

How to Read a Book

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Perhaps some of you have read Mortimer Adler's famous work, *How to Read a Book*. I want to take Adler's title and reflect on how to read the Bible, the book of books. We'll look at two episodes in the Old Testament when sections of God's word were read, and we'll see how the hearers responded to what was read. My role on the pastoral staff is primarily to study and teach the Bible, so the reading of and response to God's word is a matter of considerable importance to me.

One of the most precious gifts that the Lord gave to his people Israel was his Law. We have a generally negative attitude to both law and lawyers, as our fondness for lawyer jokes shows. But the Old Testament views the Law in a positive light—witness Psalms 19 and 119. How is it possible to have this positive outlook? First we need to change the translation. The Hebrew word usually translated "law" is *torah*, but a better translation of this word is "direction" or "instruction." God gave his people a precious gift when he gave them instruction on how to live in fellowship with him and with their fellow Israelites. At the heart of this set of instructions lay the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2-17), the Book of the Covenant (Exod 21:1-23:19), and the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy contains a set of speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites at the end of his life. In these speeches he reviewed and summarized the Lord's *torah*. So important was this document that when Israel was later a monarchy, each king was supposed to write his own personal copy, which he was to keep with him and read "all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees" (Deut 17:18-20, NIV). The king was to treasure God's instruction in his heart and set the example for the people to follow.

Somehow I end up fixing computers for many people. I find a near universal unwillingness to read the instructions, whether the printed manual or the online help. Much of the help I give could have been obtained by searching the help resources that had already been provided. This unwillingness, particularly on the part of males, to consult the instructions or ask for directions provides abundant material for the comics.

Israel was given a set of directions far more significant than those provided with a new computer. But Israel and her kings managed to mislay the instruction book and forget all about it. Since the kings were ruling without any *torah*, is it any wonder that Israel went astray? In 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34 we read of the rediscovery of the book. Next to David, the best king that Judah ever had was Josiah who came to the throne at the tender age of 8. Despite his youth, he forsook the evil ways of his father, king Amon. We read that "in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David" (2 Chron 34:3). Over the next ten years he gave the land and the Temple a grand spring clean.

As Hilkiah the high priest was cleaning the temple, he came across a dusty old scroll lying forgotten in a

corner. He handed the scroll over to Shaphan the secretary (one of the king's chief ministers) who read it and went straight to the king. When Shaphan read the scroll to the king, Josiah tore his robes. They recognized that this long-forgotten document was "the Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses." Josiah summoned the entire nation to gather at the Temple, where he read to them all the words of this scroll, and then led the people in a renewal of the covenant. What an incredible time that must have been, as this chain of people read this newly discovered book and responded.

Sadly this renewed enthusiasm for God's *torah* did not last long. Just fifty years later many of the citizens of Judah found themselves in exile in Babylon. Their city and temple lay in ruins, and their king was in captivity with them. These harsh events brought the exiles to their senses. They realized that the Lord had sent them into exile because they forsook him and his *torah*. So they set themselves to study the word of the Lord. These scholars in Babylon were the first scribes.

The first Jews returned to Jerusalem in 538. Nearly a hundred years later, Ezra and Nehemiah returned. In Nehemiah 8-9 we read of another remarkable event in the history of Israel's interaction with the Lord's *torah*. Ezra, who was both priest and scribe, brought out the Book of the Law, which he read to all the people. Then a dozen or so Levites instructed the people about the book, "making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Neh 8:8). The people started weeping, but Ezra and Nehemiah told them that this was a day for rejoicing not weeping. So the people went away "to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them" (Neh 8:12).

My understanding of my ministry is heavily shaped by these two episodes in Old Testament history. In my own studies I want to respond in repentance and renewed commitment to the Lord, as did Josiah and his ministers. In my teaching I want to make the meaning clear so that the people understand, as in the days of Ezra. What is the evidence of true understanding? I am convinced that faithful teaching of the Scriptures should produce worship and celebration. If my teaching merely produces an increase in head knowledge but fails to produce worship, then I have failed in my task. How much more so should this be true when we have so much more of the story than did Josiah and Ezra!

When we were dating, my wife Sue gave me a verse that she had cross-stitched and mounted in a frame. I hung it by my desk, and it still serves as my prayer when I read the Book:

*Establish Thy word to Thy servant,
As that which produces reverence for Thee.*
(Psalm 119:38, NASB).

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