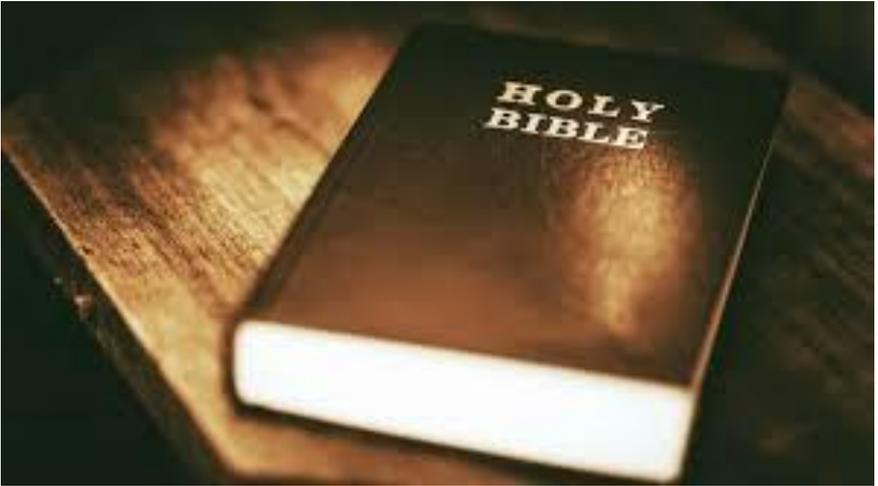


UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE



A Guide to Life With God

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Orientation to the Bible

The holy Scriptures, are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:15

These words give us a sense of purpose and origin. The Bible is God breathed. It is inspired by God and given to us. The Bible can be a lot of things and is sometimes misread as a manual for everything. In these verses, however, we see that the primary focus of the scriptures is to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. The Bible points us to Jesus who is the central character and focus. The scriptures should lead us to trust him and then guide us as we live with God.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books divided into two large sections, the Old and New Testaments. The overall theme of the Bible is the story of how humanity has turned away from relationship with God and how God has worked to restore that relationship through the people of Israel and through Jesus Christ.

The **Old Testament** is made of 39 books in which tell the history of the people of Israel. The OT was written in Hebrew between the years 1400 B.C and 400 B.C.

In the OT we learn that God made people to have a relationship with him, but they turned away from God in sinful rebellion. God, however, did not give up on people but rather immediately began a process of redemption and reconciliation.

The majority of the OT describes how God chose the nation of Israel and offered himself to be their God while asking them to be his people. He made promises to them and gave them rules and ways for them to live with him.

God entered into covenant relationship with this nation with the intent of using them to bless all peoples. Sadly, they broke the rules and chose not to follow God.

All was not lost. The OT also reveals that God promised to send a messiah (God's chosen savior and king) who would bring a solution that was stronger than human rebellion. The people looked forward to a new covenant with God. Through the nation of Israel God would produce a savior who would fulfill all the promises and bring reconciliation to all peoples.

The New Testament is made of 27 books that tell the story of Jesus and the people that first followed him. The New Testament was written in Greek between the years 50 A.D and 90 A.D.

Jesus Christ (Christ is the Greek term for the Hebrew word Messiah) is the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. He came to make a new way for people to have a covenant relationship with God.

The centrality of Jesus' mission was his death and resurrection. His death is understood as a sacrifice in payment of all human sin and his resurrection is proof that God accepted his payment and that we also may hope for eternal life with God.

We have the opportunity to be the people of God if we trust Jesus to forgive us and follow him.

Just as Israel was intended to be a blessing to all nations, Jesus has commissioned his followers to continue to make disciples of all nations. Through the spreading of his kingdom, Christians partner with God to fulfill the plan to bless all peoples.

The Organization of the Bible

In order to make it easy to find things in the Bible, every book is divided into chapters and every chapter is divided into verses. A Bible reference will list the book then chapter then verse. For example: John 3:16. The Book of John chapter 3 verse 16.

The Index for the Bible is usually at the front of the Bible. The books are not organized chronologically, but are rather grouped together by type.

There are several different types of books:

Old Testament

Law: Early history of Israel and the rules for living as God's people.
(Genesis to Deuteronomy)

History: Later history of Israel and how they turned away from God.
(Joshua to Esther)

Writings: Songs and poems praising God and wise sayings which guide living.
(Job to Song of Solomon)

Prophets: Messengers from God calling people to trust God.
(Isaiah to Malachi)

New Testament

- Gospels:** The life history of Jesus, his death and resurrection. Gospel means good news.
(Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)
- History:** Story of the first followers of Jesus and the start of the church.
(Acts)
- Letters:** Letters to churches and individuals from the first Christian leaders. Also called epistles from the Greek word for letter.
(Romans to Jude)
- Apocalyptic:** Symbolic writing that describes the future victory of God and encourages faithfulness and endurance. The Greek word apocalypse means to reveal.
(Revelation) (Portions of Daniel in the OT)

When reading the Bible it is often difficult to read from cover to cover because many of the prophetic writings only make sense within their historical context. Furthermore the Old Testament only makes full sense in light of the New Testament. If you begin reading the Bible it is recommended to read from various places at once. In fact it is likely easier and more appropriate to start with one of the Gospels and read some of the letters.

The Overall Story of the Bible

We've already seen that the basic theme of the Bible is how God has worked to restore our relationship with him. This theme has played out through the centuries finding its culmination in the person of Jesus Christ. The overall narrative of the Bible is detailed and needs to be read to appreciate it fully, but the following list of significant events and characters will help you see the big picture.

A great place to further your understanding of various books of the Bible is at <https://thebibleproject.com/> The Bible project offers short animated videos which give a clear overview of the various books and themes of the Bible.

1. Creation (Genesis 1-2)

God organizes a world and places humanity at the centre. People are made in God's image and invited to live and work with him.

2. Fall (Genesis 3-11)

Humanity rebels, choosing to define good and evil for themselves with the result that evil enters the world and begins to corrupt it. God starts again with Noah after cleansing the world with the flood, but this restart does not rid the world of evil.

3. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 12-50)

In order to begin a reconciliation process, God selects Abraham and enters into a covenant relationship with him and his descendents. He receives a promised son Isaac who in turn has a son Jacob who is renamed Israel. These three patriarchs become the foundation of God's work with the nation of Israel. These people are blessed by God, promised the land of Canaan and are invited to become a blessing to all nations .

4. Exodus (Exodus 1-20)

Through the influence of his son Joseph, Jacob's family relocates to Egypt where they live for many generations but ultimately are enslaved by the Egyptians. God calls Moses to confront Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and eventually leads the people out of slavery to the promised land.

5. Law (Exodus 20-40 / Leviticus, Deuteronomy)

To help the nation of Israel live with him, God gives them a law founded upon the 10 Commandments and a priestly system which includes animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

6. Wilderness (Numbers)

In fear and rebellion, the Israelites freed from Egypt do not trust God enough to conquer the promised land and remain in the wilderness for 40 years until the next generation comes of age.

7. Promised Land (Joshua)

Under the leadership of Joshua, the successor of Moses, the Israelites invade the land of Canaan and receive it as an inheritance in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham.

8. Settlement (Judges)

Although the people enter into the promised land they are inconsistent in following God over the next several generations. Various oppressors rise up in the people cry out to God. In response God raises up various judges/leaders who liberate the people of Israel. The cycle repeats many times and it is evident that the people of Israel are struggling to obey God.

9. New King (1,2 Samuel)

God establishes a king over the people of Israel who helps them unify and follow him. The first king, Saul, proves unfaithful to God, but the second king, David, despite many failures brings victory and remains faithful to God. God promises that David's line would rule as king as long as they remained faithful.

10. Temple (1 Kings)

David's son, Solomon, is recognized as a wise king who writes some of the wisdom books in the Bible and establishes a temple for God in Jerusalem. His reign is the high point in Israel's history.

11. Divided Kingdom (1, 2 Kings, 1,2 Chronicles)

Solomon does not end well and his son Rehoboam fails to keep the people united. The tribes split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The kings of Israel quickly fall into idolatry. The kingdom of Judah which contains Jerusalem and the temple has a series of Kings who are both good and bad. The line of David continues to rule only in the southern nation of Judah.

12. Prophets (1,2 Kings and Prophetic books)

God raises up men who confront the idolatry of the people and call both the nations of Israel and Judah to be faithful to God and his law. Some prophets like Elijah and Elisha confront the kings through powerful deeds. Other prophets speak out for God and we have record of their message in their books. Increasingly the prophets warn about coming judgment.

13. Judgment 2, Kings, 2 Chronicles, Prophetic books)

Because of their unfaithfulness to God's law and their worship of idols, the northern tribes of Israel are destroyed by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah is conquered by the Babylonians several generations later.

14. Exile (Daniel, Esther, Prophets)

The northern tribes never fully recover, but God preserves a faithful remnant of Judah in the land of Babylon where they are held captive for 70 years. During this time they begin to repent and desire to live faithfully with God. The prophets predict a restoration of the people back to their land.

15. Return (Ezra, Nehemiah, Prophets)

As an act of mercy and grace, God uses the Persian empire to restore the people back to their land. Although they are able to rebuild a smaller temple and through the leadership of Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the people never regain self-rule and the kingly line of David is not re-established.

16. Hope for Messiah (Prophets)

The prophets begin to speak about a hope for a Messiah who will re-establish the kingly line of David and rebuild the kingdom in Jerusalem. They look forward to a time where the law will be written on people's hearts and the people will live faithfully with God.

17. Quiet (Between the testaments)

After the final prophet Malachi there are no prophets for several hundred years. The people continue to struggle with the Greek empire and eventually the Roman empire. The people continue to hold hope for a Messiah.

18. Jesus the Messiah (Gospels)

Jesus is the Messiah from the line of David who is born to save the people from their sins. As predicted by the prophets, Jesus fulfills the promises made to Abraham, Moses and David. Jesus shows himself to be the divine son of God through his teachings and miracles. He preaches a message of the kingdom of God which he is beginning to establish on earth.

19. Once for all Sacrifice (Gospels , Hebrews)

Although innocent, Jesus is crucified by the religious leaders and authorities. His death becomes the payment for the sins of the world. He fulfills the temple and sacrificial systems of the Old Testament and becomes the once for all sacrifice and high priest.

20. Resurrection (Gospels)

Jesus triumphs over death and is raised by God on the third day. His resurrection confirms the payment for sin and establishes our hope for eternal life.

21. Disciples (Gospels)

While on earth Jesus calls 12 disciples and calls them to make disciples of all nations. The people of God are no longer defined by their ethnic heritage, but by faith in Jesus.

22. Holy Spirit. (Acts 1-2)

In fulfilment of the prophecies, Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to indwell all those who place their faith in him. The Holy Spirit works from within to enable his followers to obey the law and continue the mission to make disciples of all nations.

23. Apostles (Acts, Letters/Epistles)

In the decades immediately following the resurrection of Jesus, the followers of Christ who met him personally are sent throughout the Roman empire to share the message of Christ. The work begins in Jerusalem with people like Peter and is extended to the Gentiles through the missionary work of Paul. The apostles write letters to various churches to support them in their faith.

24. The Church (Acts, Letters/Epistles)

The followers of Jesus are organized into local gatherings called churches who represent God on earth. The power of the Holy Spirit helps them extend the good news of forgiveness in Christ's name. The church moves beyond ethnic barriers and includes Gentile believers.

25. The Future. (Revelation. Letters/Epistles)

The apostles teach about the second coming of Christ who will one day conquer evil and establish his kingdom through a new heaven and a new earth.

The Reliability of the Bible

Christians proclaim that the Bible is God's book. They use words like inspired and authoritative. They claim that it is true revelation from God. Yet if you are just beginning to explore the Christian faith, you may wonder how we know that the Bible is reliable?

In recent years there have been a lot of questions about how the church selected which books should be included in the Bible and which ones were not included. There are questions about the historical reliability of the text and worries that the early church fathers manipulated the scriptures to their own designs.

If much depends on the scriptures, it is important to have confidence in the process as to how God's revelation has been transmitted to us today.

While much of the discussion will focus on the New Testament, the same principles apply to the Old Testament.

Inspiration

God has chosen to reveal himself through the writing of inspired authors. The Bible is at the same time the work of God and the work of men. The Bible itself explains this process.

2 Peter 1:20-21

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The basic thought is that the Holy Spirit directed particular people to write. This does not mean that the writers were in a trance or received audible dictation, but rather that God worked through particular individuals to produce divinely authoritative writings.

Given that we do not know the authors and were not present when they wrote, there is not much else to say about this process. The question for us becomes “how do we know that these words are inspired? Many religious books claim inspiration, on what basis can we recognize the Bible to be inspired?”

Canonization (Recognition of Inspiration)

The word “canon” means standard and refers to the standard by which a writing is recognized as inspired. The Canon includes those writings recognized as authoritative for Christians.

The question is “How can we recognize what writings are inspired and what writings are not?” In other words, “What writings should be included in the Bible?”

There are no definitive rational tests for recognizing an inspired writing, however, there are some principles which were historically applied.

Authorship:

Inspired books are written by men of God. From a New Testament Perspective, this means that the books should have been written by or under the direction or approval of the apostles.

This has led to the rejection of some books, the slow acceptance of others, but is not the only deciding factor, because the author of the book of Hebrews, for instance, is not known with certainty.

Consistency:

Inspired books should be consistent with other inspired books and should not contain factual errors.

Collective Discernment:

The recognition process should be one undertaken not by a solitary individual, but by the corporate church. In regards to the New Testament. Books were only included in the canon after they received widespread recognition among the churches.

In all this one can follow some general principles but must be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Again we must point to the role of the Holy Spirit.

John 16:13-14

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.

The Holy Spirit guides believers in the truth. In fact He is the Spirit of truth. As such, the Holy Spirit has directed the church in recognizing and receiving those writing which are inspired. It is important to note that the church does not designate which books are inspired, but rather recognizes what books are inspired.

Historical Overview of the NT Canon

Imagine what is happening from the start. Paul writes a letter to one of the churches like Corinth. The believers there recognize that this letter comes with apostolic authority, but they also recognize that the letter is good and helpful. Copies are made and

sent to nearby churches. A believer from Antioch is traveling in Corinth, gets a chance to read the letter and makes a copy for his home church.

Believers begin to recognize inspired writings and it becomes common practice to read them in the gathered church. Some books like Hebrews which had no definite apostolic author and 2, 3 John which were not widely known took longer, but the majority of the NT books were recognized early. The church however, was not one monolithic institution so it took several centuries before leaders began to formally establish a canon. Eventually church leaders start to make lists of which writings are appropriate for church use.

From the mid part of the 4th century, the 27 books of the New Testament have been recognized as inspired. 20 of the 27 books were undisputed from the start. These 20 books include all the books from Matthew to Philemon as well as 1 John and 1 Peter.

The other 7 books, were disputed by some for a number of years for various reasons. It should be said, however, that most people accepted them as inspired, but there was not unanimity.

Hebrews	Questioned because of anonymity.
James	Some thought it inconsistent with Paul's writings.
2 Peter	Has such a different style than 1 Peter that some questioned authorship.
2 & 3 John	Due to limited circulation many were not familiar with them.
Jude	Jude 14-15 quotes the non-canonical book of Enoch and this caused some to be concerned, though quoting non-scripture does not rule out inspiration.

Revelation Some doubted its authenticity because it is a difficult heavily symbolic book.

The concerns over these books were eventually resolved and they were recognized as inspired.

There are other books which purport to be written by apostles or about Jesus, but few were ever given any serious attention. Most have fanciful and magical elements, were clearly written much later and are significantly inconsistent with undisputed books that there was never any question that they not be included in the canon.

Some however were accepted in local situations for a period of time but had no lasting acceptance. What is evident to readers today, was evident in the early centuries, the writing included in the New Testament have innate credibility, whereas those works rejected, lacked this credibility, not to mention were of debatable authorship and of later date.

Example: The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew

Read the text at (<http://www.gnosis.org/library/psudomat.htm>)

“CHAP. 18.--And having come to a certain cave, and wishing to rest in it, the blessed Mary dismounted from her beast, and sat down with the child Jesus in her bosom. And there were with Joseph three boys, and with Mary a girl, going on the journey along with them. And, lo, suddenly there came forth from the cave many dragons; and when the children saw them, they cried out in great terror. Then Jesus went down from the bosom of His mother, and stood on His feet before the dragons; and they adored Jesus, and thereafter retired.”

Not only is the dating of this text much too late to be considered legitimate, it clearly contains elements of doubtful historical value.

Example: The Gospel of Thomas

Read the text at (<http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>)

These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded.

1. And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

7. Jesus said, "Lucky is the lion that the human will eat, so that the lion becomes human. And foul is the human that the lion will eat, and the lion still will become human."

77. Jesus said, "I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

The dating of the gospel of Thomas is debatable and while it does contain some material which parallels the received gospels, it is clearly inconsistent, owing more allegiance to Gnosticism which is a religious movement that emphasizes the gaining of special spiritual knowledge. The Gospel of Thomas has no clear historical narrative, no unity with the Old Testament and was never used by the early church fathers.

The acceptance of the New Testament was not by proclamation by a small group of leaders, but rather by the broad recognition of real churches. While the official NT canon took many years to be codified, it is simply not the case that church leaders somehow manipulated the process. They did not exclude books for political reasons or only include the books they wanted. The process recognized what happened naturally at the grassroots level. The church was just too widespread for any one bishop to control.

It can be said with great confidence that God has guided his church into all truth and that all the books of the NT are inspired and that the books which were not received are not inspired. Where there was question about some books, these questions were eventually resolved.

Transmission (Preservation of the Text)

Can we be sure of the reliability of the text of the New Testament? Has it been corrupted over the years? Has it been accidentally changed? Can we be sure that what the original author wrote has been faithfully transmitted to us?

In fact the New Testament enjoys a far greater level of textual reliability than any other ancient document. At the same time, there are many challenges to preserving an accurate text.

The New Testament was first written in Greek. In the earliest days of the church, the epistles and gospels were written for specific audiences, however, as believers recognized their worth, copies were made to extend their influence. Furthermore, due to the fact that the writing materials (papyrus and later parchments made from animal skins) were perishable, additional copies were made in order to preserve the text. Because of the perishable nature of the materials, we do not have an original autograph of any of the New Testament books. We do however have many early Greek manuscripts.

There are a greater number of New Testament manuscripts than any other comparable work of antiquity. Moreover, the dates of our earliest manuscripts are closer to the date of the original date of authorship than any other work of antiquity. Consider:

Work	Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	# of copies
Tacitus	100 AD	1100 AD	1000 years	20
Livy's Roman History	59 BC - 17 AD	900 AD	900 years	20
New Testament	40 - 100 AD	350 AD	300 years	5000 +

Because of the richness of the available manuscripts, we have a virtual guarantee that the text of the New Testament we have today accurately represents the original documents.

Despite this richness, variations in the text did occur. Because the early Greek manuscripts were copied by hand, there were transmission errors.

Most of these variations in transmission were accidental. They represent small spelling mistakes, the inclusion or omission of words (especially small words like “the”) or the mistaking of a word or letter for another that is similar.

Sometimes a scribe would accidentally or deliberately harmonize a passage. For instance when Mathew and Luke give the same story, a scribe copying Luke might be more familiar with Matthew and accidentally add or subtract a word or phrase. In some cases scribes even intentionally tried to smooth out the grammar.

Of course as time went on, people made copies of the copies, thus perpetuating errors in the text and introducing new errors. In fact no two Greek manuscripts agree in their entirety. However, the vast majority of the text is unaffected by these issues and moreover, the vast majority of textual variants are trivial. It is said that the New Testament is above 95% pure of textual corruption, which is vastly superior to other works of antiquity.

It can also be said that no doctrine of the Christian faith is in dispute because of a textual variance.

The additional good news is that we have such a large number of manuscripts coming from a wide variety of geographical areas, that scholars are able to reconstruct the original text with a high degree of confidence. This process is called textual criticism. The basic idea is that where the text varies between Greek manuscripts, scholars attempt to reason out which reading is most likely original.

In many cases, the spelling mistakes or omissions are obvious and relatively insignificant, but in other situations more care must be taken. Some of the principles they use include

External Evidences

1. Readings from older manuscripts are preferred to later manuscripts.
2. Readings that have the support of a greater number of manuscripts are generally preferred.
3. Readings that find support in manuscripts from a greater variety of localities are preferred to readings evident in only one locality.
4. Manuscripts that are proven trustworthy in clear cut cases are preferred.

Internal Evidences

1. Sometimes the more difficult reading is preferred, because it is more likely that errors would smooth out the text rather than make it more difficult. This is especially true when it appear on the surface that the difficult text is erroneous, but on more mature consideration proves itself to be correct.

2. Some readings can be explained by harmonization with other texts
3. Readings that better reflect the style and vocabulary of the author are preferred.

Example: John 7:53-8:11 (Story of the adulterous woman)

Although this story may represent a true event, this passage should not be considered a part of the gospel of John because:

- a. It is absent from the majority of early manuscripts.
- b. It is absent from many different types of manuscripts.
- c. No early church father comments on the passage.
- d. It interrupts the flow of John.

Because of these external and internal evidences, this passage is usually marked off in modern translations and a footnote makes reference to some of these concerns.

Because of the fact that more and older manuscripts have been found in recent years, the text of the New Testament is probably more accurate today than it was 500 years ago. The existence of textual variants should not cause any great concern. In most cases they are trivial and in no case does it radically challenge the Christian faith. Furthermore, due to the wealth of manuscripts available today, we are able to accurately access which readings are more likely to be original. It is important to be aware of the existence of textual variant, so that you are not led astray by those that wish to cast doubt on scripture. They also help explain some of the differences between English translations.

Although scripture transmission is a human process and subject to error, history has shown that the Holy Spirit has protected scripture transmission. The New Testament enjoys unparalleled accuracy and integrity.

Translation

Sometimes people cast doubt on the Bible suggesting that much is lost in translation or that the Bible has been translated so many times that it has introduced errors. Sometimes people are concerned when they compare different translations and feel that there is disagreement. It is important for us to understand how the Bible was translated so that we can avoid these unnecessary concerns.

Originally written in Greek Hebrew and Aramaic, the Bible, had to be translated into other languages. The work of translation, however introduces other difficulties. All works of translation will affect the understanding of the text in some way. Some words are difficult to translate. Grammar structures are different in different languages. Also the theology and bias of the translator will affect the translation process. Good translations, however, are done by teams of scholars and are done from the original languages. No respected translation is done through an intermediary language, such as Greek to Latin to English. Let's focus on the English Bible and look at some of the translation issues.

English Translations must deal with two significant issues

1. Textual variants
2. Translation theory

Textual Variants:

As mentioned above, translators are sometimes faced with having to decide which reading, among a number of options is most likely original. This will sometimes lead to differences between English translations. Sometimes people are very concerned that modern translations have significantly altered the familiar text of the King James Version. Often these changes are due to the fact that the different translators were relying on different Greek manuscripts.

The KJV relied on a Greek text which later became known as the Textus Receptus (the received text). This text was produced by Erasmus in 1516. Erasmus had access to a small number of later Greek manuscripts and he used the principles of textual criticism to establish an edited text of the NT. Erasmus' text is for the most part is excellent, however, he did not have the opportunity to research all the manuscripts that are available today.

Modern translations, have the luxury of a greater number of manuscripts. In addition, older manuscripts have been found since the production of the KJV in 1611. Furthermore, we now have manuscripts from a variety of different localities, which helps correct localized errors. The result is that modern translations are better equipped to make decisions about textual variants

Example:

1 John 5:7-8 KJV

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

1 John 5:7-8 NIV

For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

In this case, there is only one late manuscript to support the additional material in the KJV, although this phrase was included in the Latin Bible. Furthermore this verse was never referenced by the church fathers in reference to the trinity debates. In this case the additional material in the KJV, although theologically correct, is not likely original.

Translation Theory

Translators have to decide on how literal they should be in their translation. More literal translations will preserve exact words and phrasings, however more literal translations are not always easy to read and will sometimes impede understanding. Free translations attempt to translate ideas rather than exact words and phrasings. These translations are sometimes called paraphrases, and although easy to understand, are less precise and more open to being influenced by the translators' opinions. Dynamic equivalent translations, attempt to translate the original text into precise equivalents. They will not maintain as exact phrasings as more literal translations, but they seek to be precise translations. Both literal and dynamic equivalent translations are precise and accurate to the original languages, however, dynamic equivalent translations will likely be easier to understand.

Example: Romans 12:20

KJV (literal) ...for in so doing thou shalt heap **coals of fire** on his head.

NIV (DE) ...In doing this, you will heap **burning coals** on his head.”

NLT (DE/Free)...and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you* (footnotes original wording)

Message (Free)...your generosity will surprise him with goodness

Notice that the KJV and NIV are basically equivalent, except that the more literal “coals of fire” is more awkward than the dynamic equivalent “burning coals.” Notice also how the freer translations choose to convey the idea and not the original words.

The following chart may help you compare some of the English translations.

Literal		Dynamic Equivalence			Free	
KJV	RSV	NIV	NEB	NLT	Phillips LB	
NASB	NKJV			JB	Message	
ESV						

Probably the best recommendation in selecting a version to read and study, is to use a couple of versions. When studying a passage read it in a dynamic equivalent and a literal translation. The literal translation will give you a better sense of the structure of the original language, while the dynamic equivalent translation will be easier to understand. Free translations may be helpful and encouraging, but should not be relied upon for serious study.

We are blessed to have many excellent English translations. We should not be concerned that the different English translations differ from one another in various ways. We have seen that there will be some differences, due to textual variants, as well as translation theory. No one translation will be perfect in every instance, but neither are any translations entirely misleading. The best way to study scripture is to use a multiple of translations. Having understood why these differences exist, we can guard against people who may wish to put scripture into doubt. We have accurate reliable translations.

Interpreting the Bible

Once we have received a reliable translation of the inspired scripture, we are faced with the task of understanding it. This work is a balance between human reasoning and the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

On the one hand, it is important to interpret scripture according to good scholarship. One must consider the meanings of words and phrases and must consider the historical background to the text. One cannot draw out just anything from the text.

In addition there is an important internal work of the Holy Spirit, whereby the Spirit illuminates our understanding of the Bible, bringing forth correct comprehension and creating an assurance of its divine origin.

1 Corinthians 2:10b-11 teaches us that only the Spirit of God can reveal the thoughts of God.

"The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."

There are therefore both objective and subjective elements to Biblical interpretation. We have the external written word of scripture and the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit. The two work together to produce understanding and conviction.

The more objective aspect of interpretation is called exegesis which comes from the Greek word meaning "to draw out". The task is to draw out the meaning of the text rather than to bring our own ideas to the text. The governing principle of exegesis is to

work hard to discover the meaning of the text as it would have been considered by the original author and audience.

The two main features of the text that we analyse are the context and the language. This is sometimes called the grammatical historical method, for it looks at the historical background or context and the grammar or elements of language.

When seeking to interpret a text, one should always consider the following:

The literary genre:

As described above in the section on the organization of the Bible, the Bible is comprised of many different types of literature and these types of literature will influence the way that we read them. For instance we would expect that poetry would use more symbolic and creative language. We would fail to interpret the text correctly if we did not take figures of speech into account.

For example when Psalm 62 speaks of God as "he alone is my rock and my salvation", we know quite quickly that God is not being described literally as a rock but that his faithfulness is strong and dependable.

One important factor is to consider the use of historical narrative. Much of the Bible is written as a story or a report of events that have happened. The problem with narrative is that it does not always tell us how we should react to the text. Just because something is described doesn't mean that it is set up as a positive example. For example the book of Judges is very violent and disturbing. We should not assume that this is portraying events that God is happy about but rather we should see these stories as examples of how things get out of hand when God's leadership is refused.

Historical context

Sometimes it is helpful to understand the culture to which the Bible was originally written. Some elements and words in a story only makes sense when we understand this background. The use of commentaries or a Bible dictionary can be helpful in explaining the text.

Clues can be found within the text itself. Some of New Testament letters for instance are written to Jewish believers and some are written to Gentiles and these detail are mentioned in the opening or closing of the letter. Discovering this simple distinction can help us understand the issues at hand.

We must be very careful not to bring our present day culture into the text. Quite often we ask questions about the Scriptures which they were never intended to address. For example in the creation story of Genesis we are often concerned with questions of science. When we here in Genesis 1:3 "let there be light" we begin to think about waves and photons whereas the text quite plainly talks about the creation of day and night.

Literary context

There was always a danger in interpreting words and sentences apart from wider paragraphs, sections and books. The correct understanding of an idea can only be discovered in connection with the wider context.

One amusing example is that Psalm 14:1 says "there is no God." This may sound troubling until you read the complete sentence which is, "the fool says in his heart, there is no God."

In a similar way it is always important to consider the verses that go before and after a particular text. In many cases you need to consider paragraphs chapters and books. The book of Ecclesiastes

can seem very depressing when it speaks about everything being meaningless until you reach the final chapter of the book which finds meaning in God.

There is a story in Mark chapter 8 about Jesus healing a blind man and having to touch him twice. The first time he touches him he sees everything blurry. Jesus touches him again and he can see. This may seem strange and we may wonder about why Jesus had to touch him twice. If however you keep reading you see that this story comes immediately before Jesus speaking to his disciples about who he is. The disciples answer correctly understanding that he is the Christ but then immediately reject the idea that he must suffer and die. The wider context of the healing of this blind man helps us understand that the disciples needed a second's touch for their spiritual sight. Although they recognize Jesus as Messiah, their understanding was still blurry and they needed further teaching about his death and resurrection.

When interpreting Bible we need to look for complete thoughts and be careful not to isolate individual words phrases or verses.

The broader Bible can also help in interpretation for quite often a similar idea is addressed in a parallel passage. This is common in the Gospels. For example in Luke 14:26 Jesus says "if anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother... He cannot be my disciple." This sounds very disturbing until you consider the parallel passage in Matthew 10:37 where Jesus says "anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." When comparing these two texts it is easy to see that Luke is using the word hate as a way to illustrate the strength of love for him in comparison to love for our parents..

Grammar and Meaning of Words

Sometimes you will need to make use of commentaries or lexicons to discover the meaning of a particular word or phrase. These days we have available many resources online which can be a help in these matters. The use of multiple translations can be a help. The comparison of different phrasings can bring clarity.

Overall, the best guide for interpretation is to consider the context and to gain the sense of what the passage would have meant to the original author and audience. That being said we must also remember the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore whenever we approach the Bible we should do so prayerfully inviting God to show us what we need to see and apply to our hearts.

Although we should not treat the Bible as a mystical book written directly to us such that we ignore the original intent of the author, God can use the words of the Bible to speak directly to us. That being said, God's message to us should line up with the intended meaning of the text.

Applying the Bible Today

Consideration of how the Bible applies to us today is called hermeneutics. While our work in exegesis and interpretation may help us understand what the Bible meant to those for whom it was first written, it is not automatically true that the original message remains in force today. Because our culture is different from the cultures of the old and New Testament, sometimes the literal message no longer applies and we must look for underlying principles.

According to the very helpful book "How to read the Bible for all its worth" (Fee and Stuart) a good rule is that whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the original audience then God's word to us is the same as his word to them. However when the life situations are different we must pay more careful attention to application.

For example in a few of Paul's letters he addresses the issue of meat that was being sold in the market which had been offered to pagan idols. His basic advice was that it was okay to eat this meat but we should not do so if it led a weaker brother to believe that idol worship was acceptable. Because we no longer face this specific life situation we need to look for the underlying principles and apply this carefully to other situations.

One significant issue is how to apply the Old Testament laws today. Our interpretive work might lead us to clearly understand how those laws worked in the ancient near east culture for which they were originally given, but the question remains as to how to understand them and apply today. This issue is complicated by the aspect that the Bible employs a sense of progressive revelation. Some aspects that were taught by God in the Old Testament are modified in the New Testament. We are told in places like Galatians chapters 2 and 3 and Romans chapter 6 that we are no

longer under the law. Therefore Christians cannot simply read the book of Leviticus and assume that it is God's binding word for today. The most clear example is that according to the book of Hebrews we no longer need to do animal sacrifices because Jesus is the once for all sacrifice for sin.

This leads us to an incredibly important principle of Christian hermeneutics which is that we interpret and apply all of scriptures in light of Christ. Our understanding of the Old Testament is shaped by the fulfilment of Christ. So when we read about the temple and priests we see that Jesus is our high Priest and that the temple has been replaced by our bodies. God no longer dwells in building but dwells inside every believer by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises that were made in the Old Testament. God promised to bless all nations through Abraham and this blessing comes through Jesus who is the descendent of Abraham. God promised David that there would be a king from his line who would last forever. Jesus is that king.

The Old Testament law applied to the nation of Israel but this law no longer is in force because as it says in Galatians 3:24-25, "the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law."

This leads to another hermeneutical principle which is God did not reveal perfect once for all descriptions of utopian society. God tends to work in redemptive ways within the culture of the time. Rather than defining an ideal, he moves a culture towards the ideal but does not give them more than they can handle. For example the ancient near east culture of slavery was quite brutal. We might be surprised to find that the Old Testament does not call for the abolition of slavery as God's ideal. This ideal is implicit in the idea that all people are created in the image of God, but the Old Testament law did govern slavery without abolishing it. When

compared to the wider culture of the day, the law of Moses offered some better standards and protections. There is a redemptive element. God was moving them towards the ideal even if he understood that they could not handle the ideal.

We see Jesus describe this in Matthew chapter 19 where he talks about divorce. The Pharisees mention that the law of Moses allowed a man to give a certificate of divorce to his wife. Jesus says that this was not ideal but rather a concession that God made knowing that the people's hearts were hard. Matthew 19:8 says, " Jesus replied Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard but was not this way from the beginning."

The certificate of divorce was a protection for women in the ancient culture for without it they might not be able to find the stability of a second marriage. Jesus is saying that the old testament law was not the perfect ideal. Therefore when we consider topics like slavery and divorce from our present day culture we can applaud the redemptive elements of the Old Testament without applying the strict letter of the law today. So while the Bible may not specifically condemn slavery we cannot use it as a justification to maintain slavery.

These sorts of issues show us the difficulty in applying the text across cultures. When however we see the redemptive movement of the Bible and give priority to the teachings of Christ and the fulfilment in Christ we will not be led astray.

Conclusion

The Bible is a beautiful and difficult book. While its critics would like to suppress and mock it, there is much evidence to say that it is reliable and meaningful today. I hope that you will take the time to read it and understand it. As we approach the Bible in the light of Christ we will benefit from its instruction.

Start by finding a good translation that you can understand. Some of the best English translations are the New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV) and New Living Translation (NLT). A study Bible will offer interpretive footnotes that can be helpful.

One of the best ways to read the Bible is within a community of faith. This will give you access to interpretive helps and the insight of others. It is harder to be led astray when you are learning in community in a Bible believing church.

Remember to approach the scriptures with humility and prayer. The Holy Spirit will lead you closer to God. The Spirit was involved in inspiring the text and he will help you understand it.

Finally because Christ is the key to the overall story of the Bible it is best to start reading the Bible in the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). In the Old Testament, the book of Genesis is a good foundation and the Psalms are good for inspiring worship and prayer. It is easier to become familiar with the rest of the New Testament before reading the law and prophets in the Old Testament. As mentioned above, check out The Bible Project Videos, to offer good introductions to each of the books of the Bible.

Learning the Bible is challenge, but it will be a profound help in your life with God.