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James L. Kugel. *How to Read the Bible:  
A Guide to Scripture Then and Now.*

New York: The Free Press, 2007

Reviewed by Eric A. Eliason

Biblical scholar James Kugel will be familiar to careful readers who checked the footnotes of Elder Jefferey R. Holland's October 2007 general conference talk, "The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent."<sup>1</sup> In describing the nature of God, Elder Holland cited Kugel, an orthodox Jew—who presumably has nothing to gain by supporting Latter-day Saint doctrines—in contending that the earliest writers of Genesis understood God to have a body like a person and that he interacted with the patriarchs literally face to face. In *The God of Old*, Kugel claims that later interpretive modes still dominating Jewish and Christian thought today—the beginnings of which can be seen in the Bible itself—were used to render these straightforward descriptions as figurative.<sup>2</sup>

This finding is just one of several that Latter-day Saints might find interesting. Kugel's *The Bible As It Was* contends that the Bible cannot be grasped without understanding the ancient interpretive assumptions that shaped how the book was written and assembled, which assumptions continued to operate well into the Christian era, influencing New Testament writers as well.<sup>3</sup> Some of those assumptions are still with us; most of them, however, have been eclipsed by new interpretive modes of fundamentalism and modern scholarship.

One example of a ubiquitous biblical understanding derived from this ancient interpretive history is the identification of Satan as the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The biblical text does not say this anywhere. It is puzzling that virtually the whole Judeo-Christian world assumes this with no textual support, unless one understands this association as part of an extrabiblical interpretive tradition so venerable that it had probably already begun during biblical times. Latter-day Saints have the Pearl of Great Price to support the serpent's diabolical identification, but other Christians and Jews do not—even those Evangelicals who claim to rely on the Bible alone for their religious understandings.

In *How to Read the Bible*, Kugel gathers the insights of his earlier works and applies them systematically to the Bible as a whole. He looks at most of the well-known stories of Hebrew scripture through the eyes of both the ancient interpreters and modern scholars. Key to this process is how Kugel draws out these biblical interpreters' unspoken assumptions, and in so doing he invites reflection on what Latter-day Saint Bible readers' assumptions might be.

Kugel uncovers assumptions that have rarely been articulated but that can be deduced by examining the way Talmudic interpreters, ancient Jewish historians, New Testament authors, and early church fathers interpret the Hebrew Bible. The ancient interpreters assumed the following, according to Kugel:

1. The Bible is fundamentally cryptic. The easily apprehended meaning is not the most important one. The real spiritual meaning needs to be creatively extracted with the help of analogical leaps and numerical schemes. Many meanings ancient interpreters would have seen as reasonable and even necessary would seem like arbitrary, fanciful stretches today.<sup>4</sup>

2. The Bible's lessons and meanings are for the readers' day. Though the text may appear to be referring to ancient situations, the real cryptic meanings of events described in the Bible are unfolding as we read. This idea of immediacy was true for Bible readers even before it was finished; it was true when New Testament writers saw things mentioned in the Bible happening in Jesus' ministry; it was true in Joseph Smith's day; it is true right now; and it will be true for readers a thousand years from now who still read with the ancient assumptions operative in their minds. Of course, readers at any one of these periods do not think so much about other times but mostly their own. The Bible always speaks to the very moment it is being read.

3. There are no contradictions or mistakes in the Bible. It is perfectly harmonious in all its parts. It tells unambiguous stories of good and evil. Things that may seem like contradictions or needless repetitions are only opportunities for drawing out the cryptic meaning. Stories like the binding of Isaac are not examples of criminally bad parenting but, properly interpreted, the deeds of righteous men.

4. The entire Bible is divinely given. All of it was spoken by inspiration from God to his prophets—not only those parts where we read “thus saith the Lord” but also the long lists of genealogy and obscure Levitical rules. Every jot and every tittle is significant (14–16).

In contrast, but not always in contradiction, the modern scholarly approach—that grew out of the Reformation stance toward the Bible—assumes the following:

1. Scripture is to be understood by scripture alone. Sweep away all midrash, commentary, and traditional typological and allegorical interpretations. Get back to the text itself.<sup>5</sup>

2. We must read scripture in terms of its own language and not through the lens of our own times or values. We should take every care to make sure our own preconceptions and prejudices do not color what we say the Bible says.

3. We should assume the scripture means what it says even when this conflicts with our beliefs. It says what it says, and this may be perplexing, strange, or even appalling. We should not try to apologize for the Bible by interpreting it away. We should stare scripture boldly in the face.

4. To understand what the Bible says, we must look into how it was put together and who the people were who did so. We must study their lives and their possible political and religious motives as well as their historical and cultural contexts, including the literary forms of the day.

5. We must acknowledge that not only have there been corruptions and errors in transmission but also that, even when recorded as intended, the Bible contains contradictions between its various parts, the words of prophets not excepted. For example, the book of Ruth contradicts the Pentateuch and Ezra on taking Moabite wives. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is not the same wisdom as Proverbs. Job even contains contradictions within itself as to what wisdom is. The personal, humanlike “God of Old” depicted in early Genesis who held counsel with other gods in Psalm 82 is not the same as the abstract, peerless, and impersonal God described by Isaiah (31–32).

Kugel shows how the Protestant *sola scriptura*, or “bible alone,” stance eventually undermined another essential Protestant belief about the Bible—its inerrancy. At least this sentiment developed in mainline seminaries among biblical scholars; the congregations in their church pews have remained much less affected. Kugel says other Protestants are self-serving in cherry-picking from modern scholars’ and ancient interpreters’ assumptions, and that this practice characterizes today’s fundamentalist and conservative Evangelical approaches to scripture.

Virtually any introduction to an Evangelical-preferred Bible translation instructs the reader to (1) understand that God is the author, (2) prefer the plainest possible meaning, (3) assume historicity unless otherwise specified, (4) realize that the Bible is *the* guide to living, and (5) be wary of allegorical or “non-literal” interpretations.<sup>6</sup> (Such introductions,

extrabiblical in nature, are surprisingly common given that *sola scriptura* would seem to deem them unneeded.) This approach has more in common with modern biblical scholarship—perhaps ironically, given conservative Protestant distaste for its conclusions—than the ancient interpreters’ assumptions. But overall, the Evangelical tradition accepts and rejects some of both ancient and modern traditions.

As Latter-day Saints, we may ask ourselves when reading Kugel, What do we assume about how to read the Bible? Where do we fit into all this? As I read with Mormonism in mind, it seemed clear to me that there is at least one assumption operating among modern researchers that Kugel did not explicitly lay out. The assumption would be familiar to any thoughtful traditionalist who has read modern scholarship, and it might go like this: *An explanation of a biblical passage that does not require supernatural happenings to be understood is to be preferred over an explanation that does.* Modern scholarly insights such as the claim that multiple authors composed Isaiah (rejected by most biblical conservatives) or that David did not write some of the Psalms (more palatable for some conservatives) rely heavily on this presumption. Exegesis that settles for literal angelic appearances or actual prophetic foreknowledge would not be satisfactory. For example, in the absence of clear evidence, why say King David foresaw the Babylonian captivity hundreds of years in the future when he composed Psalm 137 when it is easier to say that someone else composed it after the events described took place?

Recognizing this version of Occam’s Razor, which prefers simple answers over complex ones, is not the same as claiming that all modern Bible scholars impose naturalistic assumptions all the time. While many scholars openly make those assumptions, Kugel seems to mostly operate following these assumptions but does not explicitly say that it is necessary to do so. Many traditionalist critics of modern Bible scholarship see, perhaps not too unfairly, secular assumptions as all-pervasive in “higher criticism.” Interestingly, even the ancient interpreters were divided on whether biblical miracles were historical events or literary devices, thus showing that doubts about the Bible’s literalness are not just the result of the acids of modernity but have old antecedents (222).

I do not know how much Latter-day Saints would be comfortable thinking of their interpretive assumptions as drawing on traditions that the Restoration has superseded. Still, it seems that Latter-day Saints would share and reject some of both the ancient and modern approaches as well as sporting some unique features of their own. Key to understanding LDS interpretive methods is realizing that perhaps *the* central assumption for traditional LDS believers is quite the opposite from the naturalistic

assumption above. They take for granted the literal reality of angelic appearances and prophetic foreknowledge unless there are compelling reasons to do otherwise. The content of Restoration scripture and its claims of how it came to be make such assumptions compelling for Mormons.

A second feature of Mormon biblical interpretation might be, “Interpret ancient scripture as it has been interpreted by modern prophets.” This idea comes to mind in another Kugel claim that Latter-day Saints might appreciate—namely his take on the Song of Solomon. In fact, the Song of Songs is the showcase for Kugel’s contention that interpretation is inextricable from, and sometimes trumps, the text in the Bible’s formation. Traditionally, the Song of Solomon’s inclusion in the Bible has been explained by claiming that it was written as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or the church. Kugel says no, it was originally written as an erotic love poem but was allegorized over the years by later interpreters. Eventually, the allegorical interpretation took on such authority that those who selected the Song of Songs for inclusion in the canon did so because of the weight of this tradition alone. To Kugel, it was not intended to be accepted as sacred scripture but only came to be read as such by centuries of creative interpretation. Such is the power of interpretation in the world Kugel is describing. It can collapse the distinction that would seem to exist between romantic love poems and scripture. Similarly, the Joseph Smith Translation manuscript contains the short but oft-quoted note, “The Song of Solomon is not inspired writing.” Apparently, the Prophet also did not buy the explanation that it was intended as an allegory.<sup>7</sup> Again Kugel’s modern scholarly methods lead to a place where Latter-day Saints have been for quite some time.

In pointing out resonances between LDS understandings and modern biblical scholarship, I am perhaps guilty of heading into the “dead end” Kugel warns of in an essay on his website “Apologetics and Biblical Criticism Lite,”<sup>8</sup> which is intended as an online appendix to *How to Read the Bible*. He warns against picking and choosing from modern biblical scholarship only those things that bolster favorite notions, because the exact same methods that help build comforting buttresses for faith also lead to conclusions requiring cherished beliefs to be rethought or abandoned. According to Kugel, the modern scholarly view of the Bible as an internally flawed and somewhat haphazard anthology of remnant scraps of old folklore and feverish visionary rantings, cobbled together over many centuries by politically motivated redactors and interpreted later to be something it is not, seriously undercuts the traditional view of scripture as a miraculous, God-directed composition that speaks authoritatively to us today.

Fair enough. One must be cautious. Moreover, much of what Kugel claims the Bible is and how it was put together could be downright disturbing to faithful Latter-day Saints even with the acknowledgement of errors and corruptions in the human transmission of the biblical record. However, I would suggest that much of the potential discomfort for Mormons would come from the naturalist leaning of modern scholarship rather than the scholarship itself. Ironically, for a book that is centrally about drawing out interpretive assumptions, Kugel curiously does little to note the naturalistic and secular assumptions often at play in modern Bible scholarship and has little to say about secularism being the starting premise as much as the end result of much critical Bible scholarship.

Overall, I found this book a feast of fascinating information and insight, and I plan to adopt it as a text for my “Bible as Literature” class. However, the book makes one claim that my training as a folklorist caused me to question. Echoing other scholars, Kugel suggests that many of the stories in the first part of Genesis did not originally have any religious significance but were only interpreted that way by later readers who, following the ancient assumption that God gave *all* scripture, believed these stories *must* have religious significance (136, 362). Kugel claims that stories such as the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, and various episodes from Abraham’s wanderings are what folklorists call “etiological legends,” or stories that explain the origins of things: why men have to work for their bread, why women suffer pain in childbearing, why the snake does not have legs like other animals, how the Kenites got their name and came to live where they did, and how certain wells and rock formations got their names. These questions are all answered in Genesis stories that read a lot like etiological legends. Such stories are universal, found in all societies and in all times. Scholars like Kugel suggest that if stories in the Bible read like etiological legends, then they probably *were* originally etiological legends with no moral or religious significance until later interpreters and redactors worked them into scripture.

The problem with that contention is not that Bible stories do not have an etiological component or likely oral narrative antecedents; they do. The problem is that Kugel seems unaware of how the last few decades of scholarship have qualitatively changed how folklorists see the significance of etiological legends—and these are mostly secular folklorists with no religious agenda and probably little awareness of the implications of their work for Bible interpretation. Kugel appears to be working from an earlier understanding that the main point of such stories is explaining the origin of some small fact. But contemporary folklorists have demonstrated that this is not how cultures who pass them on understand or use them.

Etiological stories are *not* primarily about how something came to be. By looking closely at the various cultures that tell them, folklorists have discovered that the etiological nature of the story is usually secondary to its main purpose—not only secondary but actually in service to the main purpose of the story, which is moral teaching after all. But the moral teaching, in the tradition of the best oral literature, is often subtle, oblique, nondidactic, and laid out by a trickster’s negative example.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars such as Keith Basso and Barre Toelken have shown how etiological legends tend to be told originally and *primarily* for their moral content, and etiological motifs are included as reminders of the story.<sup>10</sup> So every time people of a particular society see a snake, wonder why there are weeds in the garden, or draw water from a certain well with a funny name, they will remember the attached story and think of their moral obligations as implied in the story. Etiological aspects of certain narratives, in different cultures at different times, work as triggers for moral remembrance and only incidentally as pseudoscientific or pseudohistorical explanations of how things came to be. Why should it be any different for Bible stories?

If we want to recover the original meaning and purpose of biblical stories with etiological motifs, it is probably best not to discount the story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden as a morally insignificant tale of origins. Rather, every time we see a snake in all its slithery legless glory we might be prompted to remember the importance of resisting temptation and not seeking to thwart the plans of God. Linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso has a name for this phenomenon of moral tales forcing themselves into our minds as we interact with the creatures, places, and things of our daily lives. He calls it “stalking with stories.” I know the tales that James Kugel has told and interpreted in *How to Read the Bible* will be stalking this reader for a long time.

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1. *Ensign* 37 (November 2007): 40–42.
2. James Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003).
3. James Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

4. Even though he covers only the Hebrew Bible, Kugel draws heavily on New Testament writers as examples of how ancient readers thought. The many uses of Hebrew scripture by New Testament authors reveal pervasive use of allegorical, typological, and cryptic readings. Understanding Isaiah's and Micah's comments on events of their own day to more significantly refer to Jesus' life as well as accepting Paul's explanation in Galatians 4:22–24 that Abraham's rejection of Hagar for Sarah actually refers to the eclipse of the Jews' covenant of bondage by God's new Christian covenant of freedom are just two examples of readers' accepting interpretations that today might seem highly speculative and far beyond what is justified by the text were it not for the fact that these explanations are already in the Christian Bible and have been for two thousand years. There are implications here for Mormon biblical interpretation. Modern scholars would favor dismissing the interpretation of favorite proof texts such as Ezekiel's reference to "the stick of Joseph" and "the stick of Judah" as referring to the coming together of the Bible and the Book of Mormon. The term "stick," these scholars would say, refers to a tree serving as a metaphor for the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah and not a book. If Lehi, Joseph Smith, and Latter-day Saints make creative leaps beyond what the text might seem to signify in its original historical context, they are in the good company of biblical authors.

5. Cheekily one might suggest here that to disregard other interpretive assumptions is in and of itself an interpretive assumption.

6. See, for example, the front matter to various editions of the New American Standard Version, the New International Version, the New Living Translation, and Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message Remix* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2003).

7. Note that the Prophet did not say it should not be read, or that it has no value, or that it should be removed, or even that it cannot be usefully read as an allegory despite its original intention. The Bible Dictionary in the official LDS scriptures paraphrases Joseph Smith in saying that the Song of Solomon "is not inspired scripture." However, Joseph Smith's original wording of "writing" instead of "scripture" does not preclude the possibility that the Song of Songs should be retained as canonical for reasons other than its initial inspiration. I must admit that I am thankful for the Song of Solomon's transmission to our day, being somewhat partial to a more recent rationale given for its inclusion—namely that the Lord allowed it to be there to remind his people that romantic and even erotic love is a sanctioned blessing for those properly married.

8. [www.jameskugel.com/apologetics.php](http://www.jameskugel.com/apologetics.php).

9. The same terse and sparse style that Kugel regards as indicative of "schematic narratives" with "no inner life" and points to as evidence of the stories' mundane origins is lauded by equally prestigious Bible scholar Robert Alter as "the art of reticence," or a conscious literary style of effective understatement that displayed remarkable and unique accomplishment for its time and still has the power to move today. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 147. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 63–87.

10. Keith Basso, "'Stalking with Stories': Names, Places, and Moral Narratives among the Western Apache," in Keith Basso, *Western Apache Language and Culture: Essays in Linguistic Anthropology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990); Barre Toelken, "The 'Pretty Languages' of Yellowman: Genre, Mode, and Texture in Navaho Coyote Narratives," in *Folklore Genres*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976).