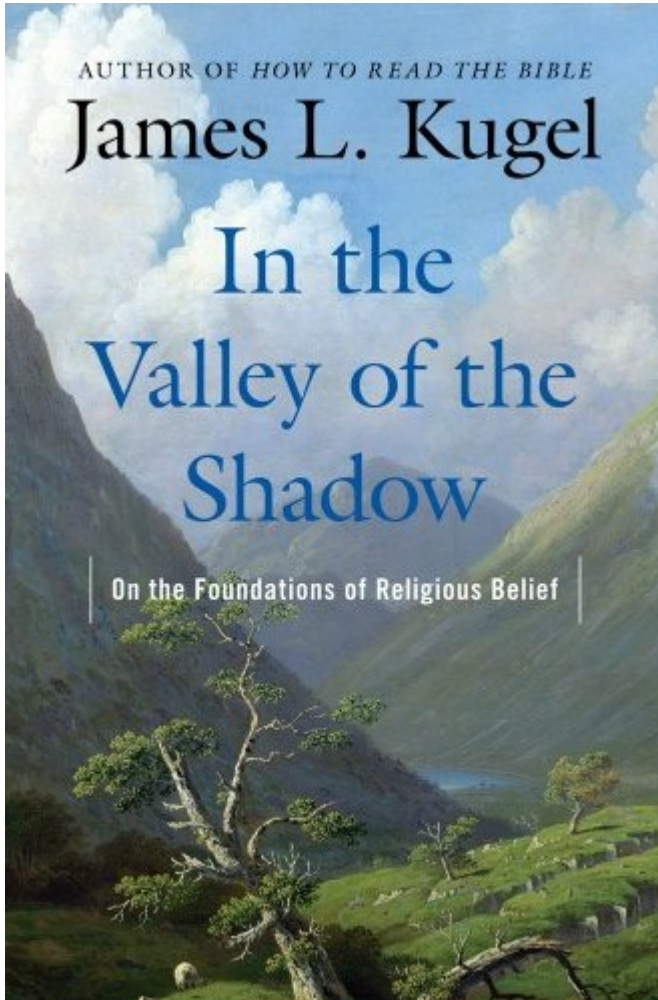


# Into starkness

By [David Heim](#)

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## In Review



## In the Valley of the Shadow

by James L. Kugel

Free Press

Dramatic conversion stories are the exception, not the rule, in the life of faith. Coming to faith usually involves a gradual adjustment of one's vision and habits, rather than the kind of dramatic turnaround described in those oft-sung words of "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." Life is rarely so black and white.

Yet there are moments in every life of faith when the choices one faces seem absolute and when the difference between the road taken and the one not taken looks black and white: it's faithfulness or betrayal, integrity or chaos, blessing or curse, mercy or condemnation, the life that is eternal or the death that is eternal. The difference may be recognized only in retrospect, and experienced only internally, yet there is no getting around its decisive significance. If faith is never part of a desperate, decisive struggle, then perhaps one hasn't yet fully entered into the religious life.

Bible scholar James L. Kugel notes that "starkness" is a basic feature of the Bible. Many psalms, for example, describe a world "stripped down to the essentials, right and wrong, good and evil, following God or going astray." He points out that the book of Proverbs divides the world into the righteous and the wicked, and in the book of Deuteronomy God sets before people the choice of life or death.

A world of such polarities may seem far removed from everyday life, Kugel says, until we face a moment of crisis and the words of scripture are suddenly heard in a fresh way. That is what happened to Kugel himself after he was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer. His book *In the Valley of the Shadow* (Free Press) is his account of how the texts and themes of scripture that he has taught at Harvard took on new resonance as he lived under the shadow of his own imminent death. (As it turned out, the cancer was successfully treated.)

The book has many engaging moments in which Kugel makes effective use of his biblical knowledge, as in those comments on "starkness." For long stretches, however, he drops the personal narrative and dips into current topics in brain science or the meaning of sacrifice in the history of religions. These explorations are always clear, but they lack the passionate inwardness that prompted the book in the first place and that drives its best

parts.