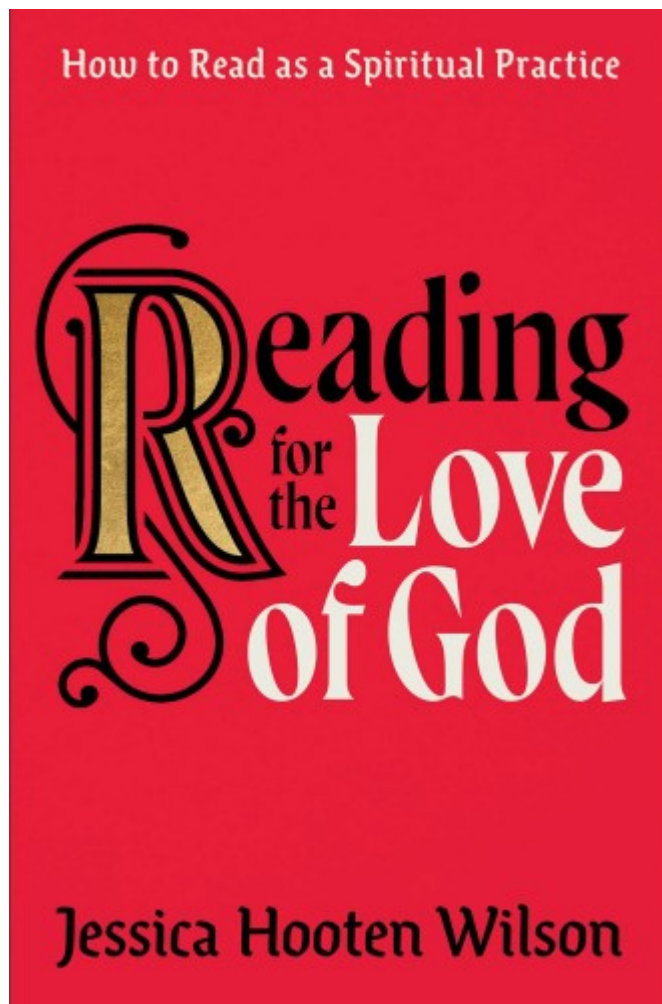


Christians should read books

Jessica Hooten Wilson helps us to see reading as a form of holy play.

by [Erik Hoeke](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue

## In Review



### **Reading for the Love of God**

by Jessica Hooten Wilson

Brazos

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Although contemporary debates focus mainly on what we should and should not be reading, it's just as important to ask why and how we read. Eugene Peterson said that putting the Bible in someone's hands and saying, "Read it!" is as foolish and dangerous as handing car keys to an adolescent and saying, "Drive it!" With this in mind, Jessica Hooten Wilson invites Christians to return to their bookish roots and recover reading as a spiritual practice. We must return to the love of books, she argues, and not just the books of the Bible. Reading books of history, poetry, rhetoric, and narrative trains us to read and interpret the same genres found in scripture. And by reading scripture, we become more capable of seeing God's beauty revealed in nonreligious texts. In all of this, the practicing reader develops greater capacity to read and interpret the world.

Wilson makes several arguments for why reading can be a good spiritual practice. It's not that reading books will save your soul or transform you into a good person. But like other spiritual practices, reading can train you in the virtues, encourage sanctification, and elicit love for the things that are noble, admirable, and beautiful. Wilson rejects a utilitarian approach to reading that only entertains or checks off boxes on a list of great books. This is a misuse of literature, she claims. Instead, the ultimate end or goal of reading ought to be the cultivation of a deeper love and enjoyment of God. Even literature that doesn't seem spiritual on the surface can still embody the beauty of God and is thus worthy of our attention.

Literary theorists believe reading can engender empathy and greater understanding of others. Wilson encourages us to enter into the story of characters unlike us, to engage reading as a practice that expands our worldview, thickens our empathy, and increases our capacity to love. Though she stops short of addressing contemporary debates about what should and should not be on library shelves, Wilson advocates reading texts that challenge our assumptions and pull off the "snuggly blanket" of comfort. With frequent references to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Wilson subtly aligns herself on the side of academic and literary freedom.

But reading challenging and dangerous texts cannot be done recklessly or viciously. Wilson creatively intersperses four "bookmarks" throughout her book, each one pointing to an exemplar who can teach us something about how to read. Augustine, a lover of secular as well as sacred texts, instructs us that any text which leads closer to God's truth is worth reading. Julian of Norwich not only reminds us that women were writing and exegeting scripture in the Middle Ages but also

demonstrates the value of a dialogical approach to reading. The life of Frederick Douglass testifies to the liberating power of reading and knowledge. And Dorothy Sayers's careful and creative translations of texts steer us away from idolizing familiar words and phrases and toward the meaning or truth contained therein.

In addition to lifting up these exemplars of spiritual reading, Wilson rejects the sort of reader-centered interpretation in which all literary analysis boils down to questions around how much the reader likes the text, agrees with it, or can see themselves represented in it. Instead, she argues for an approach to reading as perichoresis. Similar to attending to all three persons of the Trinity, interpreting literature in this way requires balanced attention to the author, the reader, and the text itself, all of which should play or dance together in illuminating the meaning of what we read.

Wilson helps us learn this dance so we can read as a form of holy play. Whether we're reading scripture or other texts, she wants us to remember that not everything can be reduced to simplistic moral lessons and that stories and poems aren't problems to be solved but works to be enjoyed. To that end, she promotes associative reading and allegorical interpretation. She expounds on this in a chapter about reading scripture with the four senses of meaning practiced by Jesus and early Christian exegetes: literal, figurative, moral, and anagogical. Walking her readers through the movements of *lectio divina*, Wilson shows how this approach allows scripture, located within a single time and place, to speak universally. Rather than beginning and ending with "What does this text mean *for me*?" the reader should attend to the text's literal and historical lens. Only then can the reader deduce moral meaning and contemplate how the text reflects or echoes the Divine.

*Reading for the Love of God* promotes the reading of sacred and secular texts in a way that is courageously critical but not vicious. Viewed within a similar presupposition of goodwill, Wilson's book nevertheless does not escape critique. Some readers may take issue with Wilson's word choices, especially her use of exclusively male pronouns for God, her unfortunate phrasing of being "enslaved to screens" within a chapter about literal enslavement in the American South, and the use of an ableist term when describing a book that once had little appeal to her. And though Wilson helpfully offers a reading list of great books as an appendix, she fails to include many texts from outside the Western tradition. Greater attention to Asian, African, and South American writers would further serve to liberate Western readers from a Eurocentric worldview.

Despite these limitations, *Reading for the Love of God* is a timely and accessible primer for those wishing to develop skills of literary analysis and interpretation for reading sacred and secular texts as a spiritual practice. With these skills and a healthy dose of virtuous courage, readers may discover, as Wilson says, that opening a book is always an invitation to discover a broader vision and to act more wisely in an impious age.