

Introduction How to Study the Bible

Reading the Bible with clear understanding is difficult for Christians today, and the sole purpose of this book is to assist the thoughtful reader in doing so. While some passages of Scripture, like the 23rd Psalm and Jesus' parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Son, lend themselves to immediate understanding, the Bible as a whole is an extremely complex book, and its complexity staggers even the most serious scholar who turns to it. Consider these facts about the Bible which contribute to the difficulty of reading it.

- The Bible is not one book but at least sixty-six books.
- Some of the earliest books were written around the year 1000 BC and the latest were written in 100 AD, a span of at least 1100 years.
- Even those written earliest were recording events that took place 750 years before the actual writing occurred.
- The multitude of forms of writing are included in this book: poems, hymns, law codes, creeds, parables, folk tales about great people, histories, genealogies, diaries, liturgies for use in worship, letters written to church groups for study and instruction, personal letters dispatched to friends.
- Scripture was written by and about people who lived in a vast variety of cultural situations. Some lived in Egypt from about 1700 to 1300 BC; others lived as outcasts for two centuries in the mountains of Judah; others were inhabitants of the most powerful empire of its contemporary world in the time of King David; others were exiled for some generations into the far-off land of Babylon; still others were residents of great cities of the Hellenistic world like Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome itself. These people were ruled by one great empire after the another; the Egyptian, the Syrian, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek, and the Roman. No other known collection of writing was produced in so many different cultural settings.
- Scripture was written in two basic languages, Hebrew and Greek, both of which are used today chiefly by scholars and which are unfamiliar to the rest of us.
- The texts of the compositions used for reading and translating the Bible are admittedly not the original ones. Our earliest New Testament text dates from the middle of the second century AD and the texts used for the Old Testament come largely from the ninth century BC. There are endless variations given for the spelling of words and for the form of the various verb-endings, and alternate texts are offered for some passages in the original text of the author.
- The various translations made into English also compound the confusion. The King James Version is probably the most literal of our translations, but it is based on an out-of-date text and employs a form of the English language more suited to the seventeenth

century than to the twenty-first. The Revised Standard Version tried to update the King James Version and succeeded at some points but failed at others. The New Revised Standard Version updated the Revised Standard Version with inclusive language but sacrificed some of the meaning and majesty of the earlier version. The Good News Bible, the New English Bible, the translations of J. B. Phillips, and the Message attempt to catch the spirit of the Scripture rather than the literal meaning, while the translators of the Living Bible and the New International Version chose the theologically most conservative position at every point. The difficulties of translation and the variety of translations are also confusing to the person who wants to read the Scripture meaningfully.

Yet it is important for Christians to work out a way of approach to the Scriptures, a scholarly way that takes into account the language, thought-forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. What follows is my attempt to hear God speak in the human situations in which we find ourselves and I commend it to you for your study and your critique.

In searching through the Scriptures, I find it important to isolate five major components that went into the composition of the Scriptures. The first two are in this introduction, the others will come later in this study.

The first stage of understanding the Scriptures is to look carefully at those persons whose lives made the most impact on shaping the Scriptures. Four such persons are presented. Moses acted as agent for God's covenant with God's people and is fully recognized as the most important person in the Old Testament; he is to the Old Testament what Jesus is to the New. David, considered a just and God-fearing king, set the model for Kingship and governance to which all succeeding generations looked. Elijah was the quintessential prophet, and his confrontations with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel inspired the work of the prophets from his own day to that of John the Baptizer. And Jesus was the Christ, the culmination of the Old Testament and the center of the New. These four are designated "Pioneering Persons," because they pioneered new trails over which others could later follow.

A second component for reading the Bible meaningfully consists of detailing the history that provided the skeletal structure for the writing of Scripture: If a dozen dates, more or less, are fixed in memory, the pattern of Scripture is more perfectly discerned. The following dates are suggested:

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| c. 1325 BC | The Exodus from Egypt under Moses. |
| c. 1000 | The beginning of David's kingdom. |
| 925 | The division of David's kingdom into a Northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. |
| 722 | The destruction by Assyria of the northern kingdom |
| 586 | The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian armies and the exile of Judah into Babylon |

- 539 The beginning of the return to the land of Judah from the Babylonian exile.
- 333 The Greek conquest of the Persian empire and the beginning of the Hellenization of the world.
- 167 The Maccabean revolt against Syria.
- 63 Rome takes over the Holy Land.

- 29 AD The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- 70 The destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies under Titus
- 135 The final revolt of Bar Kochba, whose defeat ended Jewish hopes for a return to power in the area that Rome now called Palestine.

While dates are important they do not catch the dynamism of history, and so attention has to be paid to the social movements that underlay the writing of Scripture. Four are described. The patriarchs represent the most ancient strata of the biblical account, and I attempt to recount what is known of them. The period of the judges (c. 1200 – 1000 BC) was a most creative period in the life of the People of God, and this creativity is reconstructed. The prophets built upon the ministries of one another as they declared their message, and their social situation is plumbed. The more important social movement of all underlay the writing of the New Testament — “The Followers of Jesus as an Organized Movement” — and this is described in as much detail as possible. These social movements provided the context in which Scripture was written, and they have to be recognized and studied by the discerning reader of the book.

These movements, and others not described in the depth these are, began to provide compositions that were used by later writers as the actual books of Scripture were written. Among these are poems, law codes, histories and genealogies, liturgies and diaries, folk tales and official chronicles of kings and kingdoms. The fourth section of this study is devoted to these, and each one is used to open a unique vista on the life and thought of some particular moment in the saga of the People of God.

The fifth section describes the attempt on the part of the People of God to make sense of all of the above, and the only sense that counted was the theological sense. Theology can be defined as a reasoned and reasonable attempt to respond to the activity of God in human affairs, and under that definition the writers of Scripture were theologians. Many theologies were written into the Scriptures. The earliest comprehensive attempt at theology was that of the Israelite underground, who left us the theology found in the books from Deuteronomy through Second Kings. Next after them came the theology of the priestly movement, which I have called “The Conservative Revolution,” and the final Old Testament theology was that of the Chronicler of Israel. Many theologies presented themselves in the New Testament: that of Paul, those of the Synoptic Gospels, that of the Gospel of John. Scripture is best understood when we recognize the impact upon it made by these various theologies.

A final approach is to locate the actual books of the Old and New Testaments within these various theological movements and to indicate how the books relate to them. A single chapter, chapter 25, is directed toward this.

The concluding section, "An Epilogue," constitutes my own reflection on the study: what I learned from others about Scripture, some of the hypotheses I constructed as I have tried to understand various segments of it, some issues faced then that we continue to face today, and, above all, the new appreciation I continue to develop for Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. You can read this section first of all, if you care to, or last, or even omit it altogether if you are not curious about the author's point of view.

All this sounds like a complex way to approach Scripture; and it is. But it is complicated because the subject itself is complex. For the subject of Scripture is God, the God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts and who yet chose to reveal God's inner life to us in the life of the People of God and above all in the person of Jesus Christ. Any revelation as important as this is bound to be intimate, intricate, and intriguing, and any descriptions of the resulting relationship between God and humanity are of necessity complex, complicated, and confusing. It is with the aim of reducing this complexity and confusion without belittling the intricacy and intimacy that this study is presented. It is entitled "Gateway to God's Word," in the hope that it will open the door for many to a new and renewed understanding of the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and climaxed in the life, death, resurrection and continued presence of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians choose to call Savior and Lord.