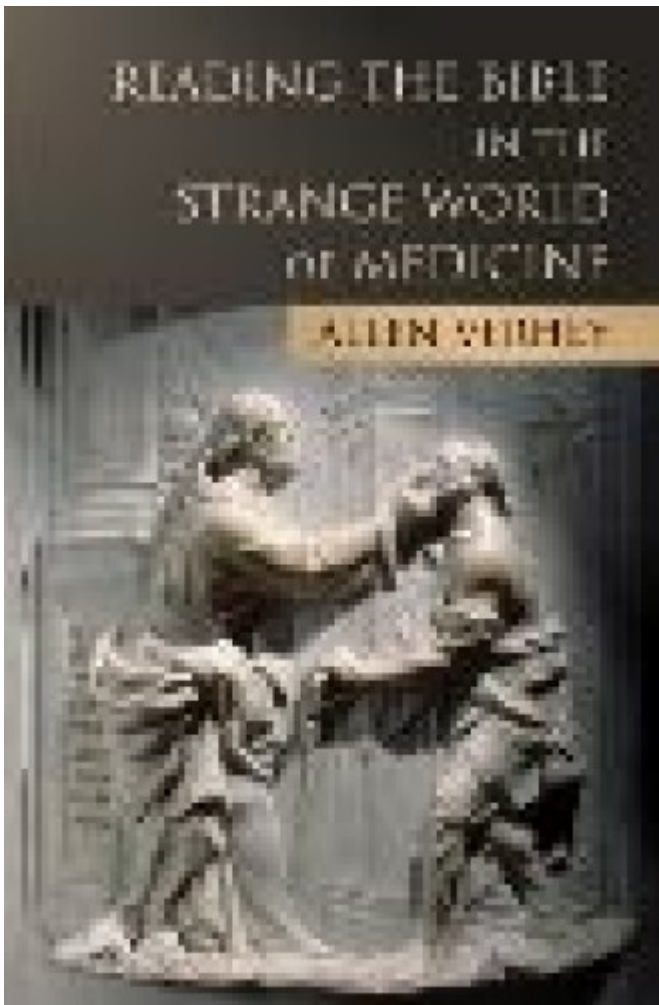


Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine

reviewed by [Joseph J. Kotva Jr.](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine

Allen Verhey
Eerdmans

For more than two decades Alan Verhey has been helping the Christian community understand the interconnections between our commitments to scripture and to the moral life. His work is especially insightful when he focuses on how our reading of the Bible can inform and guide our interaction with modern medicine.

Verhey, who is leaving a position at Hope College to take up a new post at Duke University Divinity School, does not offer simplistic solutions for how we should read and appropriate the Bible or for the issues presented by modern medicine. Keenly aware of the historical and social distance between ourselves and biblical authors, and of scripture's silence on most issues associated with modern medicine, Verhey rejects proof-texting or appealing to scripture as if it were a collection of timeless moral codes. Instead, he views reading the Bible as a community practice that shapes lives, a practice through which the community discerns what actions and patterns of behavior are coherent with the whole biblical narrative.

Verhey is confident that this practice provides the memory and wisdom necessary to guide us through the complex terrain of contemporary medicine. Scripture trains us to see that modern medicine is often driven by the corrupt assumptions of a Baconian, liberal, capitalist society, a society with distorted notions of personhood, compassion, freedom/autonomy, justice, parenting and childhood.

A careful and gifted reader of the Bible, Verhey offers his own wrestling with contested moral questions in medicine as a contribution to the community practice of discernment. Dealing respectively with personhood, compassion, genetics, abortion, artificial reproductive technologies (ART), physician-assisted suicide, care for neonates, and access to health care, Verhey strives to hear the wisdom of the broader biblical story. For example, his effort to understand "personhood" draws on the beginning narratives of Genesis, the infancy and resurrection stories of Jesus, the story of the Good Samaritan, and Paul's concern for the body in 1 Corinthians. The result is an embodied and social notion of personhood that reduces people neither to a capacity for agency nor to mere genetic uniqueness, and is more dependent on our orientation to care for others than on abstract categories.

This book is difficult to classify. Though most of the material has appeared previously in various forms and venues, Verhey has organized, rewritten and synthesized it into a coherent whole. Scholars already familiar with Verhey's work may find this book somewhat repetitive, but will be amply rewarded by his insights. Nonspecialists will find it an accessible and engaging introduction to Christian

medical ethics.