

How to Read The Bible

Reading can be daunting to anyone, and when it comes to the Bible, many of us simply give up thinking that it is too hard, too over our heads. Or, others have a kind of crazy ultra-subjective approach, believing that it is open to *any* personal interpretation in the *this is what it means to me* school of reading.

Definitely the Bible stands alone, believed by many to be the inerrant Word of God. Although the Bible is not like any other book, *still it must be read the way you would read any other book* by letting it speak for itself. The most important fact about *reading anything* is that *the writer determines meaning*. The reader can *at best* tip his hat to the text, acknowledging that he has done his best to understand the writer's complete viewpoint. Sometimes the readers' experiences are valuable to understanding, sometimes they just get in the way.

We must not bring to our reading a lot of preconceived notions that could filter out what the writer is saying. You wouldn't read a book by Ernest Hemingway, for example, and then declare after you have read a page "this is what it means to me or that can't be true." Preconceived notions may come from our Western world-view point, from church doctrines that can act like a screwdriver, screwing interpretations into a text, or from pastors' sermons, or from TV preachers, or from some misunderstanding about translations, or from reading a passage symbolically instead of literally. It is best to approach the text without filters or preconceived ideas. Very difficult to do.

As established, the writer creates meaning, not the reader. So, the first step of reading is *What is the author saying?* The second step is *do I agree with this writer in whole or in part?* If you begin with step two, you will never be able to read the Bible intelligently. Ultimately you must decide if what you have read is true. But, you can't change the rules of intelligent reading simply because what you read does not fit into your paradigm.

The reader must humble himself. The writer must be superior to the reader in understanding. And the reader must be able to overcome this inequality to a good degree. The reason he picks up the book in the first place is to have understanding. He must strive to know what the author meant. There are many who will never understand no matter how easy the translation, how many below the line commentators, or how many versions or translations. The Greeks call such readers *Sophomores*; Alexander Pope calls them "*bookful blockheads, ignorantly read*" or as Paul said "*ever learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth*" (2 Tim.3.7).

I was just reading a Facebook post today by a very good scholar who was discussing the problem of evil. Logical syllogisms were presented, philosophers such as Epicurus, Richard Dawkins, and Bertrand Russel, were mentioned; but in this erudite discussion, the Bible didn't come up, the only book where the presence of evil is adequately explained. In fact, when it comes to the Bible, sometimes a child can instinctively grasp a truth before the educated man. Seminary, itself, can be the obstacle.

Dabbling here and there in the Bible, reading about the Bible instead of reading the Bible itself will never produce understanding. Although this essay focuses on important practical considerations, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate teacher. Arrogance and our naturalistic predilections interfere with reading the Bible especially the first five books. Paul doesn't give the smart man a lot of credit. He says, through wisdom man cannot know God.

"For the natural man does not receive the things of the spirit of God for they are foolishness to him, nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor.2.14).

The Western world-view as hindrance:

Northern European peoples are naturalistic. We respect the engineer, the scientist. Our focus is on science to understand the natural world. Our Western world view is not very concerned with the supernatural, supernatural beings, or those concepts that go beyond the five senses. If we are sick we send for the doctor trained in science. A non-Westerner may say, "What Spirit have I offended? Is someone taking revenge by having a Spirit afflict me? The Bible introduces the *supernatural* from the first verse in Genesis through the last verse in Revelation. Scientist and naturalists will have problems with the supernatural and for that reason alone may disregard the Bible

Some of our inherited Western assumptions are: a focus on *material objects*, gaining stuff; A Filipino believes you are poor if you have no relatives. And, in the New Testament, what we store up in heaven is our real treasure.

Western Society is *humanistic*. We believe our achievements have come unaided through human efforts. Humanism believes the problems of living in the world can be solved by human intelligence; no outside spiritual assistance is needed. The Bible refers to those who are humanistic as "sons of Greece" and those who are like the Hebrews, God's people, as 'Sons of Zion' (Zech.9.1).

Western society values *individualism and independence*. We don't value dependence on God or the group to which we belong. Biblical society was dependent on each other and God. Westerners tend to be open to change, especially if technological, but not so open to suspending a naturalistic belief for a supernatural one. In fact some Bible expositors interpret the "original sin" of Adam and Eve as a desire to be separate from God, to rely completely on themselves.

The Overview:

The same first principles that guide all reading should be applied to the Bible. Readers are benefited from an **overview** of a book and since, the Bible is a book of books, each book should be read with the writer's culture, history and audience in mind. We need to understand that the early Hebrews birthed the Bible from their middle Eastern culture which tends to be at odds with our Western Culture. Many never realize that Jesus is a Jew born of a Jewish Mother in a Jewish land of the lineage of David, King of Israel.

A good overview of the Bible is the Bethel Bible Series put together by the Lutheran Church a few years ago. The Bible is a work of literature and literature must be unified. There is something pulling the entire Bible together to give it unity, a sense of all parts contributing to the whole. The Bethel Series does a great job of illustrating this unity. Still, you don't need a Bible course to begin, though this series is helpful.

Don't be daunted, take a big breath and start reading. The Bible is a book of truth and comfort. Many advocate beginning with John's gospel in the New Testament. Personally, I like to begin with the first five books, the Torah, as it is the seed plot for the rest of the Bible explaining much of what is to come. Sometimes one begins in the New Testament, never to read the Old. Each testament helps to explain the other. Or if you begin with Genesis and Matthew, you will find lots of correlation.

What pulls the Bible together is the person of Jesus Christ or Yeshua ha Messiaich. He can be seen throughout the entire Old Testament as well as in the New. And the themes *of paradise Lost, the sinfulness of man, man's redemption, and paradise restored are the universal glue*. An experienced

Bible reader will see more and more of these connections. Like the pieces of an intricate puzzle no piece can be removed without losing some truth or some light that is necessary to understand the whole.

Some facts about the Bible:

It was written over a 1600 year span.
There are 66 books from 40 different authors

They didn't consult with one another, yet their work in its entirety produces agreement. Though Each writer wrote from his own point of view and in his own style, their writings fit together to produce a unified work. They give the sense of one author; they state that they were inspired by God or the Holy Spirit.

The person who ties all the books together is the Jewish Messiah, known as Yeshua or Jesus. The writers of this book of books are all Hebrew or (Jewish) with the exception of Luke in the New Testament who was a Jewish convert and Paul's personal doctor.

The Old Testament is written in Hebrew with the exception that parts of Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezra, were written in Aramaic.

New evidence supports that the Gospels were also written in Hebrew.
The New Testament letters were written in Greek.
The earliest translation of the O.T. Is the Septuagint (LXX) written entirely in Greek in the 3rd B.C.
Recent archaeological finds support a written rather than an oral tradition.

How did the Bible come to us. What is the impact of Translation?

Some people believe the Bible cannot be accurate because of its many translations. It is more correct to say that the Old Testament came to us the way an old photograph does, by copying. The Old Testament writers wrote on scrolls. The redactors and scribes recopied them when they got old. The old scroll was then put into a jar and hidden away. The copiers were so meticulous that if they were to drive a spike through a new scroll, the letters pierced would be identical to a similar piercing of the old scroll. The number of letters from the top to the bottom, from the right to the left would also be identical. Before they could copy the sacred name of God they would have to take a Mikvah, immerse themselves in baptismal waters. That is why one sees so many archaeological remains of Mikvahs in the area of the Dead Sea. The find of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940's confirms the authenticity of the Old Testament.

Regarding the New Testament, many copies of ancient texts exist, in the thousands. And by two hundred AD every verse in the New Testament that we may read in the King James Version had already been cited by the early Ante-Nicean Fathers. They were men like Clement, baptized by Peter, Ignatius of Lyons a "hearer of the apostles," Irenaeus and Justin Martyr.

The voluminous works of Irenaeus, pupil of Polycarp, pupil of the Apostle John, pupil of God (Bennet 13) validate along with other early writers the authenticity of the New Testament as received by (*Textus Receptus*) the translators who gave us the King James Version. As far as I am concerned, no greater authenticity is needed. The argument that the New Testament wasn't agreed upon until the

Council of Nicea 325 is spurious. (Eusebius was a member of the council)

The Textus Receptus *were* the Greek manuscripts which formed the basis of the original English translations. Since the Receptus, older manuscripts have come to light, The Textus Criticus. Many scholars think that their age makes them more accurate. Translations such as the NI V and the NAS are based on the Textus Criticus. However, these manuscripts arrived on the scene very badly marked up and edited which may reveal tampering. That storm has yet to be settled. Eusebius records the battles the Fathers had with Gnostic counterfeits, such as Simon Magus. But, for me, the argument is moot if the same passages that are familiar to us were already quoted by the early Fathers.

The first translation ever made is the **Septuagint** which translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek, Jesus quotes from this translation often, giving it a halo of authenticity. Then Jerome living on the Mount of Olives in the late 4th century A.D., translated the entire Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate serving as the basis for The Catholic Bibles,

No English translations were made until **Wycliffe** (1382) translated the Bible into English from the **Vulgate**. **Tyndale's** was the first partial translation from original Hebrew and Greek texts into English in the 16th century. These efforts culminated in the magnificent **Authorized King James Version** of 1611 translated by a group of scholars unmatched today in brilliance, headed up by the bishop and scholar, Sir Lancelot Andrewes who could have been translator general at Babel.

The Revised Standard Version didn't come about until the early 20th century and the later 20th century brought the familiar The New American Standard, The New King James Bible, and The New International Bible. Are there really that many translations to say that the meaning was *lost in translation*? However, I would stay far away from paraphrases and from some of the new Bibles that have sprouted like weeds in the last twenty years. Many can't be trusted. An argument for another day.

Even though you know you are reading a translation, don't fall for the old saw:

"this is what it means in the original Greek or Hebrew." Not a lot of light is shed when one searches for word meanings out of the Greek and Hebrew lexicon. If you have ever read a Google translation you know that it doesn't convey meaning. The art and science of the translator is to convey meaning. They weren't stupid! Looking up a word in the original can only convey a denotation of a word, not its connotation and certainly not the meaning of the passage. The translator must use the best English words that he can to convey the entire sense, meaning, even to poetic effect of the original. The translation that does this best is The King James Version.

Now to prepare for the close read some tools are necessary: a **pen** and a **dictionary**. A good Bible dictionary is nice too, but if you don't know what the words mean, Help! If you missed learning about language devices in your English class, they become even more important aids in understanding the Bible.

A look at Language in the Bible:

As mentioned, allow the author to speak for himself. The author, not the reader determines if the passage is **literal or figurative**. If it seems far-fetched, it does not automatically mean the the passage contains symbols, metaphor, or allegory. Begin with **the literal method of interpretation** that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, customary usage whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. To interpret literally means nothing more or less than to read in terms of normal, usual, designations. When the text no longer allows this, than the reader shifts

his method as he would when reading Jesus words, “I am the door,” which is, of course, a **metaphor**. The literal method of interpretation is the only sane and safe check on the imaginations of man.

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech using a picture to help us understand meaning. A common metaphor might be “The assignment was a breeze.” Metaphor is a picture which makes an implicit or implied comparison between two things that are unrelated. Some get very hackneyed: “He was as stubborn as a mule”. The idea is to look at the picture, the **mule** or the **breeze** to aid the concept.

The Bible, like all literature, contains different kinds of language: poetry, parable, figures of speech such as metaphor, allegory, types, and symbols. To read the Bible intelligently, it is important to understand the definition of each.

A Parable is a story that teaches a moral or religious lesson.

Jesus taught in parables to help the common people understand his meaning. Parables reveal or obscure very deep truths. Dwight Pentecost says that Jesus used the parable of the nobleman to explain a *second coming*:

Even though the Jews expected the immediate promise of the Kingdom, Jesus illustrates by way of parable in the 19th chapter of Luke that this Kingdom will come only after an *undefined period of time has elapsed* for He represents Himself as the nobleman who having a right to the Kingdom goes “into a far country to receive the Kingdom for Himself” (12) and to return at a time.” During His absence His servants “occupy till I come.” Then after an interval of time, not definitely stated, the nobleman returns ([Jesus] to enter His reign having received the Kingdom. He returns, judgment follows, and those who rejected Him saying “we will not have this man to rule over us” are destroyed .

The Parables can be very difficult with layers of application.

An Allegory

is a figure of speech in which abstract ideas and principles are described in terms of characters, figures, and events. Although an allegory uses symbols, it is different from symbolism. An allegory is a complete narrative which involves characters and events that stand for an abstract idea or event.

Pilgrims Progress is an old Christian allegory where every event and character is an idea. Some read the book of Revelation as an allegory instead of as a prophecy as yet unfulfilled. I do not believe it to be an allegory though it contains symbolic language.

Symbol

A symbol, on the other hand, is an object that stands for an idea giving it a particular meaning. A symbol does not tell a story like an allegory. A common symbol used in everyday language might be the rose . The rose stands for love. The dove for peace. A chain might symbolize prison or a union. We are “bound together by cords of love.” Lots of black in a story might stand for evil or death. A ladder may symbolize the connection between heaven and earth.

Type

The most important aid in reading connecting the old Testament to the New is a the **Type**. **Type means to represent before hand, to prefigure. It is a person, event, or institution in the Old Testament that stands for a corresponding person or event in the New Testament.** The Old Testament has many types that foreshadow or prefigure Jesus. The New Testament contains anti-types one that is foreshadowed by or identified with a **counterpart** in the Old Testament. For Example, Jesus' reference to the “Days of Noah and Lot” in the last days are **anti-types** that help explain his end

times scenario in the 24th chapter of Matthew.

Examples of types: The Israelites sacrificed a **lamb at Passover**. The lamb becomes a picture of the sacrifice of Jesus. John the Baptist calls Jesus “the lamb that takes away the sins of the world.” In the O.T. every time a lamb is sacrificed it typified the final sacrifice of Jesus.

The type of the Serpent in the Wilderness: The 21st chapter of Numbers tells of fiery serpents sent among the children of Israel. Many of them died. God commanded Moses to erect a bronze serpent. If the people looked UP to this serpent, they would not die but live. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3.14) . If the children of Israel did not look up to that **type of Christ**, they died. Likewise, we must look up to the cross and the resurrection in faith to live. This is a very powerful type.

Abraham's offering up Isaac as a sacrifice is a type of the crucifixion (Genesis 22). Many details of Jesus crucifixion are pictured. How many details can you find? Some have seen as many as twenty.

A **rock** is a type of Jesus. God told Moses that he would hide him in the “**clift of the rock**” as he passed by so that Moses would not die in His presence. That clift represents Jesus. God said, “there is beside me a clift in the rock” meaning that seated beside him was Jesus (Ex.33.21).

Moses was instructed to **strike a rock** to get water when the children of Israel were thirsty Paul explains that type: “We all ate the same spiritual food [manna] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of the *spiritual rock that followed them*, and that *rock was Christ*” (1 Cor.10.4).

Allegory and Prophecy

Prophecy is another kind of language in the Bible. Hebrew is ideally suited for prophecy because time can be fluid; either the past, present or future may be expressed, sometimes all at once. Prophecy in the Bible is different from *prophetic significance* that one might find in a book like Orwell's 1984 or Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind. Biblical prophecy foretells very specifically events that have come to pass in the smallest detail. No other book purporting to be prophetic has been able to duplicate the Bible in this regard.

Sometimes readers will mistake prophecy for allegory. Jesus' first coming is a fulfillment of many Scriptures in the Old Testament taken literally. That Jesus has come as Messiah is based on prophetic fulfillment. Other Scriptures describing the fate of Israel have also come to pass as prophesied. To then read unfulfilled prophecies as allegory is a violation of logic. Would not future prophecies have the same literal fulfillment?

A few of examples:

- Jesus was born of a virgin: Isaiah 7.14
- Born in Bethlehem: Micah 5.
- Called out of Egypt: Hosea 11.1
- hands and feet pierced: Psalms 22

Fate of Israel:

- Abraham told that Israel would be slaves in Egypt but led out with great wealth. Gen 15.14

The Northern Kingdom would be captured: Amos 5.27
The rebuilding of the second temple: Zech. 4.6.10.
After a great diaspora, the Nation of Israel would be restored in a day (Is. 66.7-8)
There are many more examples of fulfilled prophecy.

The Close Read

What is the **category of the book** you are reading? (The Bible has history, poetry, proverbs, prophetic books, eyewitness accounts, biographies, letters)
Rapidly overview and produce a cursory outline of the book

Read a chapter with pen in hand.

Who is speaking in every instance?

Who is the audience? (A common reading error is to assume that Christians are the audience). Since the Bible has many applications of meaning, often lessons from your reading may be applied to the Christian life, *but don't mistake a lesson for the audience.*

Discover the beginning and end of each sentence.

Only a sentence can convey meaning; **look for the periods.**

For example the first chapter of Ephesians has one sentence in eight verses.

Look up any words you don't know in a dictionary.

Discover the Terms. A term is not a word without further qualifications; a dictionary can not help in this situation, only becoming very familiar with the Bible. Or perhaps, just for brevity, google the term. For example Paul's letters to the Thessalonians has terms that may be unfamiliar such as *kingdom, thief in the night, His appearing*. But you will eventually need to come to terms with the terms.

Be sure to trace back any pronouns to their antecedent. In the case of the Bible, pronouns can become tricky. The verse and chapter designations are arbitrary and were not in the original texts. The first verses in a chapter many not make sense without referring back to the preceding chapter.

Don't assume that a chapter is a unit of meaning.

Now find the important words, and through them come to understand the author. **Underline** anything that jumps out at you for any reason but especially **key words**. For the reader's case, the most **important words are the words that give you trouble.**

Find key sentences and underline them. What are the key sentences? Likewise, The ones that give you the most difficulty. That is why Bible discussion groups are so valuable. We can discuss problems of reading, but ultimately the reader has to come to an understanding or the reading simply isn't done.

Ask questions of the text. Ask any question that you think needs clarifying. Write these questions in marginal notes, notes that may have arrows drawn to the mystifying places. When I taught literature I would have my students write a list of questions to ask the character if they could bring that character to life. Then I would have other students role play. It is amazing what answers role playing can give to difficult questions. Ask the question, and pretend that you are the one with the answer and give it a whirl.

Be prepared to cross reference while a book is being digested. Even reading The Bible from beginning to end in sequence may not give you complete understanding. Themes and subjects are found spread across the Bible. If the Holy Spirit doesn't cross reference, use a **concordance** to see all the places where this particular event or subject is spoken of. Pay attention to the first source. Until you know the cross references, you will not be able to have a complete grasp on the subject at hand. Their composite understanding gives the Bible unity and the reader the fullest sense of the topic. What I am proposing takes some time.

Now it is time to **restate the author**. If you don't know his arguments or his story you can't decide your own position. You must be able to state with reasonable clarity "I understand" before you know whether or not to agree or whether or not to suspend judgment.

Remember the Bible's purpose is to not convey **knowledge** but rather **understanding, truth, and wisdom**. It is worth the effort and if approached prayerfully and with a certain hunger, he who seeks will find. The truth, in as much as it can be found, requires both objectivity and diligence. And, as a bonus, you may receive peace, love and joy in the Holy Ghost and the gift of eternal life. I can think of no greater prize.

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