

Americans make the Bible a lot of very different things. Monroe makes this case as a journalist should: by going out and reporting on the uses of Christian Scripture in a range of different communities. Her first chapter orients us to the fuller argument that follows.

At a Billy Graham revival everyone seems to share an understanding of what the Bible teaches. Graham's evangelism is not an argument that we are born sinners, that God's son died to save us from torment, and that accepting him is the only way to heaven rather than hell (4), but an appeal for a certain kind of response to this picture (4). His staff hands out copies of the Gospel of John, which Graham calls "the easiest book in the Bible." *Q: Is it? Why or why not?*

The 1997 AAR/SBL convention offers an introduction to "reader-response criticism" in biblical studies. The fashionable "theory that the meaning of a piece of writing ... is determined by the reader, not the writer" (9) informs one presentation on Micah as an allegory on gender and another's subversive reading of Genesis 9, with a third arguing that sufferers should not read all the Psalms. These suggest a guild of academic biblical studies radically different from (and pretty *indifferent* to) liberal as well as conservative churches (9-12). The SBL's historical critics jostle over which of the events of Jesus' life portrayed in the Gospels really happened and which disciples invented (13-14). Here overtly theological interpretations of the texts are systematically dismissed even by many who are believers (14). *Q: Anyone want to get a Ph.D.?*

New York's Marble Collegiate Church was and has remained innocuously PC since the days of Norman Vincent Peale, the Robert Schuller of the 1950s (18-19). As Monroe hears biblical texts being recruited, willing or not, to tell a story of 'stillness' (19-20), she suspects the pervasive gentleness is vain protection from God's holiness and wrath – substituting its own acceptance for divine salvation (21). *Q: Is this so different from the first two communities?*

The differences among Billy Graham, Marcus Borg, and Arthur Caliendo go beyond the Bible's many complexities. What is going on? Monroe obliquely points to the common ancestor of all three: *modern rationalism* (27-28) – an eighteenth (really seventeenth) century movement that reduced truth to objective facts and thus reduced convictions to opinions and experiences to feelings. Modernity held the Bible to be true only insofar as it met the expectations of the age (28). Modern readers refused to submit to Scripture's judgment. Instead they submitted Scripture to their own axioms of rationality. The Bible was contradictory and thus untrustworthy (Renan); or mythical and thus inadequately historical (Reimarus); or edited together and thus inconsistent – *or it wasn't*, claimed fundamentalists who thought the Bible must pass its critics' tests.

Premodernity saw the Bible as an icon of the way things are (27), meaningful even its difficulty (28). Moderns readers faced a Bible too wild and strange for that kind of trust. They saw it not as a stained glass window but a fractured one, then a broken one, then a darkened and opaque one, and now finally a mirror. Centuries of attempts to domesticate it have left us with Billy Graham, the Society of Biblical Literature, and dull, safe contemporary churches. For some it is a flawless record; for some it is practically a plaything; for others it is a threat. "It all depends on how you read the story" (7).

Later chapters visit other outposts of American Christianity: several liberal communities, a few conservative ones (which we will treat first), and an even more select few that suggest "a way of reading the Bible that recognizes all that we have learned about it – its many strands, its complex history, the human intricacies of its development – and allows it, in and through all of that, to be a place of encounter with God" (cf. 29).

Telford Work read the material, wrote the presentation, edited it, and fact-checked. (You will credit each person in your small group here for *only* the roles he or she actually played.)