

# How do I read the Bible?

We know to read an encyclopedia differently to a novel,  
but what is the best way to read the Bible?

If the Bible is the Word of God,  
then it is vital to read it and understand it.

This booklet will hopefully introduce you to the Bible  
and help you begin to read it, understand it and live by it.

The first half is "About the Bible" and the second is "About Reading it."

"Your word is a lamp to my feet  
And a light for my path."

*Psalms 119:105*

Hopefully this will help you think through important questions ...

## ... About the Bible

- What is the Bible?
- How does the Bible fit together?
- Is it "God's Word"?
- Is it Reliable?
- What is its purpose?

## ... About Reading it.

- Which version should I use?
- Where do I start?
- Do I need the Holy Spirit to help me?
- How shall I interpret it?
- How can I apply it to me?
- Are there other resources to help?
- How should I read it?

## ABOUT THE BIBLE ...

The following is an overview of the Bible. If you prefer, you can skip to a later section about the practical elements of reading it...

### What is the Bible? .

As a whole, the Bible tells the story of our planet from creation to a new creation. The story relates the interaction between God and humans. This plot plays out through key characters and the nation of Israel, with its focal point being Jesus. A rough time line of the books, characters and history is shown on page 6.

This story is told through a library of 66 books written over 1000 years and by many authors. It has two main sections: the Old Testament leading up to Jesus and the New Testament from Jesus' birth. An outline is given in the next couple of pages.

**1) Old Testament** – This has 39 books which were all written by 400BC. It was largely written in Hebrew, which was the language of the Jewish people. A few sections were written in the related language of Aramaic. In summary, it charts the history of the people of Israel (Jews) as God's people and their growing expectation of a future Messiah (Christ) who would bring salvation. The Old Testament can be divided into the following sections:

**a) "Pentateuch" or "Torah"** – the first 5 books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). These were written by Moses around 1400BC and relate the time period from creation to the people of Israel being about to enter the land of "Israel". It begins when God creates the world perfectly, but sin and evil enter through human beings: the result is death and expulsion from the original garden. Sin gets worse and God wipes out evil with the flood of Noah's time. However, through Noah and his family, sin quickly re-enters and is a major problem again. God chooses Abraham and his descendants to be his people and a light to the world; Abraham's grandson, Jacob, and his descendants go to live in Egypt where they are enslaved. God eventually comes to the aid of his people and brings them out of Egypt, teaching them how to live. But they lack faith and are disobedient, which results in a delayed entry into the "promised land".

**b) History books** – (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther). These have a variety of known and unknown authors who cover the period 1400 – 400BC. They are in broadly chronological order and recount the rise and fall of the kingdom of Israel, followed by life in exile and their partial return. Joshua is mainly positive as conquests are made under good leadership. Judges spans probably 400 years and is less positive as it relates how Israel went through cycles of sin, difficulty, repent and rescue under Spirit-enabled leaders such as Samson and Gideon. Ruth is a love story, and is important in the ancestry of Jesus. Samuel<sup>1</sup> tells of the appointment of the first kings with much of the book being devoted to the events of David. Kings recounts subsequent kings, the split of the kingdom and the eventual destruction of the nation. Chronicles retells much of this story from a later time period. Ezra and Nehemiah are about re-establishing the nation after exile, while Esther is about salvation from a threat in exile.

**c) "Wisdom literature"** – (Job, Psalms<sup>2</sup>, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) These are either poetry or proverbial literature. They vary widely in subject matter and mood. Job is about suffering, Psalms is a collection of songs of prayer and praise, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are reflections on life and living wisely, while Song of Solomon is a love poem.

**d) Prophets** – (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). Except Lamentations, each is named after the author. The first 5 are sometimes called "major prophets" because they are longer than the remaining 12 "Minor Prophets". These prophets brought messages from God from around 850BC (Obadiah during the period of "Kings") to 400BC (Malachi under foreign rule). They are not in chronological order. Many of the earlier prophets call for repentance<sup>3</sup> so that the people would avoid the coming judgment. The later prophets call for repentance or give encouragement to the people to rebuild. A recurring theme in the prophets is a hope in a future "Messiah" with a new covenant<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles are each one book split for the size of a scroll.

<sup>2</sup> Psalms and Proverbs are collections of material by a variety of authors.

2) **New Testament** – This has 27 books which were probably all written between 48AD and 95AD. They were all written in Greek, the international language of the day. In summary it narrates the account of Jesus and the growth of the early church and then gives encouragement and instruction for the churches. It is structured in the following groupings:

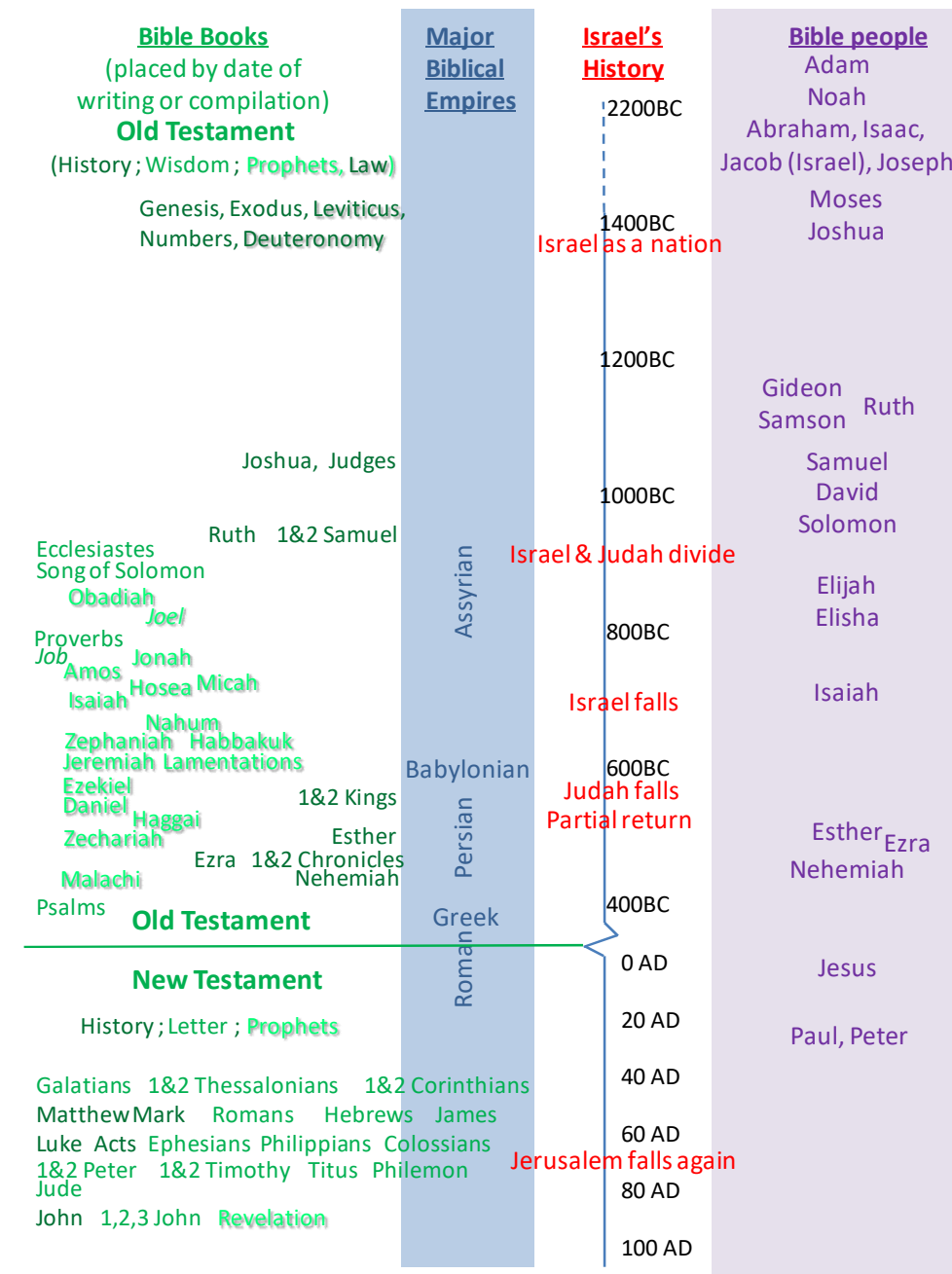
a) **“Gospels”** – (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) – these each recount the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from a different perspective. Matthew, Mark and Luke share a lot of common material, while John has more focus on Jesus’ teaching. Matthew and John were disciples of Jesus and so give personal testimony. Mark, we think, got his information from the disciple Peter. Luke was a doctor and says he carefully investigated everything with eye witnesses.

b) **Church history** – (Acts) – This, the second book Luke wrote, recounts the period from when Jesus went up to heaven to when Paul is in prison in Rome. It is a story of church growth and wonderful acts of the Holy Spirit.

c) **Letters** – (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, Peter, John, Jude). Paul’s letters (Romans to Philemon) are named after the church/person they were written to (ie. Romans is to the church in Rome, Timothy is to Timothy). We do not know who wrote Hebrews, but the remaining letters are named after their authors. In general, the letters remind the reader of what it means to be saved by Jesus and then encourages the reader to live in the light of this fact.

d) **Apocalyptic** – Revelation – This book was written by John as a record of a vision he was given. The message of the book is that while there is suffering now, evil is going to be removed, Jesus is victorious and God will bring in a new creation. There are different interpretations about the details.

## How does the Bible fit together?



NB The books are placed based on the dates of writing. Some are approximate given the scale shown. Those in italics are subject to opinion.

## Is it “God’s Word”?

The New Testament writers considered the Old Testament to be “**breathed by God**” and authoritative (eg 2 Timothy 3v16); Jesus also quoted from it as an authority. With regards to the New Testament, Peter subscribes similar authority to Paul’s letters (2 Peter 3v15-16). We do not consider that the Bible was “dictated” by God, but that God “breathed” or “inspired” the words through the various writers in their styles so that we have the truth and consider it God’s Word. If you read the whole Bible, you will be amazed at how the whole thing holds together given the great variety of authors. Finally, many today testify to God speaking daily through the Bible to them personally, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives that assurance within us.

## Is it Reliable?

We can have a high degree of confidence in the Bible’s reliability, as, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there was a growing skepticism about the Bible’s reliability, during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, developments answered three key questions:

- 1) **How Accurate were the Originals?** - Increased archaeological evidence has generally confirmed the history recorded in the Bible as being accurate. The authors were often eyewitnesses or stated their sources.
- 2) **Do we have the Originals?** - No, but the discovery of more and earlier manuscripts from different areas has confirmed a high level of consistency in copying, and has enabled, through textual criticism, an accurate assessment of the original text. Modern Bibles generally footnote any uncertainties in the text.
- 3) **How Accurate is the Translation?** – Various translations are widely available and so are the manuscripts used, so anyone with knowledge of the languages can check. See “Which version should I use?”.

## What is its Purpose?

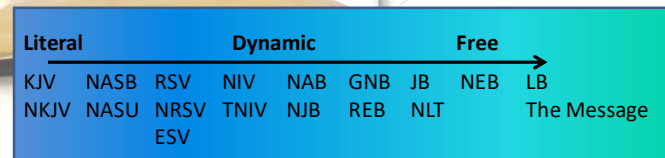
Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3v16, “All scripture is profitable for teaching, correcting, rebuking and training in righteousness.” In other words its purpose is to teach us about God and his dealings with people; correct us from error to truth; show us what is wrong; and enable us in the best way to live. The centre of the whole Bible is Jesus: the Old Testament is looking forward to him, the Gospels give account of him and the remainder of the New Testament is about living in the light of him.

## ABOUT READING IT...

*First, I need to get a Bible, but ...*

## Which version should I use?

**About Translations / Versions:** When we enter a bookstore in a shop or on line, we are faced with many translations of the Bible. Why are there so many translations? Translation is often difficult in the subtleties of different languages. It is possible to translate word for word (“Literal”), but it not seem very “English”, or it is possible to translate to give a very “English” feel (“Free”), but be less close to the original text. Some translators aim for the former to maintain accuracy, others aim for the latter to be easy to read, and still others to be a middle-ground “Dynamic”. The following diagram gives a rough guide to where different translations sit on the Literal – Dynamic – Free line



| Literal |      |      | Dynamic |     |     | Free |             |    |
|---------|------|------|---------|-----|-----|------|-------------|----|
| KJV     | NASB | RSV  | NIV     | NAB | GNB | JB   | NEB         | LB |
| NKJV    | NASU | NRSV | TNIV    | NJB | REB | NLT  | The Message |    |

Most modern versions are based on a “textual criticism” analysis of best text and highlight any discrepancy of manuscripts. The KJV uses a specific manuscript which was available in 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Selecting one:** For a quick read, the “Free” ones are good (NLT is good without being too wordy); for a bit more detailed study the “Dynamic” ones are better (eg NIV); for a good understanding of the original text, “Literal” ones are better (NASB is considered a benchmark by many). Selection therefore depends on what you want to do. If reading comes relatively easy for you and you are just getting one Bible, I would recommend a dynamic one which balances readability and accuracy - a popular one is the NIV (New International Version).

**Tip:** I carry multiple versions around with me on my phone. When waiting for something, I can just pull out my phone and read say the Message on one occasion, and then another time the NASB or NIV.

## Where do I start to read it?

It is possible to start at the beginning and read through. However, some sections are more difficult to read (e.g. genealogies or directions for Jewish rituals) and some are more dependent on having read others! The central focus of the Bible is Jesus, so a good place to start is with one of the Gospels. Then maybe read Acts. These make significant reference to the Old Testament, but every time you read, you will learn more. You may then like to read from the beginning to become familiar with the history of God's people in the days before Jesus. Here is a suggested order to read some books:

- 1) Mark – a fast-paced account of what Jesus did.
- 2) John – a deeper account of what Jesus said.
- 3) Acts – an account of the early church
- 4) Romans – an explanation of the gospel
- 5) Genesis – the beginning of the world and the Jewish fathers.
- 6) Exodus – the beginning of the people of Israel
- 7) Gospels and letters from New Testament
- 8) Remainder of Old Testament

### **Tips:**

- I often skip the lists of names where they occur, although sometimes they do act as the ancestor link to the next set of events.
- I reckon it takes me about 5 minutes per chapter if I am going to take it in.
- I often make some summary notes at the end of each chapter, to aid concentration and remembering.
- It is good to get the feel for a section setting aside an hour to read a longer portion: and then go back and look in more detail at smaller portions.

## Do I need the Holy Spirit to help me?

The original authors were led by the Holy Spirit. It is wise to pray and ask God to help us as now, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us as he:

- 1) gives **assurance** to us that this is the Word of God.
- 2) gives us a **thirst** to read more
- 3) enables us to **understand** it
- 4) enables us to **live** it and obey it

## How should I Read it ?

**Styles of Reading** - God speaks in a variety of ways, and so we can listen in a variety of styles:

- a) **Story.** As we become familiar with the Bible story, we become familiar with how God works. Sit down and read a major chunk of a book in one go: like you would a novel. Maybe read a letter or a gospel in the New Testament, or to read, say, the life of Abraham in Genesis 12-25) in the Old Testament.
- b) **Devotionally.** As we regularly read smaller portions, we find that God registers particular issues in our minds. It might be a promise to claim or a command to keep. It is a good idea to do this morning and evening. It can help us focus on God and give inspiration for prayer and worship.
- c) **Meditation.** God calls his people to meditate on his words day and night. With this approach we read a small portion of the Bible (maybe just one verse), and keep chewing it over in our minds; maybe as we commute, or as we go to sleep. As we meditate on it, it actually becomes part of how we think and thereby our minds are renewed.
- d) **Doctrinally.** Ultimately, God has revealed his truth through the Bible. This is an on-going study of the Bible. See the section "How do I interpret?"

**Method** - Think about different ways you can read it – in a *book, on-line, read aloud, listen to recording, read as a group*, etc . Reading with others is particularly important as it helps understanding as you discuss and it provides some discipline. What works for you? Noisy or quiet? When travelling or still? ...

**When** – Get into a routine of reading it. Sometimes you will find it hard, but if you have a routine, it is easier to push through those times. First thing in the morning and last thing at night are often good times.

**Tip:** I have often changed how I read it as seems best at the time.

## How does the Bible change me?

God works through the Bible in two ways. Firstly, he often gives you an immediate word for today, but secondly, as you store up the God's Word in your heart over time, you will find that he changes you through that word and you begin to think and behave differently.

## How should I Interpret it?

A view is sometimes expressed that you can make the Bible say whatever you want as it is so open to interpretation. While, this may be true if read very poorly, by following some simple logical rules, the vast majority of the Bible becomes very clear. With this approach, there are very few parts of the Bible which remain open to debate as to what they mean. To accurately understand any particular passage requires considering:

- a. **The Bible** - How this section of the Bible fits in the whole of the Bible story.
- b. **The Book** - The purpose and overall theme of this book
- c. **The Genre** - of this particular literature (e.g. poem, history, story, speech, vision etc...)
- d. **The Passage** - The immediate context of the verse in the paragraph.
- e. **The Phrase** - What do these specific words mean?
- f. **Compare** - How does this compare with other passages on a similar theme?

There are many resources to help us (see “Resources”), and as you become more familiar with the whole, so it will become easier. For deeper guidance in this, Books such as “How to read the Bible for All its Worth” by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart may be helpful.

## How can I apply it?

There are some key questions that I like to ask

- How does this progress the overall **history** of God’s interaction with man?
- What does this tell me about **God** (his character, his response to people, his actions, his power, his authority)?
- What does this tell me about **humanity and me** (our finiteness compared to God, our sin, our needs, our desires, what God wants from us, our need to repent, our destiny)?
- What **response** do I need to make? (e.g. worship God, change attitude / character, exercise discipline, trust God, claim a promise, obey a command, increase my love for others, receive more from God ...)

Take time to reflect on your thoughts with God.

## Are there other resources to help me?

**Study Bibles** – Some Bibles are “Study Bibles” which contain a variety of notes to help aid understanding. They may give some background information, or explanation of difficult terms, or provide links to other relevant passages. Remember, the notes are not the actual Bible, they are just there to help and are not always right!

**Commentaries** – These aim to help readers in a more in-depth way than a “Study Bible”, by giving more background historical information, and more helps to understanding the text. Good commentaries will indicate how different people have interpreted difficult passages and highlight where there are any manuscript issues.

**Concordances** – These give a list of words and tell you where they are found in the Bible. This can be useful for looking up particular topics, but are largely superseded by the search tools in electronic versions.

**Devotionals** – there are a large number of devotionals with different emphases. These normally give a short portion of the Bible each day and some thoughts by the author about those verses. They are normally easy to read and give a good thought to chew on.

**Plans** – these give a plan for Bible reading – for example to read the Bible in a year.

**Resources** - The above materials can be obtained in print or on line. I like to sit and read a book, but I also find it helpful to study with reference tools on the computer (eg Esword which has versions which tell you the original Greek or Hebrew words) and on my phone, I can just read the Bible anywhere.

Good Bible reading plans and notes are available from Bible Reading Fellowship and Scripture Union. Biblegateway is a good online source, in addition to Esword which can be installed on the PC. There are several applications for your phone which contain the Bible – take your pick at an App Store.

