

How to Read the Bible

The Bible is a collection of 66 books written by about 40 authors, in three different languages, on three different continents, over approximately 1600 years. The Bible contains many different styles of writing such as poetry, narration, fiction, history, law, and prophecy and must be interpreted in the context of those styles. It is the source of the Christian religion in that the Bible contains the words of God and how the Christian is to apply the words of God to his life. The Bible is at the same time, words of men and words of God. God did not pick up a pen and write; it was human hands and minds that were inspired by God to write.

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16

There are many tests that the Bible can be examined against

- Historicity – It has survived and continues to shed light of ancient history
- Reliability – The method of manuscripts and compilation (canon) is remarkable
- Relevance – It continues to change people's lives today!

1. Devotional reading

Assumption: The Bible is the inspired Word of God and can (and does) speak across generations and cultures to speak to me today. "Speak Lord your servant is listening."

All you need is an open Bible, an open heart and an open mind.

2. Exegetical reading

Exegesis means to "draw out".

What did the text mean to the original hearers?

What would it mean to get into the "skin" of the original hearers?

If you miss the context (cultural and historical) it is highly likely you will misunderstand the text.

3. Literary criticism

Remember the Bible is not one book it is 66 different books. The word "Bible" means library so what kind of book are you reading?

Is it narrative, parable, wisdom saying, prayer, song, poetic, instruction or apocalyptic imagery? Who is the author and for what reason did the author intend this publication?

4. Textual criticism

Textual criticism looks at the nature and meaning of the words.

Remember that the Bible did not come to us in English. Every language has its limitations and when translated from one to another meaning can be lost.

An example of this is in the well known verse, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." Luke 11:9. This English translation fails to give the impact of the original Greek that has present-

continuous verbs “ask and keep asking” “seek and keep seeking” “knock and keep knocking”. A better translation could be “never give up asking, seeking and knocking!” See the difference?

5. Thematic reading

Tracking the great themes of the Bible.

For example: prayer, salvation, grace, forgiveness, poverty ...

Putting it all together

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the process of interpretation of the text from which the text can then be applied.

Sometimes the interpretation of the Biblical text is self explanatory but in many cases it requires further “interpretive work”. One of the most common errors of Bible reading is going from text to interpretation then application in one jump. In Exodus 20:8 we are told, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath.”

What was the context for this instruction? What did the hearers hear? What does the original word “Sabbath” mean? What constitutes work and rest? How is the “Sabbath” understood throughout the whole Bible? How come the early church changed from Saturday to Sunday as the Sabbath? What did Jesus teach about the Sabbath?

Only after answering some of these questions can you begin to say - “Because of God’s instruction this ... is how I will live my life.”

Challenges to understanding

- World view: How does our modern world view colour our understanding of the Bible?
- Prior assumptions and justifications: Take care you are not reading into the Bible what you want to find.
- Individualism: The Bible was given to a community of people and not to individuals. Beware of “self appointed” interpretations that have not been tested by a community of faith.

Tools

1. A Bible – get a good translation – one that you can read.
2. A Study Bible with good cross referencing.
3. Internet Bible. This helps with looking up original words even if you can't speak Hebrew or Greek.

<http://www.christianbooksummaries.com/library/v3/cbs0325.pdf>

http://www.trinity-pres.net/essays/how-to-read_expanded.pdf

<http://www.christianbook.com/read-bible-for-all-its-worth/gordon-fee/9780310246046/pd/46043>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A5HT_vVHO4

<http://www.biblegateway.com/>

<http://www.blueletterbible.org/index.cfm>