

Ears to hear: Reading the Bible with the aid of faithful interpreters

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

Every once in a while someone asks me about my “faith walk.” It makes me cringe. But lately I have discovered that the expression can have a less mawkish, more literal connotation. I have taken to Bible-walking: walking from office to home, from home to supermarket, from kitchen to study and from kettle to pot, with a headset on my head and the words of the Bible, King James Version, spoken by the “voice of the Bible,” Alexander Scourby, thundering in my ears. The idea came to me after several wonderful months spent walking through Middle-Earth, listening to an unabridged reading of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*—all 45 cassettes. Only then did it occur to me to walk my way through the Bible, 48 cassettes, from Genesis to Revelation. As of this writing, I have just reached the foothills of Malachi.

Hearing is entirely different from reading. One remembers by sense and taste, rather than cognition. Episodes get attached to one’s surroundings. Genesis 37 is forever pasted upon the unremarkable mailbox that stands at the corner I was rounding as I heard, “And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; And they took him, and cast him into a pit . . .” And though no one would suspect it, a certain scruffy patch where the bike path empties into the Stop & Shop parking lot has become a royal pleasure-garden; for it was here that I heard about the “gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks” King Solomon obtained from Tarshish (2 Chron. 9:21).

It’s a familiar observation that in the epoch before print technology, our ancestors relied upon memorization and recitation to transmit their religious culture. For the ancients and for the traditionally learned, memory is a vast storehouse, a treasury, a palace, a theater, an abyss that calls to the Abyss. Bible-walking cannot restore the lost arts of memory, but it can provide an inkling of what it would be like to live in a mind furnished with biblical lessons and imprinted with biblical images and sounds. Bible-walking makes the world a memory theater.

Listening through a headset, I hear the Bible proclaimed in a voice that descends from above. This contrasts mightily with my usual reading posture. When I read, I rarely stand, as our ancestors used to do; typically I am hunched over the book and hold it in my grip. I scan for information, I read between the lines, I skip the indigestible parts. When I am Bible-walking, however, I hear it all. I can't read what I want to read, or make the text say what I want it to say. The genealogies, dull lists of dead letters when I read them, rise up like a living procession of ancestors when I hear them. I hear what the Bible says about purity and pollution, not just what it says about right and wrong. The prophets terrify me. The wars seem uncannily familiar. The thought sinks in that we have not ceased from idolatry, that we still pass our children through the altar fire to Molech. I hear the strong demands, and the huge freedom the Bible promises; and I feel the folly of our attempts to wiggle out of teachings that pertain to social and sexual morality. Development of doctrine is one thing; remaking the Bible after our own image is another.

Bible-walking is a delight when one is lucky enough to be outside during the many passages in which nature praises God. The silvery squirrel that pelts my head with an acorn and the shimmery slug naked of its shell and unashamed, the clouds piled high in their grandeur and the compost heap piled low in its humility; the pond that looks straight up to heaven and the gutter-stream that rushes toward the sewer praising God for having made it such a goodly brook—all creatures great and small are praising God in unison with the Bible. Only one of these creatures, a middle-aged biped of stature slightly greater than a hobbit, is so dense that she needs a headset to speak reminders into her ears. Fads and obsessions fade in the presence of these voices from the gutter-stream and the Bible stream; the voice of the living God speaks and commands. I am little, my life is passing, and I hear words that are life abundant: do not steal, do not covet, do not give false witness . . . be upright and serve the Lord with gladness, care for the poor, avoid corruption and impurity. Protect the child in the womb and the sanctity of the family, and shield the aged and infirm from those who would callously dispose of them. Be faithful; *don't* follow your bliss. Every leaf speaks its consent; who am I to withhold it, or hedge it about with reservations that serve only the ego and the age?

But these reflections make me realize more acutely than ever that I need to hear the Bible not naked (as a fundamentalist might wish) but gloriously clothed with commentary and wise guidance. Reading, or hearing, the Bible from cover to cover is quite untraditional; we are meant to encounter the Bible through the lectionary, the liturgy, or the Torah portions read in synagogue. I need the rabbis and the

church fathers; I need the Talmud, the magisterium, the inspired preachers and the historical-critical scholars who are willing to join their company. Without the aid of faithful interpreters, I am doomed to hear only a sectarian voice, a fundamentalist voice, a liberal voice, a secularist voice or my own voice, speaking Alexander-Scourby Bible-ese. Bible-walking: it's a great adventure—definitely not a stroll in the park.