

How to Read the Bible

If you are picking up the Bible for the first time or have never been instructed properly how to read it, you might find it intimidating. Aside from the fact that it is an enormous book (66 separate documents compiled into one book), many people do not know how to deduce meaning from a simple reading of the Bible. Most religions will provide myths and parables upon which the reader is supposed to ponder the meaning. It is possible that some people will never be able to understand the intent of the document's author. In these cases, most religions will have gurus (enlightened teachers) who can properly interpret holy writings. This is not the correct approach if you desire to understand the message of the Bible. I will outline several principles to keep in mind as you read the Bible so that you might understand its meaning more clearly for yourself.

Read it for What it Says: Leaders in other religions often criticize the Bible for not containing any sort of complex teachings. Although this is not true, what they really mean to say is that “Gurus are not needed for people to understand the Gospel, thus putting them out of business within the context of Christianity.” The Bible is easy to understand, really! The Old Testament simply starts off with the story of the creation of the world and then starts to describe how the nation of Israel was founded. This theme takes up a good chunk of the Old Testament and is simply meant to be taken as literal history. There are no tricks here! The New Testament starts off with 4 books that tell the story of Jesus Christ, the Chosen One of God who would take away the sins of the world. Acts is a continuation of that story, but follows the work done by Jesus' followers after he ascended to heaven. The books following Acts mostly contain teachings for various churches throughout the Greek/Roman world.

Understanding the Bible is fairly simple. Good pastors will tell their congregations not just to take their word on what the Bible says, but to read it themselves. This is because a good pastor wants people to know that they are free to read the Bible and interpret it for themselves even if it means that it leads them to disagree with the teacher of the Bible for that congregation. The Bible has always been meant to be read and understood by everyone; not just religious masterminds.

Having said that, to understand what the Bible says most accurately and with the least amount of confusion, you must understand what genre each book of the Bible falls under.

Know the Genre: Each book in the Bible has a *genre*. A genre is a style that ultimately influences the meaning of a given work. The different genres within the Bible are: History, Law, Prophecy (Major and Minor Prophets), Wisdom and Poetry, Gospel, and Epistle/Letters (different scholars will list different genres).

History: Books that speak of Historic events. In the Old Testament, these books mainly describe the establishment of the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, the Gospels are typically classified separately from the Historic books for the purpose of emphasizing the importance of their contents. Therefore, the lone History book of the New Testament is Acts.

Law: Law is often times intertwined with certain History books. The first 5 books of the Bible are often referred to as the Law, even though a significant portion are more historic in nature. Leviticus is the most distinct book of Law. Genesis lays the foundation for the Laws that are presented in later books while

Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy intertwine Law and History. The designation of Law is pretty to understand. For instance, The 10 Commandments are Biblical Law.

Prophecy: Prophetic books describe events that will take place in the future. Some of the events were fulfilled within the course of the Bible, others have yet to come. In the Old Testament, Prophetic books are separated into Major and Minor Prophets (they are separated into their respective books and are easily recognized seeing how Major Prophets are bigger books than Minor Prophets). Prophetic writings can sometimes be taken literally, but sometimes prophecies include bizarre imagery that has deeper meaning. When reading prophecy, it is necessary to take precaution when attempting to interpret the images described. Fortunately, some of this imagery is described directly after it is described. The only Prophetic book of the New Testament is Revelation.

Wisdom and Poetry: Books of Wisdom and Poetry make use of artful language. Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are the best examples of these sorts of books. These writings are more for the purpose of teaching lessons that require thought and reflection opposed to conveying simple messages. Although there are some poetic and wisdom portions in the New Testament, there are no books devoted specifically to these purposes.

Gospel: Gospels are the historic accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry. They describe the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Epistles/Letters: These are the writings from certain Disciples to the various churches of their day. The most important aspect of these is that they apply the message of the Gospel directly to the lives of people. Through these letters many key teachings can be discovered that might not be easily deduced from the Gospels. Although there are a few letters within the content of the books of the Old Testament, the New Testament is where all of the books classified as Epistles can be found.

Know the Context: Context is king when it comes to understanding the Bible's more challenging passages. Context is the surrounding body of literature encompassing a passage, (in this case) the original language of the document, and the cultural underpinnings that affect its meaning. Sometimes there will be a statement within the Bible that does not immediately make sense. More times than not, a better understanding of one of these three components will resolve the confusion.

Surrounding Body of Literature: With the Bible there are a lot of components to the surrounding body of literature. Whenever you seek to understand a verse in this context you must be aware of the nearest verses, the entire chapter, the section of the book (if applicable), the book, the author, whether it's Old or New Testament, and how it fits in to the entire Bible. Too often people will get confused because they choose to understand challenging verses only within the context of surrounding verses and the chapter. Although this is a reliable method in most cases, some verses can be totally misunderstood unless you include a broader knowledge of the entire Bible.

Original Language: The Old Testament of the Bible was written in Hebrew and Aramaic while the New Testament was written in *koine* Greek. No language translates perfectly into another language. Learning more about the original languages, or at least certain key words, will greatly help you to understand challenging verses better or at least deepen your understanding of familiar Bible verses.

Cultural Context: If learning a new language does not appeal to you, take heart, learning the cultural context is in many cases a better way to understand the Bible. There are many resources (written in your first language) that are available for understanding cultural practices of Biblical times. There are many instances where cultural practices make sense of challenging verses. For instance, in one book of the Bible, Judas Iscariot is said to have purchased a field with money given to him for turning Jesus over to the Pharisees. In another book, it is recorded that after the Pharisees received the money back, *they* purchased the field with the money. It sounds like a contradiction, until you understand that the purchase of the field was credited to Judas' account because the Pharisees could not take back the money. Therefore, they purchased a field on behalf of Judas, in a manner of speaking.

These are some of the most basic elements to be aware of in reading the Bible. Many people that *do* have a good understanding of what the Bible is saying might not be aware of their application of these devices, but they are employing them nonetheless. For a Christian, there is not much as important as knowing how to read the Bible. It is God's Word and through it we are able to deepen our relationship to him.

More information may be added in the future. Feel free to submit questions concerning how to read the Bible to preacherbill174@gmail.com.