feel the desire, it is safe to say that you do not fully understand the verse.

If you don't feel that desire, then, as we have already seen, it may be because you've been trained to read the Bible with Cartesian eyes, to think of it exclusively as an instruction manual. It may sound strange, but if this is the case for you, permit yourself to feel a sense of relief for just a moment. It's okay to feel the same kind of frustration reading Psalm 58 that you felt when a teacher asked you to read T. S. Eliot or Gwendolyn Brooks in school. At least you can now see the problem. You've likely grown up in a culture that values assertions, propositions, and arguments, and there's nothing wrong with those things in themselves. But we cannot be content with this partial understanding and lackluster love. We must cultivate a new hermeneutics and new reading practices that will help us learn to love the Scriptures. We must figure out how to read with our heads *and* our hearts.

Given the head/heart dynamic, a book might seem an odd choice for teaching us to love the Scriptures. After all, aren't books aimed primarily at the head, especially books like this that put forth an argument? That's a fair question. But what I hope will become apparent is that this book, although it is fundamentally an argument, has been crafted with your imagination in mind. As with the meditation on Psalm 119:105 above, I have tried to appeal to the imagination as

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much as possible in these chapters. I do not set out to change your mind in hopes that your feelings and actions might follow. Instead, I want to foster a kind of intellectual and emotional recognition of how we read the Bible, and I want to work through some practices that can help you become a different reader. It is my hope that if you read this book in good faith and adopt these practices, then, in time, you will look back on how you used to read the Bible and marvel at how much more you've come to love it, and, as a result, love God.

EXERCISE 1

Reflect and Pray for Longing

1. Read Psalm 119:105–12.
2. Write a list of specific things you've longed for or looked forward to recently. For instance,
   a. A visit from family or friends
   b. Publication of a new book by a favorite writer
   c. Release of a new album, movie, television show
   d. A vacation, trip, or event
3. Reflect on what drew you to these things. Why did you look forward to them? How would you describe your longing to a friend?
4. Pray Psalm 119:105 and ask God to give you a longing for his Word more powerful than that for any of these other things.

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