

# Character and . . .

# Identity

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*Introduction: Character and Identity*

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*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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# Co-Authoring Your Story in Light of God’s Epic: Human Identity and the Divine Word

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Timothy Matthew Slemmons

## Abstract

*Suspending our disbelief in reading scripture puts us in touch with the Author God, who is revealed as such through diverse metaphors. This encounter often unfolds dramatically in crisis, but, just as important for character and identity formation, in daily reading. The Word of God (written, preached, paraphrased, or above all, incarnate in Jesus Christ) encounters people, reorients their lives for the good, invests them with a new identity, shapes their character and vocation, and even continues to “author” their lives afterward.*


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Austin was a smart kid from a solid family. No math whiz, his particular gift for the language arts was apparent by age 12. His parents, with modest means, put him through private school anyway, and he managed to succeed, even while dabbling in some risky behavior. At 16 he was sexually active with multiple serial partners; at 17 he was hanging out with a gang he called “the wreckers;” at 18 he had a child with a girl his mom didn’t like. Then his dad died. Life was getting heavy and his conscience was weighing on him. His life took a nosedive. Religion drew him but he settled on some simplistic, black-and-white

answers to begin with, picking and choosing what he wanted to believe about life-and-death questions, arriving at no real sense of coherence about them. Questions about the nature of evil gnawed at him, but the explanations he came up with, peppered with a lot of popular philosophy, caused a falling out with his mom, a Christian, who shut him out of the house.

For all of his personal challenges, Austin's education moved right along. He taught grammar in his hometown for a couple of years, then speech. He progressed from one teaching position to another, each more prestigious than the last, was published in his field, built an impressive professional reputation, even showed political promise. He broke up with his long-time girlfriend and mother of his child, largely due to the influence of his (now reconciled) mom. She was pushing him toward a marriage that would make him financially secure and advance his career, but in the "cooling off" period, Austin's sexual drive quickly impelled him into a physical relationship with yet another new partner. He was absolutely wretched: wracked with guilt, utterly helpless, unable to gain control of himself, floundering in an identity crisis.

Everyone faces times of testing, even moments of desperation, and many people do some really destructive, even self-destructive things in response. They may dull the pain with drugs or alcohol. They endanger their lives for an adrenaline rush. They lash out in anger, frustration, or revenge to hurt someone or make them feel guilty. Sometimes their action is simply a cry for help, but one that may take them beyond human reach. If we as persons of character are to avoid such a destructive course, where should we turn for the most creative, redemptive, coherent, and trustworthy guidance possible?



*The Bible can change  
your life incalculably  
for the better.*


Whether you are a nonbeliever, a skeptic, or a Christian who already esteems the Bible, stick with me here, for both history and the present day are teeming with witnesses to the fact the Bible can change your life incalculably for the better. Not only in desperate crises but every day, the best, most (in)formative source you have available is scripture. Whether you are looking for wisdom to deal with hard situations or

read from it daily, it is the freshest, most bracing and invigorating source. Its divine author is the author of your life, too, and uses the stuff of this book to write your story, to write *you!* Put another way, God's role in the authorship of scripture—without squashing the human authors or overlooking the evolutionary way in which the Bible arrived at its final (“canonical”) form—not only reveals God to you, the reader, but also reveals and interprets you to yourself.

## The Book that Breathes New Life

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Scripture, then, is understood as an *instrument* of revelation (God's act of revealing). Such revelation can be shocking to begin with, especially in crisis-reading, when you realize you are not only reading but *being read*. Beyond the momentary crisis, however, scripture itself becomes a virtual pen in the hand of the Author God, an essential *tool* for character formation over the long haul. Such ongoing formation invites our daily reading, earnest engagement, and humble inquiry, undertaken with the reasonable belief that we are, or will be, written beautifully into the Book of Life (Rev. 20.12). This book of books invites us to reconsider the



*You are a character—  
moral and literary—in  
the story that God  
authors jointly with you.*

possibility of having our character formed (drawing our concern for *moral* character closer to the familiar sense of *literary* character) in the light of scripture, *not* by a rigid insistence on the *authority* of scripture, but by raising the issue of scripture's divine *authorship*.

Yes, just as the Bible is co-authored, so is your life. You are a character—moral *and* literary—in the story that God authors jointly with you in light of scripture. Yes, God is busy—busy with you, co-authoring your life.

*God the Friendly Poet* God's double role as author of scripture and author of life is what a young German man discovered when, at age 27, he was sent on a business trip to London. His mission fell flat, likely owing to his speech impediment. After wallowing in his failure, he tried to make money as a musician, but soon found himself broke, indebted, malnourished, far from home, and sick. At one point he began to read

the Bible, without effect. “Six days later, however, on Palm Sunday, he began reading anew and gradually began to perceive that God was somehow speaking *to him* and that the same one who authored the Bible was also the author of his own life” (Betz 31).

He read the entire Bible in a single month(!), producing a diary of biblical reflections on nearly every book of the Bible in the process. His journal echoes with wonder. He writes as if he suddenly sees everything so much more clearly, expressing sheer elation at the playfully poetic quality of God's literary masterpiece. Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) had come to realize that God is a poet in the broadest sense of the word: “creator and narrator alike” (Bayer 54). More than that, in an autobiographical piece from the same period, Hamann

tells of the God who encounters him in the Bible as the friend who understands him: “In the tumult of the passions which overwhelmed me . . . I continually prayed to God for a friend. . . . Praise God, I found this friend in my heart, who crept in there at the time when I felt most heavily its emptiness and darkness and wildness.” (qtd. in Bayer 62, n. 67)

The divine poet behind scripture and creation, he learned, is ultimately friendly.


From that turning point, Hamann knew precisely what he was about. He went on to become a sharp critic of the Enlightenment and the leading intellect of his day. Yet he was able to remain friends with those, like philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose writings he criticized. Regarding the Bible, he would put the question of Horace to skeptical Enlighteners: “Why do you laugh? Change but the name and the story speaks of *you*” (qtd. in Betz 41, n. 9). Commenting on 1 Peter 4.11, he writes: “The Holy Scriptures ought to be our dictionary, our grammar, upon which all ideas and sayings of Christians are founded and of which they consist and are composed” (“Biblical Reflections”; *Sämtliche Werke* 243; *Londoner Schriften* 304).



*Johann Georg Hamann*

For Hamann, the Bible had become the touchstone for all his analysis, the lens through which he viewed the world and everything in it.

*Best Check Your Doubts at the Door* OK, so how can the same person be unmoved one day and transported a week, a day, or even a moment later? Why are some people thunderstruck by scripture and others not? Well, the Bible is not a magic book, but there is a trick to reading it, a simple trick that you likely already know because you already use it when watching movies or reading other stories, including histories: *You suspend your disbelief*. You enter into fiction with an attitude of trust, a willingness to be taken for a ride. You know full well that it isn't real but you're willing to receive the message and experience of the text.



*If you approach the Bible as merely a story, why expect to get anything out of it without suspending disbelief?*

So why expect to get anything out of a book that purports to reveal the presence, the mind, the artistry of God if you approach it with skepticism instead of trust? For that matter, even if you approach the Bible merely as a story, why expect to get anything out of it without suspending disbelief or leaving your

doubts at the door, as you do with every sci-fi novel you read or every superhero movie you see? Why single this one book out for doubt? As Jesus said, "According to your faith let it be done to you" (Matt. 9.29, *NRSV*) and "the measure you give is the measure you get back" (Luke 6.38). Invest nothing, get nothing. Believe not a word, go away empty. It happens all the time. As the Letter to the Hebrews explains: "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4.12). I can think of no better passage to explain how the friendly God who understands you reveals and interprets you to yourself—that is, to your willing self.

So what ever happened to Austin? One day, at age 32, with his moral life in shambles, Austin flung himself down under a fig tree in the garden and began to bawl his head off and pray, asking God, whom he had kept at arm's length for so long, that he would finally be free from his past sins. Soon he heard a child's voice from the neighbor's yard

chanting what seemed like a song from a game, but a game he did not know: “Pick it up, read it. Pick it up, read it.” Wiping away his tears, he went over to the bench and picked up the book he had been reading moments before, and read the first words he saw: “not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” It was Paul’s Letter to the Romans (13.13-14). As Austin tells it, “it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away” (Augustine 182).

Austin, better known as Augustine of Hippo, would come to be widely recognized as the greatest theologian of the first millennium of the Christian era. The little children’s song that led him to read scripture with trust—“*Tolle lege!* Pick it up, read it!”—is best understood as God’s own prompting to read the Christian scriptures in particular. Taken in this narrower sense, however, the implications are far broader than simply discovering the pleasure of reading.

*Enter the Holy Spirit* No, the Bible is not a magic book, but an *instrument* of revelation, God’s literary masterpiece. The Bible does not act alone. If it did then perhaps it would be a magic book, but no, it does not fly off the shelf and cram itself down your throat. It awaits a reader, one willing to suspend his or her



*The Bible is an instrument of revelation.*

disbelief. But there is another agent involved. Remember the voice prompting Austin/Augustine to pick it up and read it? It may not be an audible voice or a child’s voice in every case, but some unfamiliar, even invisible prompting, an event, a barely detectable nudge may inspire the reading. More often than not, it is the *timing* of things that is remarkable. Some coincidence or convergence or person (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) brings together (1) the words one encounters in the “instrument” of the scriptures; (2) the reader or hearer who is receptive in faith; and (3) the presence or agency of the Author God who is revealed in the encounter.



## *Character and . . . Identity*

In these remarkable, even “holy” conversion experiences of Hamann and Augustine, we see a paradigm or a pattern that is surprisingly common. The copy of the book Augustine read—evidently not even a complete Bible, just an edition of the letters of Paul—was basically paper and ink, like any other book. But Augustine was certain that God used the writing as an instrument to communicate with him. For those of us alive today, the essential message is that God remains committed to using the Bible as the place where, through the Holy Spirit, he meets those who want to know about him and to truly know themselves. If you throw the Bible in the trash, you will not likely be struck by lightning, but your conscience may be struck nonetheless. Read it with an open mind and you may just find your character re-written, your identity formed in a wonderful new way.



*Benozzo Gozzoli,  
“Conversion of Augustine”*

We can actually recognize such a pattern of transformation that people have experienced down through the ages. In fact, as famous as Augustine's account is, two other such moments are mentioned in the very same passage! Augustine had just been told of the conversion of Anthony a century or so earlier, a wealthy young man who happened into church just as the words of Jesus were being read: “If you would be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor; and come follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven” (Matt. 19.21). Anthony considered himself personally addressed, he responded accordingly, and became the father of a monastic movement.

Augustine's friend Alypius had been told of Anthony in the same conversation and had been with Augustine in the garden as they mulled over Anthony's example. He knew of his friend's struggles and watched him pick up and read the passage from Paul. Alypius himself took the text from him, read the very next line, and applied it to himself: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions” (Rom. 14.1). Both men were baptized together, along with Augustine's teenage son, on Easter in the year 387.

With this decisive turn, Augustine no longer resisted God's calling to live a holy, devoted life, but entered fully into his new Christian identity, guiding the church through many wrenching controversies, and producing the most significant interpretations of scripture by any church father.

*Big Changes, Little Changes, and Sometimes No Change at All* As we have said, not every reading of scripture results in a major change in the reader. Some readings involve incremental change, as when one reads a little every day. Others may yield no change at all. The apostle Paul himself acknowledged the difference between dull, ineffectual reading and inspired reading that reveals something: “to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3.15-17).


Jesus, likewise, in his parable about a farmer sowing seed (seed being another metaphor for the Word of God), describes the difference between the receptive and the non-receptive person—such a pervasive theme!—as various forms of soil that either yield a rich, abundant harvest or fail to produce for one reason or another (spiritually hostile forces, trouble and persecution, the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, etc.) (Mark 4.1-20).



*What change will your reading yield?*  
Image: [Freepik.com](https://www.freepik.com)

So the scriptures repeatedly describe the varying degrees of change or response, including none at all, that God's Word effects. One young king heard the scroll of Deuteronomy read and was horrified to realize how Israel had abandoned their covenant with God, so he instituted major reforms (2 Kings 22). After Israel lost their land, spent seventy years in exile, then returned, they heard the scriptures read in public once more and they too wept to hear the Word of God that had fallen silent for so long (Neh. 8.9). In the New Testament book of Acts, an African diplomat happens to be reading a crucial passage in the scroll of Isaiah, and asks the young Philip, who, prompted by the Holy Spirit, has just then run up to meet his chariot, “Who is the prophet talking about?” (Acts 8.26–40).

The timing is exquisite; some might even call it inexplicable if there were not such a clear sense that the Author God is involved, arranging this and other divine appointments.



*There is a well-worn path from personal crisis to scripture to positive personal transformation.*

The paradigm continues beyond the pages of scripture and throughout history, as we have seen in the cases of Augustine and Hamann. Methodists (representing a stream of Protestant denominations with around 80 million followers worldwide) trace

their theological and spiritual roots back through the moment when a discouraged John Wesley walked into a gathering in Aldersgate, in London, and heard someone reading a passage from Martin Luther's commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans. Granted, his experience was with a text several degrees removed from the original letter—through a commentator (Luther), a translator who rendered Luther's German comments into English, and a reader who was there that day—not directly with the Bible itself, but all these layers rested on the good news revealed in the divine text and they converged in such an way that Wesley, in his journal, wrote how his heart was “strangely warmed.” None of it, not least the change that overcame Wesley, would have happened without the Bible and what it reveals of the good nature of God.

## Collaborating Authors

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What is the point? This is all simply to say that there is a well-worn path from personal crisis to scripture to positive personal transformation. Scripture is the *sine qua non* for these transformations, the unparalleled instrument through which you can “reasonably believe” you will encounter, learn from, and be shaped by God. But its role is not reserved for thunderclaps of dramatic conversion, still less is it a license to badger people. It is better understood and far better used as the one essential and ongoing source of spiritual “food” that forms one's true identity.

*God Feeds Us* In both “Testaments” of Christian scripture, “Old” and “New,” some of its human authors (most notably Ezekiel and John)—yes, the authorship of the Bible is a divine-human *collaboration*—were told to “eat this scroll” (metaphorically, I assume). The call of Jeremiah is similar: “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth’” (Jer. 1.9). This would not only form you inwardly, with a deeper and more literal sense of “information” than we associate with the term, it would also make you a speaker for God, collaborating with the Holy Spirit.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “You spoke of the book, then said it becomes a pen with which God writes our story, our character. But sacred text as food? Didn't anyone ever teach you not to mix metaphors?” You are right! Scripture mixes metaphors so often, it likely drives some English teachers crazy.<sup>1</sup> But work with me here, or better yet: *work with the metaphor that works for you.*


I have a wide, flat, decorative spoon from the Central African country of Malawi, a gift from a missionary friend. The spoon is used for serving *nsima*, a white grain made from maize. The picture on the spoon shows a pair of African hands holding something white, which at first I assumed was the bread in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Spoons are for food, right? Looking closer, I saw it was not bread, but the pages of an open Bible held between those hands. Some optical illusions are as sharp as 20-20 vision! We can see God's Word shaping character and forming identity by feeding people in such starkly different, yet similar ways.<sup>2</sup>



*This spoon reminds us that God feeds us with his Word.*

*Our Role Is to Partake and to Participate Humbly* Perhaps you are asking: But what is my role in this? Let's return to Hamann, the failed musician who found God through the poetry of scripture. One of his chief criticisms of the Enlightenment was that it lost sight of the divine Author of scripture, exaggerating the role of its human authors, and thus scuttled the sense of divine-human collaboration. From the human

side of the things, such collaboration requires faith (not only trust, but loyalty) and humility. Humans, of course, can never be equal partners with God, and yet God, wanting to inspire, sanctify, and summon us to our better selves, accommodates himself to us.



*The only proper way to read scripture is by meeting God's humility with our own.*


Hamann described God's authorship of scripture as an act of supreme "condescension" (in a positive sense). God willingly lowers himself to the level of creatures in order to reveal himself. This loving and humble approach to humanity was and is still met with arrogant

dismissal, even with the murder of Jesus, the Son of God, also known as the Word of the Lord or the *Logos* of God. Instead of continuing the pattern of human arrogance, Hamann says, the only proper way to read scripture is by meeting God's humility with our own:

God an author!—(The Creator of the world and Father of humanity has been denied and blamed, the God-Man would be crucified, and the Inspirer of the divine Word ridiculed and blasphemed.) The inspiration of this book is just as great a humiliation and condescension of God as the Creation by the Father and the Incarnation of the Son. The humility of the heart is therefore the unique frame of mind which belongs to the reading of the Bible, and the most indispensable preparation for the same. ("On the Interpretation of Scripture"; *Londoner Schriften* 59)

Remember how I said you need to suspend your disbelief, to read with trust, in order to get anything out of scripture? Humility and faith amount to the basic and essential attitude for understanding God's Word, for receiving the food he offers. In a nutshell, the human role in this collaboration is humbly to approach God through scripture and to consider yourself addressed.

*A Personal Testimony*     A happy fellowship emerges among those grateful to be addressed in this way. I teach seminary students, and I assure you that none of them makes the life-altering decision to go back



*God essentially turns on the lights for us, revealing Godself through imagery that we mere humans can actually understand.*

to school without a text effectively reaching up from the pages of scripture, grabbing them by the collar, and saying: “Pay attention. This is speaking to you.” My own Hamannian/Augustinian moment came in 1988, when I decided to read the whole Bible, not with any mystical

aspiration, religious agenda, or even any conscious sense of devotion. I was simply prompted by the memory of a high school teacher's college preparation syllabus that featured the Old and New Testaments as top priority, and a college literature professor's lifetime reading list on which the Bible was, again, the first thing one “must read.”

Here I was, 25 years old, with years logged in Sunday school, church, Bible studies, etc., and I had only ever spot-read portions of the book that has shaped and arguably defined western civilization far more than any other. I did not get far before I read Isaac's naive question, shortly before he was laid on the altar by his father Abraham: “where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?” Abraham replied: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son” (Gen. 22.7-8). In a flash, I realized what millions of others have concluded long before me. Twenty or so centuries before the crucifixion of Jesus, the Lamb of God “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29), the Author of scripture was speaking through Abraham about Jesus. This Lamb of God, this Author of scripture, had to be *divine*, for what human could see two thousand years into the future without divine assistance and inspiration? Jesus' *subsequent* “once-and-for-all” death not only spared Isaac's life that day but reconciled God and humanity for eternity, thus slamming the brakes on human sacrifice forever.

Some moments, some experiences, simply defy explanation, so no words can do justice to the defibrillating effect this had on me. But at least a small part of it had to do with the sense that, in that moment, many seemingly separate moments of history and truth had converged in a flash and everything of ultimate importance was present and accounted for, bound together in that recognition, in the revelation that

Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—is the Author of Life and the Giver of eternal life, is everything he is revealed to be in the complex, mysterious, composite composition that we know as the Bible. More than this, the searching of this book has become for me, as it is for many others, the basis for everything: not merely for the courses I teach and the sermons I preach, but for the character to which I aspire with each day I am given, for my self-understanding as a beloved child of God, for the kind and charitable regard in which I am to hold my neighbors. I measure up to none of these, but together they constitute both the goal and the frame of reference—of sense, of sanity—we have been given to guide us through this earthly life.

“Pick it up, read it.” Genesis 22 is a riveting story, one that lies behind Kierkegaard's classic *Fear and Trembling*. But far beyond inspiring this or that book, sermon, painting, sculpture, or whatever, it reveals the transcendent perspective of the only Author capable of *seeing, writing, even appearing in*, the whole of human history and steering it through the ages. I say the “only” such Author because God does this from the vantage point of eternity. God essentially turns on the lights for us, writing the story of redemption and revealing Godself through imagery, poetry, symbol, events, parables, etc., so that we mere humans can actually understand. Such an epiphany does not move me to put the book down and say: “Been there, done that. I'm done.” No, I want to know this friendly, most essential Author!

That may be the best way to understand the connection between encountering God through scripture suddenly in a momentary crisis and doing so every day through regular formative reading. You find yourself rescued from a train wreck by a Good Samaritan, and exclaim: “That Samaritan is the best and kindest person I have ever met! What better friend could I have? I want to spend every day with a friend like that!”<sup>3</sup>

*The Most Essential Author Shapes Our Character(s)* You know how it is with human authors and artists. A great novel moves you and you want to read more, yes, read *everything* by the author. A song hooks you, so you check out the artist's entire catalog. You want to know their story, their background, their inspiration. What were they trying to say with this or that work? Needless to say, in every case, the search leads

to new discoveries, but also to the realization that some works are better than others and, frankly, not all of it is 5-star stuff.

When it comes to scripture's influence, however, sometimes we see it go beyond the occasional literary allusion and take hold in a deep and discernible way at a particular stage in an artist's career. Just as Bob Dylan had his Gospel period (a phase that I think has not ended, but only grown more subtle), we are now witnessing a similar transformation, as Kanye West, who speaks openly about the Bible's influence on his own creativity (Sarachik), sets aside the god of self and sings and preaches that *Jesus is King* and distributes Bibles to any interested fans (Law). Time will tell whether the transformation of Kanye or Dylan or any of us will hold, but I do suspect that in the future Kanye's catalog and career will be assessed in two distinct phases: Before and after *Jesus is King*.



*Jesus stands before the throne of God.*


So what about when the Poet, the Author, or the Artist is God, who even counts *me* and *you* among the catalog of his works? The most essential Author writes us, his collaborators, both *with* character and *as* characters. As David wrote in the Psalms: “Here I am!

In the scroll of the book it is written of me” (Ps. 40.11). And in the most hair-raising book of the Bible, there is a mysterious detail. Three times Revelation mentions a separation of those bound for hell, who worship “the beast,” from those saints whose *names* are “written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered” (Rev. 13.8; cf. 17.8; 20.15).

But a fourth and final time, in the apostle's vision of the new, heavenly Jerusalem, he writes of the city: “nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but *only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*” (Rev. 21.27; italics mine). All the ominous overtones aside, notice how fitting this phrase is: “those who



are written.” No longer are mere names being written. No, this book of life is no measly class roster, attendance sheet, telephone directory, or even a register of church membership. Rather, at the end of the grand narrative of divine revelation, whole persons—fully-orbed, well-rounded characters—are the product of the pen of the divine Poet, the Author God.



*Whole persons are the product of the pen of the divine Poet, the Author God.*

## Your Life, God’s Epic

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So where to begin? At the beginning, of course! In the beginning, “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.” (Gen. 1.3-4) As a newborn, all your eyes were able to make out was the difference between light and darkness. When Austin/Augustine first began to ask questions about life, with an infant in his lap, and questions about death, with the dirt still fresh on his father's grave, all he could grasp were the most simplistic, often superstitious, contrasts. But in time God eventually coaxed him to pick up and read just the words he needed to read in order to set him free and give him a whole new sense of identity. His life began anew just as he began a new relationship with the Word of God.

Likewise, through untold circumstances and the subtlest of spiritual nudges, God manages to get some of us to pick up his epic poem and read it. Under God’s friendly influence, moral agents, persons of maturity, character, purpose, and integrity—Anthony, Augustine, Alypius, Luther, Wesley, Hamann, Kierkegaard, myriads of saints, women and men in every age, and now perhaps even Kanye West and Kim Kardashian!?!—emerge as “new creation,” living, artistic works of this same divine Poet, this Author of salvation. Scripture is a book to be picked up with an open mind. When disbelief is humbly set aside, you should prepare for an adventurous ride, a collaboration with God as he writes you into his book of life. In such a light that spills toward us from eternity, shouldn’t we begin to think of our own lives as epics? Pick up the Bible and read it. God knows what will happen!

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Image p. 55: “*Johann Georg Hamann*,” Wikimedia/public domain

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Image p. 65: scan by Timothy Matthew Slemmons of illustration in 16th c. copy of *Oecolampadius' translation of Theophylact's commentary on the Gospels*.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most important and illuminating treatments of biblical metaphor, see the classic works of Northrop Frye, namely, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of “the Bible and Literature.”*

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say other literature cannot inspire us, shape our character, and form our identity. It is to highlight the claims that the Bible makes for itself, especially for its divine Author, to do so in a way, and with a friendly and redemptive integrity, that secular literature alone does not.

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of good daily Bible reading plans available, but I would suggest and even prescribe the one-year plans by Eliot Young (no relation to Sarah Young of the popular *Jesus Calling* series), namely, *The Word at Work*, *The Spirit at Work*, and *Sitometrion*. These plans, like many others, provide for multiple starting points with the assumption that you will read through

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different parts of the Bible (e.g., the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, Epistles) simultaneously, but they have the added bonus of rich, penetrating, and thought-provoking commentary.

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