

The document, "Introduction: the art of reading," from J. P. Fokkelman's *Reading Biblical Narrative*, primarily focuses on a theory of reading that emphasizes the **reader's active role** in creating a text's meaning, particularly concerning biblical narratives.

Here are the main points:

The Active Role of the Reader in Creating Meaning

- [cite_start]**Meaning is not inherent or fixed:** The text does not simply "contain" meaning like a cup contains coffee[cite: 898, 899]. [cite_start]Meaning is **potential** or **latent** until a reader engages with it[cite: 894, 914].
- [cite_start]**Reading is an active process:** A text only becomes "alive" and starts to speak when a listener comes along[cite: 901, 902]. [cite_start]Reading is a "specific mental activity" that involves **conferring meaning** to the text; the reader is structuring the living text[cite: 911, 912].
- [cite_start]**Reader responsibility:** Because meaning is only realized through the reader's mediation, the reader's responsibility for that meaning is greater than the text's own[cite: 916].
- [cite_start]**Subjectivity is essential but must be controlled:** Readers are not objective; they express a value judgment simply by opening the book[cite: 989, 990]. [cite_start]The text cannot come to life through any other channel than the reader's **subjectivity**[cite: 993]. [cite_start]A good reader, however, must control this subjectivity, employing it in a disciplined way for the good of the text[cite: 1005, 1006].

Critique of the Historical-Critical Approach

- [cite_start]**Rejection of "three-fold alienation":** The common scholarly attitude of trying to understand the Bible only "within the framework of its own time" creates a "three-fold alienation" by emphasizing that the text comes from "far away," "long ago," and a "very different" culture[cite: 921, 922].
- [cite_start]**The text is a "living text":** The writer, audience, and original context are all long gone, and the text is on an irreversible journey away from its origin—it has been **decontextualized**[cite: 936, 937, 940]. [cite_start]Trying to read the text as an early Israelite would have is both perilous and not viable[cite: 943, 944].
- [cite_start]**Focus on the present encounter:** The essential part of reading is the confrontation, interplay, and clash between **what the text provides** (the world it evokes and values it embodies) and the **reader's own world and values**[cite: 968].

Emphasis on Literary Form: Asking "How" not "What"

- [cite_start] **The primary question:** The most productive approach to reading is to shift the focus from **what** the text is saying to **how** it is saying it (i.e., *how* it has been constructed)[cite: 1028, 1029, 1032].
- [cite_start] **Avoiding pitfalls of premature interpretation:** Asking "what does it say" too soon leads to two pitfalls: **partial observation** and allowing expectations, prejudices, and religious beliefs (unconscious desires) to pre-form the interpretation[cite: 1034, 1040].
- [cite_start] **Form and content are inseparable:** The stories are products of meticulous **literary design**[cite: 1057]. [cite_start]The content can only exist by virtue of the **forms of language, style, and structure** chosen by the writer[cite: 1089]. [cite_start]Penetrating deeply into the meaning requires understanding *how* a story is constructed and the purpose behind its techniques[cite: 1082].

Language and Time as Literary Components

- [cite_start] **Language is art:** All meanings exist by means of language and have been created or evoked by language[cite: 1070, 1071]. [cite_start]Good readers follow the writer's footsteps by loving and creatively handling language[cite: 1072].
- [cite_start] **Narrative Time:** The chapter introduces distinctions in how time functions in narrative: **narration time** (discourse time—the length of the text itself) and **narrated time** (story time—the duration of the events described)[cite: 734].
- [cite_start] **Manipulation of Time:** Narrators manipulate the ratio between these two forms of time, stretching or condensing narrated time or even halting it (e.g., in a weapon inventory or a historical aside) to indicate what is really important[cite: 814, 818, 822].
- [cite_start] **Example: David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17):** The story is used to illustrate how attention to **language** (David's use of metaphor to see Goliath as a wild animal) and **literary form** (the ironic focus on Goliath's armor and a re-translation of the point of impact) reveals profound meaning and an ideological contrast between a faith in weapons versus a faith in the Lord[cite: 1121, 1129, 1130, 680, 722].

The document highlights the danger of the reader **imposing** a pre-existing view onto the text, rather than engaging with what the text actually presents.

This idea is most forcefully expressed in the caution against asking the question "**What is the text saying?**" prematurely.

Imposing Preconceived Views on the Text

Fokkelman argues that rushing to the content ("What does it say?") before analyzing the form ("How does it say it?") is a critical error. This haste immediately opens the door for the reader's own **cemented views to hijack** the interpretation.

Instead of reading to discover, the reader is essentially using the text as a mirror or a tool to validate what they already believe. This destructive process occurs in two ways:

1. **Partial Observation:** The reader selectively observes only the parts of the text that conform to their existing worldview, thus creating a partial, and therefore false, representation of the text's message.
2. **Pre-Formed Interpretation:** The reader's interpretation is fundamentally shaped by their **expectations, prejudices, religious beliefs, and unconscious desires** before they even begin a loyal reading. The text becomes an **allegory for their own preconceived notions** rather than a world to be explored on its own terms.

In this sense, the reader is not engaging in an act of reading, but an act of **self-justification**, making the text serve their established view rather than allowing the text to challenge or shape their view. Therefore, the "meaning" that emerges is a **projection** of the reader's mind, not the disciplined rendering of the text's literary design.