How to Read the Bible **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 16 January 2017 - 16:33



Read time: 13 minutes
In this article in my series on the Bible, I am going to look at how to read the Bible. In particular I am going to focus on two areas: how to read the Bible for the first time, and how to read the Bible in general.

How to Read the Bible for the First Time

The Bible is the most prolific book in the world (and even outside of it [2]). Yet in some places it can be difficult to obtain a Bible. And even in places where the Bible is easily available, many have not read it. This can lead to all sorts of confusions and strange preconceptions about the Bible (as I briefly touched upon in my first article in this series [3]). And so when someone does come to this legendary book for the first time, it can be a daunting or mystifying task to pick it up. As discussed previously: is really is a book of books, contains many genres, speaks of strange ancient cultures, etc. So what is the best way to approach it?

There is no single right answer. The obvious approach is to read it from front to back. This is certainly possible, but can be hard going. The Old Testament (the first part of the Bible) can be a depressing read. The first half of this part of the book contains the most narrative, but is interspersed with long lists and genealogies which don't seem to be relevant and certainly not interesting. And when reading the narrative, it can be difficult to understand how everything ties into the "main plot". As for the second half of the Old Testament, it is full of poetry, prophecies and lamentations—even for a long-time reader of the Bible it can be difficult to keep all the threads together in these books.

So, beginning with the Old Testament is possible, but will likely be very confusing. If the reader does decide to take this approach, I am going to suggest to simply push through and not pause too much because they feel lost or confused. The New Testament provides many opportunities to return to the Old (normally indicated by footnotes) and completes many of the obscure parts of the Old. The Old Testament should also make more sense on subsequent re-readings (yes, I do believe that the Bible should be read more than once—as with many books and films, small details and sub-plots make more sense once one has seen the whole thing before).

However, it is important to know that the Bible does not *have* to be read in this way. It is perfectly acceptable to read individual books of the Bible "out of order". Personally I would recommend a ordering like

1. The Gospel of John
2. The Gospel of Luke
3. The Acts of the Apostles

4. Genesis
5. Exodus
6. Deuteronomy
7. Judges
8. Romans
9. Ruth
10. 1 Samuel
11. 2 Samuel
12. 1 Kings
13. 2 Kings
14. Esther
15. Nehemiah
16. Malachi
17. The Gospel of Matthew or Mark
18. Proverbs
19. Ecclesiastes
20. Job
21. Ephesians
22. James
23. ...

This is just a list from the top of my head; it may very well look different in six months' time. There are many online guides which can be consulted. The reader can also ask the advice from a Christian pastor or friend who has a good knowledge of the Bible.

In between it would be good to read the Psalms. Psalms is the longest book in the Bible; it is also a book of poetry, and in my experience, reading too much poetry in succession dispels some of the wonder of it. I prefer reading one psalm for every few other chapters that I read.

Just a note: the above ordering is not meant to obscure anything or hide anything from a novice or naive reader. The point is that the reader will eventually read all the books in the Bible. I chose this ordering as I think it shows a good progression yet a healthy balance:

1. The first three books are the gospel message (which is the most important in Christianity) and history of the early Christian church.
2. The next four books tell the story of early mankind and when God begins to work out His redemptive plan (and how human beings resist it).
3. Romans is a letter written by the apostle Paul and is a good summary of the Christian message and hope. It stands in contrast to the depressing end of the previous book in this list.
4. The following eight books tell the history of Israel: this is foundational to understand much of the language and heritage found in the New Testament. It ends with a book, not of history, but of prophecy: a poignant "letter of separation" from God to the people who had been rejecting Him time-and-again. He would not speak to them again until Jesus brought the message of salvation to the whole of the world.
5. Then we read a gospel again (but written from a different perspective than the others).
6. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job form part of the section of the Bible known as the "wisdom literature". Proverbs is mostly pithy sayings (which can be useful to both the Christian and the non-Christian). Ecclesiastes and Job are a little more philosophical and look at the meaning of life and the reason for suffering.
7. Ephesians is another letter written by Paul and contains instructions for living a good Christian life.
8. James is a letter written by Jesus's half-brother. It also gives instructions for a good Christian life, but in some ways James takes a different approach from Paul.

I hope that if you do embark on the journey of reading the Bible that it will be insightful, enlightening and edifying for you!

Reading the Bible in General

The Bible should be read pretty much like one would read any other book. With scant exceptions (such as Proverbs), one cannot and should not simply pick up the Bible and begin reading at a random location. Sadly, because of the Bible's mythical status as a holy book, many people think that they can read the Bible as if using it for divination. That is not, nor was it ever, how the Bible was intended to be read.

Context

Context, context, context... this point cannot be stressed enough. Any passage of the Bible, no matter how obscure, makes sense when placed in the correct context. A passage should *never* be considered in isolation, with a meaning for it conjured up without paying attention to the context.

This should not be a controversial claim. If I fall asleep while reading a book, or pick up a book I left off reading a long time ago, I need to go back several pages to make sure I understand where in the story I was before I can continue to the unknown. Sadly, many people seem to think that they can ignore context with the Bible.

There are several kinds of context of which one should be aware:

1. **Immediate context**: what do the verses surrounding the current one say? In one place, the Bible declares "there is no God". However, reading around that phrase we see the Bible is saying "the fool says in his heart, 'there is not God"'.
2. **Chapter/Section context**: modern translations of the Bible are divided up into chapters and even sections. These section titles and numberings were not part of the original texts. They were added to ease reading. These usually group logical units of verses (although taken in isolation, these can also be misleading).
3. **Book context**: where in this particular part of the book is the verse placed? What happened before which could influence the meaning? There is also the context of the book itself: what is the purpose of the book, why was it written, and by whom was it written[1]?
4. **Bible context**: Where in the Bible is this book found? What is the significance if it is in the Old Testament or the New Testament? Where is it placed in terms of the story of God's eternal plan of salvation for humankind?

This are really simple guidelines and should almost be self-evident. If the reader keeps them in mind, they will avoid many pitfalls which have claimed more careless readers.

Use an Aid If Necessary

There exists many good study Bibles[2]. A study Bible is a Bible which has been (usually) extensively annotated with additional information to clear up obscure phrases, verses and passages. It can also contain maps, sketches, tables, dictionaries etc. so that the reader can better visualise, compare and contrast what they have just read. This is not something unique to the Bible, of course: if someone were to read, say, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, one would do well to pick a version of the book which has been annotated to explain 19th century Russian customs, translate the French and explain the literary references which would most likely be unknown to the modern reader. A study Bible does the same kind of thing. *However*, the following needs to be said: try to read as much of the Bible on its own without immediately jumping to the annotations. Some annotations may have been written with a particular theological slant and should be taken with a pinch of salt. Rather, try and see if you can discover what the Bible is trying to say by itself.

As one of my former pastors once told us: *the Bible has been known to shed light on many commentaries (study Bibles)*.

Some people may object to me urging people to look for "outside" help to understand the Bible. The

Bible is self-explanatory, they would say. Two things can be said in response to this. The first is that I am not saying that people should look for the *meaning* of the Bible outside of the Bible. I believe that its meaning and main point is clear. Rather, the use of "outside" resources is to clear up confusion about minor details. Secondly, I find this insistence on "the Bible only" (to understand it) a bit hypocritical: ever since I have been in primary school, people who have expounded New Testament passages would mention Pharisees, then pause to explain who the Pharisees were. The Bible never explicitly explains this. Rather, we need the additional information provided by Josephus and other extra-biblical writers to know who the Pharisees were. The Bible was written by people belonging to different ages and cultures than our own: it is only appropriate that we pay them the due respect by making the efforts on our part to understand the nuances that they wrote.

Be an Active Reader

By "being an active reader", I mean not simply reading the Bible passively, but making your own notes, making tables and charts, etc. This slows one down and allows one to really take in the details of what one reads. For example, reading about all the different kings in the books of 1 Kings and 2 Kings can be confusing, but this confusion clears up if one draws a family tree. Suddenly, *seeing* the relation of these people to each other, makes the story much more real.

Reading the Bible in One Year

Regardless of whether your Bible fits in your pocket [4], or spans multiple volumes [4], it is a long book. It can easily take months to read.

I want to conclude by briefly mentioning my strategy of reading the Bible through in a year. I have done this several times, and would urge any Christian to do the same (that is, reading through the entire Bible every couple of years or so).

Doing the math, one can read through the entire Bible in about ten months by reading four chapters a day. This can be a demanding regiment, so one needs those final two months of contingency (for example, Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible and is best read on its own).

I normally read it more-or-less back-to-front, starting with Genesis and finishing with Revelation. However, for half the year I read one psalm along with three other chapters. I also throw in a gospel every now and then just to break the heaviness of the Old Testament and lift my depressed mood (due to the heavy nature of the contents of the Old Testament).

Again, there are many online guides and resources to consult on this. A simple online search will return many results. Have a look for one which looks interesting and relevant for you.

Conclusion

In the following article, I shall discuss and example of the subtleties which the Bible can contain and why one really should be careful when reading the Bible. One will never get all the subtleties, but with each iteration of reading the Bible one notices more and more details previously missed.

- 1. Some of these questions cannot be answered. For example, many of the books of the Bible are anonymous. One must accept this and continue with the facts which are known.
- 2. My personal favourite is the NIV study Bible; I am not overly fond of the ESV study Bible (and I hope I do not get stoned by some Christians for saying that). One study Bible which I particularly like is the NIV "with concordance, dictionary, maps, and other Bible Study Resources"; it is not the same as the NIV Study Bible and some may say that it does not even qualify as a proper study Bible. It has minimal notes, but therein lies its beauty: one can read the Bible without being distracted by a plethora of annotations. Sadly I think it would be extremely difficult to find a copy of this Bible. It was published [4] by the Bible Society of

Australia and *not* Zondervan.

Categories:

- Bible Study [5]

Tags:

- bible [6]
- context [7]
- reading plan [8]
- bible reading plan [9]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1156

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1156
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njpWalYduU4
[3] https://siyach.org/node/1154
[4] http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/38466909?selectedversion=NBD43302372
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/5
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/89
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/126
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/633
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/634