How to Read as a Spiritual Practice

Reading for the Love of God

Jessica Hooten Wilson

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BrazosPress
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Wilson, Jessica Hooten, author.
Title: Reading for the love of God : how to read as a spiritual practice / Jessica Hooten Wilson.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022037483 | ISBN 9781587435256 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493440535 (ebook) | ISBN 9781493440542 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life—Christianity. | Books and reading—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Contemplation.
Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .W55477 2023 | DDC 248.4—dc23/eng/20220912
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022037483

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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1

What Kind of Reader Are You?

Imagine you are resting in a cave on an unpopulated Greek island. The other islands in the distance appear nearly as blue as the sky above and the sea below, so that everything before your gaze blends together like an impressionist painting. While staring off into the reverie of blue, a figure of light the size of a skyscraper appears before you, and it seems as though the sun has descended to earth. The being appears as fierce as it is large. A voice rings in your ears: "Go!" It continues commanding you, "Take the little book that is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the earth."

Although you did not notice before, this lightning giant holds a small book in its mammoth hands. No one would be brave enough to approach this creature and take anything from it. In fear and trembling, you inch toward the light that the voice has called an angel. You find your voice and croak out the request, "Give me the little book."

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Fearing that sentence is surely your last, you do not dare open your eyes. Yet the angel speaks, uttering words even stranger than its form: "Take and eat it."

What do you do? Why and how would you eat a book? The command is followed by a warning: "It will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth." The moment reminds you of that time your dad said, "Try this. It's disgusting." But because this is an angel, with much more authority than your father, you do not protest as you did then. Shaking, you nod and take the book. Page by page, tearing the leaves off as if shredding chard, you chew up the book. Unlike an undressed salad, the book melts on your tongue, disintegrating into sugar, as the angel said it would. No sooner do you finish swallowing the final punctuation marks than your stomach begins to turn and writhe. As you fall to the ground, clutching at your stomach, you receive another command: "You must prophesy."

The above is my rewrite of Revelation 10:8–11. The Bible is weird. And lovely. And awe-inspiring. It is like no other book that has ever been written. It is the Book of books, the foundation of every story, and the lens through which Christians see all other books. If we were to read the Bible on its terms, we would become different people, converted by the practice. Christ's vision would become our vision. *Why* and *how* we read matters as much as *what* we read. If we are poor readers, an encounter with the Word will not do much to make us his people. Plenty of people have read the Bible without so much as an eye twitch toward faith. And too many Christians who read the Bible every day forget what love and justice and hope should look like in practice. When a religious teacher tested Jesus on the law, Jesus responded, "*How* do you read it?" (Luke 10:26). It is not enough to read the Bible; you must *eat* the book. You must delight in its honey. Suffer in your gut. And then prophesy. If you want to know how to eat the book, learn how to read—not only the Bible but other great books as well—as a *spiritual*

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practice. In reading other books, we practice reading the Bible; and in reading the Bible, we read other books by that lens.

Reading Quiz

What kind of reader are you? How do you read now? Let's walk through a quiz, similar to one you might take when trying to figure out your Enneagram or which Hogwarts house in Harry Potter you belong to.

1. What section of the bookstore are you most drawn to (assuming you still enter brick-and-mortar stores and don't just order online)?
   a. Memoir
   b. Self-help
   c. Religion
   d. Literature
   e. Other
2. When picking a book to read for fun, you do so most often by:
   a. Looking at Oprah's Book Club
   b. Listening to friends' recommendations
   c. Finding the book your group is decrying on social media so that you can read it quickly and write a scathing review
   d. Following a great books list like the Harvard Classics or John Senior's "Thousand Good Books"
   e. What's "read for fun"?
3. When thinking about what a book means after you read it, do you mull over:
   a. Your own feelings and thoughts?
   b. The author's intention?
   c. The pages of text?

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4. The greatest recommendation a book can receive is that it is:
    a. Thought-provoking and inspiring
    b. Original and new
    c. A page-turner
    d. Relatable and relevant
5. True or False: Books are only the expression of a writer's ideas; they carry no authority or greater significance.
6. With which opinion are you more sympathetic?
    a. "I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for?" (Franz Kafka)[1]
    b. I prefer books with instant uplift. I feel good after I read them, as though I can have hope in humanity. Books with a spiritual purpose.[2]
7. Reading is an activity best done:
    a. In silence and solitude
    b. Aurally in community
    c. Depends on the book
8. True or False: If you think a book is good, no one can tell you that you are wrong.
9. With which opinion do you agree?
    a. "A great deal of literature was made to be read lightly, for entertainment. If we do not read it, in a sense, 'for fun,' and with our feet on the fender, we are not using it as it was meant to be used." (C. S. Lewis)[3]
    b. "I cannot live without books, but fewer will suffice where amusement, and not use, is the only future object." (Thomas Jefferson)[4]
10. Consider the following brief descriptions of various types of readers. With which do you most identify?

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a. *The no-nonsense literalist:* This reader prefers that the author be a straight shooter. Rather than poetic phrases and metaphors, this reader wants the explanation on the surface. In the words of George Herbert, "How wide is all this long pretence! / There is in love a sweetness readie penn'd: copie out only that, and save expense."[5] When she picks up a book, she has a tendency to skip over the flowery language and get to the main point. If there are lines that don't make sense, this reader mentally crosses them out and moves on. If there are passages that she disagrees with, she'll put the book down and go on to the next book.

b. *The romantic adventurer:* Books are meant for escape. As J. R. R. Tolkien says, "Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?"[6] Escape is a virtue of a good book. This reader most closely identifies with Don Quixote or Catherine Morland from *Northanger Abbey*. If the book is not a page-turner, is it even worth reading? More than ideas or word choices or other small things, what matters is the plot. You want to know what happens.

c. *The liberator:* The world is full of lies, and we need books that tell the truth. Books give us power. We can know more than those who came before us, even if, as T. S. Eliot asserted, "they are that which we know."[7] If we can get the right books into the right hands, people will become better versions of themselves. The "direct pathway from slavery to freedom," in the words of Frederick Douglass, is knowledge.[8] "I conceive that a knowledge of books is the basis on which all other knowledge rests," George Washington said.[9] To that the liberator says, "Amen."

d. *The unfinalizable panoptes:* Because this person is in-process and on a quest, she is never satisfied with her

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> own way of seeing the world. She reads to see how others see the world—the living, the dead, those like her, those different from her, and maybe even how God sees it. In Greek, *pan* means "all" and *optes* means "eyes," so this reader desires all different ways of seeing to be drawn together. Each book, for this reader, is like meeting a new friend, opening another door, finding a new set of lenses. When she walks into a bookstore, she travels to every aisle, collecting epic poetry and new novels and buying books on the periodic table of elements, on the global economy, or on the Peloponnesian War.

There are no right answers to this quiz. Rather than provide an answer key, let me recommend that you continue reading this book. My hope is that these questions provoked you to consider the *ways* you read, and the assumptions you make about how to read, without being fully aware of them. We all bring baggage to our reading, for all of us learned how to read from others. Some of those reading lessons have been quite advantageous, while others may have caused blind spots.

The Profile of an American Reader: Thomas Jefferson

When I was in third grade, I wrote a short biography of Thomas Jefferson. The biography was arranged alphabetically as an acrostic poem, walking through the many roles and jobs that Jefferson had: A for archaeologist, for example, because Jefferson published the first American archaeology report. Jefferson was a man of many talents and many sins, but I am not interested here in digging into controversies regarding his character. What I want to do is examine his reading habits, especially the ways they compelled him to create the Jefferson Bible. If you are not familiar with this piece of Americana, the Jefferson Bible is the nickname given to the "handcrafted, cut-and-paste, compressed version

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of the Gospels edited by Jefferson with a sharp blade and glue; a book he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*."[10] He began the project in 1804, excising from the New Testament all but the philosophical claims of Jesus, and he finished it decades later, compelled by his former secretary, who assured him that others would make use of such a book.

As a humanist, Jefferson is an ideal specimen. Jefferson was a product more of the Enlightenment than of the church, more a scientist than a literary figure. In his pockets, he carried around little instruments—thermometers, a compass, a globe. He followed a strict daily routine, never sleeping in late and always filling each hour with an appropriate activity. He set stringent expectations on those around him to create similar to-do lists. When it came to his reading habits, he expected books to be useful to him. Jefferson was not one to waste time in leisure or to delve into a story *merely* for pleasure. Rather than read for delight, Jefferson ensured that he read "something moral" every night before turning in.[11] All reading was submitted to Jefferson's standards of use, relevance, and scientific truth.

For Jefferson, a book must prove its worth, and he was the judge. He applauded Shakespeare, for instance, for his plays' ethical value.[12] Jefferson writes, "Everything is useful which contributes to fix in the principles and practices of virtue. When any original act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity, and conceive an abhorrence of vice."[13] One can find such a stance admirable. If we read these sentences apart from any knowledge of the author's life or work, we can agree with much of it. We hope people will cling to what is good and hate what is evil and that they will act graciously rather than viciously after reading great books.

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But how does such a morally upstanding person pull apart the Bible and put it back together again according to his own tastes and preferences?

In his biography of the Jefferson Bible, Peter Manseau begins with the tale of Jefferson's archaeological exploits. To prove a hypothesis, Jefferson excavated burial mounds near his land to find out whether such mounds were the site of a battle or the cemetery of the Native Americans. Because Jefferson's contemporaries did not consider Native Americans to be civilized enough to bury their dead in the fashion of Western culture, they conjectured that the discovered bodies may be from a lost race that predated the local Native American tribes. After digging up bodies of infants and children and finding no arrowheads or signs of bullet wounds, Jefferson decided that the mound was the site for Native American burial.

In this story, how do we read Jefferson? Is he a scientist pursuing rightful inquiry and detailing the data, or is he an inconsiderate colonialist desecrating the remains of aboriginal people? Manseau places the episode before readers to have us weigh in our minds "what constitutes that which ought to be inviolable" and how these notions "may alter significantly from one generation to the next, to say nothing of the changes that occur across centuries."[14]

In other words, the practices of reading the Bible during the Enlightenment shaped Jefferson such that he could take a blade to its pages without doubting his faith. "He reordered the passages with little regard for the intention with which they were first composed, repurposing them rather according to his own intuition and sensibilities."[15] Jefferson was well versed in multiple languages, so he compiled his version of the Bible from a 1794 Greek-Latin edition, an 1802 French translation, and an 1804 English translation. According to his biographers, Jefferson started by drafting his own table of contents—a rubric, if you will, for what to include. As a guide, Jefferson drew on the

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1778 *A Harmony in Greek of the Gospels* to arrange his verses in chronological order. "Made up of sound-bites of scriptures separated, shuffled, and stitched back together in a way that seeks to supplant rather than serve their original meaning, the Jefferson Bible is less a book than a remix," Manseau observes.[16]

Lord, forgive me if I ever compose a Hooten Wilson Bible. We may find such an endeavor horrifying and arrogant. Yet we should pause and consider whether we have accidentally committed similar errors in the ways we read the Bible. Do we cut and paste verses around our house according to what suits us? On our clothes, our mugs, our cars? I love the sign in my house that quotes Zephaniah 3:17: "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." So why is it permissible for our habits of reading to allow us to convert the Bible into consumerist items for purchase but not to become, as Jefferson did to his Bible, a moral guidebook on our nightstand? I am not attempting to justify Jefferson's choices by saying that we may be just as mistaken. I am wondering whether we have inherited Jefferson's ways of reading more than we might realize. I do think we are more American in our way of reading the Bible than we are aligned with church tradition.

As a reader, Jefferson did not limit himself to reading the Bible. He advised one lawyer-in-training to read twelve hours each day, including multiple hours on science and at least a couple of hours in belles lettres before bed. However, Jefferson deemed contemporary novels worthless. In *Books and the Founding Fathers*, George Nash summarizes Jefferson's letter of 1818, in which he wrote a friend denouncing eighteenth-century novels as "a 'mass of trash'—'poison [that] infects the mind' and becomes 'a great obstacle to good education.' Fiction should have moral utility, he argued. 'Nothing of mere amusement,' he declared, 'should lumber a public library.'"[17] I have overheard so many Christians echo Jefferson's distaste for contemporary fiction—unless, of

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course, it's Christian fiction. However, what Jefferson calls "trash" we now consider classics: *Gulliver's Travels*, *Frankenstein*, *Pride and Prejudice*. A mind that sifts through the narrative of Jesus's life to find the valuable lessons will not easily sit and relish the story of a handmade monster or the drama over the marriages of five sisters.

A Christian Way of Reading

There may be an alternative to Jefferson's way of reading. In contrast to an Enlightenment predisposition, C. S. Lewis was a professor of medieval and renaissance literature. In his book on the subject, Lewis distinguishes between two ways of reading that move readers toward two alternate modes of being. He compares the different methods to two types of travelers. "One man may carry his Englishry abroad with him and bring it home unchanged," Lewis writes. Such a traveler goes abroad, for instance to Italy, and grumbles that the food is not as tasty as that of the local Italian chain back home. He seeks out strangers who share a British accent and visits only the sights where the tourists flock. The visitor decries the *albergo* for not being like a British hotel. Lewis notes, "He complains of the bad tea where he might have had excellent coffee." On the other hand, there is another sort of traveler who exemplifies "another sort of reading": "You can eat the local food and drink the local wines, you can share the foreign life, you can begin to see the foreign country as it looks, not to the tourist but to its inhabitants. You can come home modified, thinking and feeling as you did not think and feel before. So with the old literature."[18] The second traveler has been altered by the country he visited or the book he has read. Rather than fault the foreign country for not being like his home, the second traveler learns to see his home in light of what he learned in the foreign country. He comes home—or he closes the book—with a newly expanded vision.

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In 1979 George Steiner labeled these two modes *critic* versus *reader*. To be a critic is to stand over the text, as Jefferson positioned himself above the Bible. "The critical act is a function of the ego in a condition of the will" that makes the critic "*judge* and *master* of the text."[19] This standing *over* prevents the *under*standing necessary to be transfigured by the reading.[20] The reader should approach the book in the way a student draws near a teacher, with a willingness to learn, to receive, from the book. Through the process of standing beneath the text, the reader will be read by the book. And, thus, she will be changed.

Reading in this manner shapes our way of being in the world; it modifies our lenses and vision. While reading cannot induce virtue and cannot make us more Christian by osmosis, the practice of reading well can increase our ways of seeing as contemplatives and beholders, those with imaginations that align more fully with the eyes of Scripture. By practicing certain habits of reading texts, we become those who read even the world with clearer sight.

How to Read as a Christian

On Twitter, someone told me they would never read a book titled *How to Read as a Christian* (the placeholding title of this book). But there is a different way of reading for Christians than for others. For Christ "has subverted the whole order of the old imagination. . . . He illuminates it, and is a new level," as William Lynch professes.[21] We believe in the incarnation, which alters our experience not only of ourselves but of all creation. Everything is spirit and matter. We believe in creation, fall, redemption, restoration. Our God was crucified by his people. Surely all of those beliefs radically affect the way we exist in the world, including how we read. When Jesus asks a religious leader, "How do you read it?" he does not merely want to know *what* the person is reading. The Pharisees and other religious leaders

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studied the law. They knew the stories of God's faithfulness to his people, from Genesis to Maccabees. Yet, over and over again, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus feels compelled to ask rhetorically, "Have you not read . . . ?" Apparently, *how* these teachers were reading affected how they lived. It was not enough to possess the right books. Without faithful methods, right motivation, and practices that acknowledge literal and figurative senses of words, these readers were missing the heart of God's revelation.

While much has been written about proper methods of biblical interpretation, I take the question of how to read beyond reading Scripture—what Christians call the "Book of books"—to reading other books. Perhaps it is our digital culture, but we have forgotten our identity as word creatures. God creates the world by word: "Let there be light." And, with a word, God pronounces creation good. He converses with human beings in Genesis through words. He teaches the first human to name the other animals, connecting the stewarding role of human beings with their ability to verbalize. When God enters creation in the incarnation, John describes him as the Word that "became flesh" (John 1:14). From the prophets to the apostles, God reveals himself in words and instructs his people to "write this down" or "eat this book." Human beings are word creatures, and Christians especially should be bookish creatures.

The first time I attended an Anglican church, the most surprising part of the service was when they lifted the physical book of the Bible into the air and carried it down the aisle. People turned and bowed their heads as it moved past them. Their reverence for Scripture captivated my imagination. I had taken for granted that I could hold the Bible in my hands at home, fall asleep reading it in bed. Growing up, some of my friends had Bibles decorated with cartoons. But here, the people of God stood for the procession of the Bible. They stood for the reading of the Word. I felt as though I had been pulled back in time to when

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Ezra read the law to the returning Israelites, and they all stood to hear it. Going back to Christianity's Jewish roots, the Torah was carried with worshipers all around it. The people stood for the procession of the sacred word. Jews kissed—and some still kiss—the sacred book when they opened and closed it. If the scroll of the Torah became unusable, they would bury it like a loved one rather than destroy it. The word of God was central to their worship, their culture, their very identity.

From our Jewish mothers and fathers, we Christians inherited this love and reverence for the Word and for words. When Mary the Mother of God accepted the privilege of carrying the Messiah, she responded with words drawn from the Old Testament. She imitated Hannah and Deborah by creating her own hymn of praise, in which she referenced a dozen Scriptures. In the Middle Ages, Mary was depicted in the annunciation paintings with a book before her. It was central to the Christian identity that the mother of the Logos, the woman who carried the Word within her womb, first carried it within her heart. Not only does Mary exemplify a faithful Jew in her attention to Scripture, but she shows Christians what it means to embody the Word.

The early church assumed the necessity of being a bookworm to know God and make him known (though their "books" looked different than they do now). Paul studied Greek myths and knew their ancient stories. He encourages Timothy by reminding him of the inspired nature of the Scriptures and tells him to keep reading and following their story. Many patristic exegetes wrote whole books on how to read, and they invested hundreds of pages in explicating chapters line by line. They defended Homer and Virgil as worthy reading for Christians and imitated their work in their own writings. Although many pagans were illiterate, Jews and Christians were encouraged to know written works, even if they themselves could not read or write.[22] When Rome fell, we could have lost all previous writings to the barbarians. But monks copied and preserved the manuscripts of thousands

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of poems, myths, and sermons—Christian and non-Christian. Every day, seven times a day, the monks heard the Word of God read, and they chanted along. They knew the Scriptures by memory, and these words were in their minds as they copied beautiful literature, seeing it through the eyes of God's Word.

How We Lost the Art of Reading

So when did Christians stop being considered a bookish people—a people who revered words—those who not only read the Word of God regularly but also read history, literature, philosophy, and the like?[23]

That story is long and complicated, with numerous factors. Some scholars point all the way back to the introduction of spaces between words, when Latin manuscripts moved from organization by syllables to pages of separate words. This change began the gradual descent away from churches filled with well-read Christians. With the conversion from unbroken pages to be chanted in community to separate words on a page, individual reading became possible, leading to less accountability for reading, less shared reading, less connection between the reader and the words on the page.[24] Others consider the printing press and its proliferation of books to have caused the widespread neglect for reading well. Writers needed no authority or expertise or knowledge of the craft of bookmaking to create written works, and thus vicious and ugly works began to be printed among the godly and virtuous ones. How could we know the difference between righteous and unworthy books? Before the advent of mass printing, it had been theoretically possible to read all the great works. After the printing press, how could one read everything? We could even point a finger at the Protestant Reformation and its mistrust of authority, distaste for the scholastics, emphasis on the individual believer, democratization of the Bible, the loss of reading Greek and Latin, and so on.[25]

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In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we have seen the advent of new forms of technology that compete with books for our attention. Few persons these days could be considered bookish, let alone those in the pews on Sunday. After lengthy days in offices or classrooms or with children, watching Netflix or YouTube is so much easier than reading a book. Over the years in which technology (washing machines, shopping apps, food delivery services) has replaced so many of the arts of life—those domestic responsibilities that used to require craft, such as gardening, cooking, laundry, and so on—we have increased our workloads to replace the energy saved on those other activities. Now we work more and have less space in our lives for leisure. The manual labor of the past that allowed a human being to work in an embodied way, and to contemplate in heart and mind while working with one's hands, encouraged the desire for reading after the physical exertions were completed. One can imagine why a farmer might kick off his boots after a day of sweat and dirt to read a good book. However, I empathize with the struggle that a twenty-first-century accountant, for instance, might feel trying to transition from the headache of the screen to the demands of a literary sentence. Your brain has been frazzled by your work all day while your body has been inactive. If anything, one may assume that zoning out and turning on a podcast or a television show would be easier since those activities require little participation.

Against the seduction of screens, we must return to the love of the book, beginning and ending with the Bible but including other books that enlighten Scripture for us and show us how to live like Jesus in our own time and place. Reading must be a daily spiritual practice for the Christian. A life of reading counteracts the malformation of screen and digital technology. It acts as an antidote to the bad habits of consumerism, utilitarianism, individualism, and other wayward *-isms*. In contrast to many other pastimes, reading demands engagement. It asks something

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of the participant. It cultivates that person's imagination and increases their vision of the world. While people argue all the time that reading is not a cure-all, no one believes reading is bad. No one doubts that reading—even if it cannot make a person good—can make a person better. But we have to know *how* to read as well as *what* to read.

Following the Reader

In the fourth century, St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, wrote a book explaining how to read, aimed at his church congregation. He knew his readers would push back; after all, they had the Holy Spirit. Why did they need to learn how to read? Augustine replies, "Their excitement must be restrained by the recollection that although they have a perfect right to rejoice in their great gift from God, they nevertheless learned even the alphabet with human help."[26] In other words, someone taught you how to read mechanically, so why not learn from another teacher how to read spiritually? Literary theorist Valentine Cunningham steps out further than Augustine: "Reading always comes after theory. We all, as readers, trail behind theory, theory of some kind or another."[27] Even if you never took a college English class, someone taught you to read with certain assumptions about what reading should be like. Whether or not your teacher, your pastor, or your parent was able to articulate their theory of reading, they taught you to read from a specific perspective on reading—what to read, why to read, and *how* to read.

If we are to learn how to read well, I recommend we practice reading according to the ways of those readers we admire. What would it look like to read as Augustine did? Or as Julian of Norwich read? As Frederick Douglass read? As Dorothy L. Sayers? How might we emulate reading with charity, memorizing the best that has been thought and said, and creating from what we read? Throughout this book I'll draw on examples of readers

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from our past, especially from the church, on how to read the Scriptures, and I'll explore how ways of reading the Bible may be fruitful in how we read literature.

A Teacher in Babel

"The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries."[28] So begins Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Library of Babel." In this fictional cosmos, the universe is the library; the library constitutes the whole universe. And the books on the shelves are so infinite that the venture toward knowledge seems meaningless. After all, these repeated books are mere scrambles of combinations of letters in infinite varieties. Each human being is an "imperfect librarian" for the library, which must be "the handiwork of a god." Borges conflates our reading lives and created lives, casting doubt on the meaning of what we read or create. Initially, we may express joy that all answers are available, all sources of knowledge contained before our eyes, if only we can locate the correct shelf. In harmony with this search for meaning, librarians suppose that a key book must exist that deciphers "*all other books*, and some librarian must have examined that book; this librarian is analogous to a god." The superstition of this book and the "Book-Man" parallels the belief in the Bible and the Word that became flesh. While the narrator ends his reflections with an "elegant hope" in a potential order for these books, for the possibility of meaning, those who believe in revelation and the incarnation may end their reading of this story with an even more potent sense of hope. For the books before us may be deciphered; they have a code. We as readers have been granted access to understanding.

In response to this story, Amit Majmudar wrote a sonnet dedicated to Borges. The poem shows us how to stoke the presence of words to life, to participate in the tradition by creating

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within it. In the opening lines, the narrator stands at a loss before books as numerous as the stars in the sky. You will recognize the image of Borges's library that Majmudar responds to. Then a "blind librarian with a lantern and a hand" takes the narrator's own hand to show the reader where to look. In Borges's story, people await a messianic figure who will decode the contents of the library. Yet, in this poem, only a teacher is needed to direct our attention to one book at a time. As the mentor points his finger, the reader follows, and together they behold with awe as each book, "one by one," opens "into suns."[29]

"READING"

For Jorge Luis Borges

I stand before the books as I might stand
Beneath the night sky. They're in stacks and stacks
of self-contained infinites demanding exploration. I
have neither maps
nor ladders to pursue these stars,
these books that burn within themselves. That's when
he comes and shows me where to start,
a blind librarian with a lantern and
a hand that takes my own. He knows the books
for me, he knows exactly where they are.
When he points, I at last know where to look.
The deep night sky he navigates by heart,
And as he shows them to me, one by one
I find those far stars opening into suns.

Majmudar might have drawn his "night sky" from C. S. Lewis's metaphor of reading. Lewis writes in *An Experiment in Criticism*, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see."[30] In this image, the act of reading with a guide leads one to contemplation, to an augmented vision. We experience an invitation outside the self

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through reading, yet the outcome includes a fuller version of the self than one could have created alone. In this sonnet, we are pilgrims. We are Jacob watching the angels ascend and descend. We are readers who long for a guide to take our hand. For Majmudar, the blind librarian is Borges. For Dante, it was Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard. For me, it was initially Flannery O'Connor. My guides have also included Homer, Boethius, Christine de Pizan, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and others. In this book, I hope to point you to those readers who taught me how to read well, so that we too may find books open before us into suns.

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