

Marsh, Cory M. *A Primer on Biblical Literacy*. El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2022. 89 pp. + 20 pp. (frontmatter) + 38 pp. (backmatter).

Cory Marsh's church ministry and academic roles have situated him to observe a gap in teaching emphasis in relation to Scripture. Systematic theology tends to convey formal bibliology. Hermeneutics details the formal principles of Scripture interpretation. And most scholarly books explore these same academic issues. The topic of biblical literacy for its own sake receives much less attention. In his short work, *A Primer on Biblical Literacy*, Marsh offers a lay-level reflection on the importance of biblical literacy among the people of God. He argues on *a priori* grounds that "it is not only *possible* for Christians to understand the Bible but, in large measure, they are *expected* to understand it" (86). God would not have given us his written word unless he intends for us to read and grasp its meaning. Marsh divides his argument into three chapters that examine the need for biblical literacy (ch. 1), the definition of biblical literacy (ch. 2), and the method of biblical literacy (ch. 3). He closes with an appendix that provides the full text of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy followed by recommended resources.

Common human experience demonstrates the need for biblical literacy. Eras of significant biblical illiteracy (e.g., the Middle Ages) have always led to the captivity of the Church and of the individual human conscience to the whims and manipulations of unbiblical leaders. When the people of God do not know the Scriptures for themselves, they are unable to ferret out false teachers. If they do not know the truth, they cannot hold others to the truth. In Marsh's words, "The wolves are never held accountable to the Scriptures by their sheep" (9). Nationwide surveys reveal that the average churchgoing Christian today remains contented with whatever information a pastor dispenses from the pulpit. Many "*sincere Christians simply do not study the Bible for themselves*" (16, emphasis original).

Chapter two defines biblical literacy through the phrase "achievable awareness and proficiency" (21). That is, literacy does not equal scholastic training or comprehensive knowledge. Instead, it is a familiarity that runs deeper than a Sunday-school-level awareness of basic stories to an understanding of how Scripture fits together, what it teaches, and what it means for us today. Literacy exhibits an adequate proficiency that recognizes when someone is misconstruing a passage (29). Marsh observes that a portion of this literacy stems from the character qualities of believers. They must be "regenerate, prayerful, humble, obedient, and diligent" in order to grow in discernment (33).

The third chapter introduces the reader to the value and necessity of hermeneutics in the process of acquiring biblical literacy. Since biblical hermeneutics involves the study of the principles utilized in the combined art and science of interpretation, it encompasses a broad field of academic study. Nevertheless, Marsh effectively summarizes a series of key principles—the necessity of determining the original author's meaning and intent (52–58); grasping and submitting to the context (59–64); attending to history, literature, and theology (64); observing the progress of revelation (65–67); retaining the natural sense of the text and its single meaning (69–71); and extending that meaning by recognizing the text's significance (71–72). The remainder of the chapter (75–81) offers two biblical examples of the process of sound interpretation.

A few details in the book could use greater clarity. For instance, chapter 2 claims that “half [of American Christians] can’t name *even one* of the four Gospels” (25, emphasis added). The accurate current statistic is that half of American Christians cannot name *all four* Gospels.⁵ Chapter 3 uses the phrase “begs the question” (the name of a logical fallacy) when it means “raises the question.” Although this expression has both the technical and common functions, the reader might expect greater precision in a chapter that relates to hermeneutics. Chapter 3 also refers unnecessarily to a specific country music singer and song, although other examples of distinctive genres are readily available. A conservative reader might misunderstand the point of the example and question the author’s purpose in the citation. Finally, the author briefly quarrels with the expressions *hermeneutical circle* and *hermeneutical spiral* (61), but on this point he is somewhat unconvincing. A “cycle” expresses forward progress no more clearly than a “circle” does, and a “spiral” readily implies directionality and growth. While of course an author must use his preferred wording, Marsh’s critique seems out of place.

Several facets of *A Primer on Biblical Literacy* exhibit particularly commendable qualities. First, although footnotes appear only occasionally, they point lay readers to constructive resources that are accessible to Marsh’s audience. The author wastes no time trying to impress the reader with his own significant knowledge. Instead, he focuses on communicating succinctly what the reader needs for growth in biblical literacy. Marsh demonstrates a solid understanding of a writer’s responsibility—to keep his primary audience in mind and to write so that the reader may understand. Second, the work exhibits a strong devotional tone. It urges believers to choose greater intentionality in their knowledge of the Scriptures. It invites the lay reader to experience deeper understanding of God’s Word without becoming an academic professional. Anyone who “hears” the book correctly must sense Marsh’s devotion to the inspired, inerrant Word from a wise and gracious God.

Brian Hand

Professor of New Testament Interpretation | BJU Seminary

⁵ A. W. Geiger, “5 Facts on How Americans View the Bible and Other Religious Texts,” Pew Research Center (April 14, 2017); <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/#:~:text=But%20fewer%20than%20half%20of,to%20God%20despite%20extraordinary%20suffering>.