



OVERVIEW

Alive to God in Scripture

A LONG HISTORY OF NOT READING THE BIBLE

Johannes Gutenberg, a German goldsmith, spent 1439 A.D. fabricating polished metal hand mirrors— believed to capture holy light from religious relics— popular with spiritual pilgrims. A decade later, his printing press changed modern history.

And Christian spirituality.

Before 1450, few people ever read a Bible.

- **Limited access**

The only Bibles that existed were hand copied, typically costing three-plus years in wages— the price of a small house. Only kings and bishops could afford a copy.

- **Illiteracy**

It is estimated that only 3-15% of the population in Mediaeval Europe could read.¹ Education was almost the exclusive privilege of nobility and clergy.²

- **Illegal**

For almost a thousand years, the Catholic Church outlawed reading the Bible for laypeople.³

1. For example, according to one study, in 1517, only 2.6% of the people in Germany could have read Martin Luther's 95 Theses. (Scribner and Dixon, *The German Reformation*, 2003.)

2. Beginning in the 12th century, English defendants accused of a capital offense could plead "the benefit of clergy," transferring their case to a Bishop's court. The proof of clerical status: literacy, demonstrated by reading Psalm 51 out loud before the court. (<http://www.britannica.com/topic/benefit-of-clergy>)

3. In 860, Pope Nicholas I condemned all who expressed interest in reading the Bible, and reaffirmed its banned public use (Papal Decree). In 1073, Pope Gregory supported and confirmed the ban, and in 1198, Pope Innocent III declared that anybody caught reading the Bible would be stoned to death by 'soldiers of the Church military' (Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, 1759). In 1229, the Council of Toulouse, passed another decree strictly prohibiting lay people from 'having in their possession either the Old



For the average person, even if a Bible was accessible, and you could read, it was illegal to do such.

GOD'S WORD IN AN ORAL CULTURE

Before Gutenberg, the Bible people 'read' was never simply or even primarily a text.

Instead, God's love story of Creation, Fall, Christ, and the Cross was a multi-sensory experience told through stained glass windows, tooled bronze doors, cantatas, creeds (Lord's Prayer, Apostles Creed, Ten Commandments), marble sculptures, painted canvas, doctrinal sermons, and inspiring architecture (cathedrals).

Mediaeval summer drama festivals acted out stories from the Bible in historical sequence.

The liturgical calendar— from Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, etc.— created a rhythm for living in the divine drama. Saints days and holy feasts kept the faithful engaged and alive to a Christian history and hope.

Catechesis (from the Greek meaning, "instruction by word of mouth"), which began as early as the 9th century, was a simple, systematic way of educating children and adults in the Christian life. For generations it helped illiterate heads of household to train family members in the basics of their Christian faith, forming and transforming lives.

And Christianity thrived.

Without access to a printed Bible.

A HINT OF 'SOMETHING MORE'

History demonstrates that it doesn't matter how we take-in Scripture. Whether in an oral culture through hearing, or in a literate culture through reading, God can encounter us through His Word.

or New Testaments; or from translating them into the vulgar tongue'. By the 14th Century, possession of a Bible by the laity was a criminal offence and punishable by whipping, confiscation of real and personal property, and burning at the stake.



What makes Scripture transformational is not the intake mode, but what we do with God's Word after we take it in.

This goes against the grain of our literate training, with the subtle assumption that information equals formation. Specifically, that Bible study, analysis, and application will produce spiritual transformation.

This is a prominent myth within Western Christianity.

In the oral cultures of the Old Testament, the early church, and through the 15th century, God-followers were taught what to do with the Scripture that they had only heard.

This practice is little known or exercised today.

GOD'S WORD IN A LITERATE CULTURE

Arguably, the most significant event in church history is the printed Bible.

This shift in technology changed how we take in knowledge. As we transitioned from an oral to a written culture, our way of 'knowing'— how we process, understand, and relate to information—radically changed.

The moment you opened this book to read, a powerful set of preconditioned dynamics of perception went into operation. You are the "victim" of a lifelong, educationally enhanced learning mode that established you as the controlling power (reader) who seeks to master a body of information (text) that can be used by you (technique, method, model) to advance your own purpose).⁴

Today, we are well-equipped for informational Bible reading, using our rational, cognitive, intellectual minds to analyze and synthesize, data mining a text for pertinent information.

In this mode, text becomes an object that we control: we dictate the approach, we determine our needs, *and* we decide what we are looking for and how we will apply it.

4. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word* (The Upper Room: Nashville, 1985) 21.



MODERN APPROACH TO READING VS. HAGAH

The Bible says nothing about the personal reading of the Bible.⁵

However, Scripture does show us how to personally interact with God through His Word once we have taken it in. We encounter God through *hagah*.

For example:

*This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall HAGAH on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.*⁶

Hagah grew out of the meaning, “to discuss with oneself, consider, ponder, ruminates, chew on, growl over.” So, Isaiah 34:1: “. . .the lion which growls (*hagah*) over its prey.”

It came to mean, “**To “work out the personal meaning by careful thought.”**⁷ *Hagah* carries with it the idea “to think, reflect, imagine, devise.”⁸

In Biblical times, the people were taught how to bring the words of Scripture into their lives, to sit with them for a season, “chewing on them” like a dog chews on a bone, working out their invitations.

As we engage Scripture in this way, we become aware of God's invitations for our lives. Through this dynamic, personal interaction, we move from mastering the text, to allowing the text to master us.

This is an invitation to read the Bible again for the first time.⁹

5 Those who were literate and had access to the Scriptures were encouraged to study them. The NT also mentions not forsake the public reading of Scripture—that is, so others can hear it and take it in.

6. Joshua 1:8.

7. In the Jewish Qumran community, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, around the time of Christ, *hagah* meant, “in the thought of my heart.” See, *Qumran. Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. III, Ed. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringren, Trans. John Willis, Geoffery Bromiley, David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 324.

8. Psalm 2:1; Proverbs 24:2.

9. There are many different kinds of Bible reading: curiosity, general familiarity, academic study, spiritual formation., etc. While they are not mutually exclusive, the focus of each is distinct.