

Chapter 9

Jim Fodor, “Reading scripture reverentially but not univocally: why words in themselves are not dangerous”

Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Jim Fodor’s chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

Summary of Chapter

Jim Fodor discusses modes and methods of scripture reading, drawing especially on the Anglican Christian tradition. He argues that words in themselves are not dangerous, and that “reading scriptures *reverentially*, as God’s address to the reader, is entirely compatible with the historical practices of interrogating, challenging, and sometimes strenuously objecting to those very scriptures” (p. 117). Moreover, “even those who designate certain readings of scripture as authoritative or orthodox do not necessarily think the text has one and only one correct meaning” (p. 119). Fodor stresses that reading is an active process, and that one can “attune oneself to texts” without “treating them as self-interpreting artifacts” (p. 119).

Understanding the Argument

As you read Fodor’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand his argument.

1. Fodor offers “a brief account of how many Christians tend to read scripture” (p. 114). What types of reading practices does he discuss, and what does he say about them?
2. According to Fodor, many people treat texts as a kind of “container” (p. 117). What does he mean by that, and what alternative view of texts does he suggest?
3. Overall, Fodor’s chapter suggests that there is no direct causal link between “reading scriptures reverentially, as God’s address to the reader” (p. 117) and acting violently. Why not?
4. At the end of the chapter, Fodor suggests several ways to “improve the quality of scripture reading” (p. 120). What practices does he think can be beneficial, and how?

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-4 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

5. Fodor points out that the Bible contains a wide variety of material, in different genres and with different content (pp. 115-116). How do you think it might affect your response to a seemingly violent passage of scripture to read it together with a passage encouraging peacefulness – and vice versa?
6. Why might some people think that reverential reading of scripture – or seeing scripture as authoritative – consists of “blind, passive adherence to ‘the one and only meaning’” (p. 116)? How might this assumption shape their attitude toward people who read scripture reverentially?
7. How do you think Fodor’s reflections on the act of reading might be useful when one is reading other sorts of texts (e.g., news articles, websites, novels)? Are the issues he discusses unique to scripture?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- To think more about what it means to read, see, e.g.:
 - o Karin Littau (2006). *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania*. Cambridge: Polity.
 - o Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (eds.) (1999). *A History of Reading in the West*. Cambridge: Polity.
- To learn more about the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, go to scripturalreasoning.org, or see, e.g.:
 - o Mike Higton and Rachel Muers (2012). *The Text in Play: Experiments in Reading Scripture*. Eugene: Cascade.