

Bible Basics 1: Introduction to the Bible

Sections of the Bible:

Section 1: The Pentateuch or the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The first section of the Bible consists of all the Law books, or in Hebrew, the Torah. The word *Pentateuch* is Greek for “the five books”.

Section 2: Historical Books: Joshua, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees. This section of the Bible, more or less, chronicles the history of the Jewish people from the moment they enter the Promised Land until their destruction during the Maccabean revolt at the end of the 2nd century BC.

Section 3: The Wisdom Books: Psalms, Proverbs, Sirach, Job, Ecclesiastes (or the Book of Qoheleth), Wisdom, and the Song of Songs. These books encompass much of the philosophical and theological reflection on God’s interaction with his people.

Section 4: The Prophetic Books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These books capture the prophetic messages that God gave to his people through his prophets. They contain some of the strongest social critiques and expressions of God’s love for his people in all of Scripture.

Section 5: The Gospels +Acts: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. The four accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection. Their primary focus is to prove to their readers that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.

Section 6: the Pauline Letters: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Most scholars agree that only the first 7 letters are authentically Paul’s writing. The others may have been written by his disciples or other people who worked closely with Paul. Nevertheless, they all fit into a corpus of works called the Pauline Writings.

Section 7: Catholic Letters: Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. These letters are clearly not written by Paul both based on their content and style. These letters are called the “Catholic Letters” because most Protestant versions of the Bible do not contain these books.

Section 8: Revelation. The Book of Revelation is really its own category of writings called Apocalyptic Literature. Its style and structure are similar to the Gospel of John and the three Johannine Letters. Only two other books of the Bible are classified as Apocalyptic literature: Daniel and Zechariah.

Finding a passage in the Bible

Few notes:

Until you are familiar with themes and the structure, Google will be your best friend

If you have the location identifying information, then you can easily find any passage, i.e. John 10:15. This means the passage is in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, verse 15. Or 1 Chronicles 12:15, the passage is in the first book of Chronicles, chapter 12, verse 15. It may also be written as John 10,15.

Formation of the Bible:

Most scholars agree that the books of the Law and the historical books (excluding 1 and 2 Maccabees) were written during the Exilic Period. Half of the prophetic books were written prior to exile, a third during exile, and the last sixth after exile. The exact timing of the wisdom books are uncertain. Many of these books were originally written in Greek, which implies they were written during the Hellenistic Period of the Jewish People, about 600-200 B.C. All of Paul's letters were written between 40 and 60 AD. The first Gospel is Mark around 68, Matthew around 70, Luke around 75-85, and John around 100-120. The rest of the letters were written between 70-100. Revelation was written last dating around 120. The first time all of these books were codified as the Canon of Scripture was after the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. (the word canon comes from the Latin word for ruler or measure. It signifies the measuring rod through which we determine what it in and out.) The list of books that were included in Scripture went largely undisputed until the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Following the Reformers critiques, the Council of Trent in 1563 formally declared these books to be part of the Canon of Scripture.

Translations:

Many different translations of the Bible are available, with varying degrees of validity. The important point to mention is that every translation is a lie, namely, that no one translation can fully capture what the authors of these texts intended and meant when they wrote what they wrote. However, you can still appreciate the nuances and difficulties inherent in translating the biblical texts by comparing several different translations.

See extra page

Issues of translation:

Different languages mean different concepts:

Examples: Luke 1:28: "And coming to her, he said "Hail (chaire), favored one (κεχαριτωμένη (kecharitomene))! The Lord is with you."

The word for "favored one" is in a tense we don't have in English called the Perfect tense. It expressed the idea that an action happened in the past whose consequences are still felt in the present. Another good example of this tense is Jesus' last words on the cross in John 19:30.

Mark 4:39 "He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Quiet! Be Still! (σιώπα πεφίμωσο (siopa pephimoso))' The wind ceased and there was a great calm."

These words in Greek would have been known by those who speak Greek as words only spoken by God.

Genesis 37:3: “Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a long tunic.”

The word for long tunic ((pas) 𐤀𐤓) could mean multicolored, long, or embroidered. Since this word only occurs twice in all of Scripture and we have no other texts from that time period, we are unsure on how to best translate this verse.

Genesis 37: 8 “So they hated him all the more because of his talk about his dreams.”

The verb “hate” in this passage is in a voice we don’t have in English. Whereas we have many tense to convey a message (past, present, future), Hebrew does all of that with their voices (we only have active and passive). Here the force of the translation should read “they really really hated him!”

Some ways of expressing ideas in other languages are not possible in English:

Galatians 2:16: “who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (πίστεως Χριστοῦ (pisteos Christou))”

We don’t know exactly what Paul meant by this phrase: faith of Christ, faithfulness of Christ, faith in Christ. The difference in translation caused a huge debate during the Reformation over when faith in Christ is sufficient for salvation.

Nested phrases: Who in his great mercy gave us new birth: (ὁ (who) κατὰ (according to) τὸ πολὺ (great) αὐτοῦ (his) ἔλεος (mercy) ἀναγεννήσας (raised to new birth) ἡμᾶς (us))

This concept is uncommon but really useful in constructing a Greek sentence. Since word order is not as critical in Greek, they take one phrase and nest in within another to intensify the language and link it more closely with the subject.

One concept in multiple words: John 21:15-19: Peter do you love me (agape)? Yes Lord I love (philiōs) you? Peter do you love (agape) me? Yes Lord I love (philiōs) you? Peter do you love (philiōs) me? Yes Lord you know everything you know that I love (philiōs) you?

Different translations:

Each translation of the Bible was written by, usually, a committee of scholars who wrestled with the original languages, the many editions of the Bible we have, and the historical context of the languages and texts before deciding how to interpret the text for us. This process is very time consuming and complicated. Some translations are much better than others.

Translations I recommend: New American Bible (NAB) or New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) – this is the translation we use for the readings for Mass. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) – biblical scholars tend to use this edition for most of their work; this is the best scholarly translation. Navarre Bible – a newer translation that focuses more on the

modern scholarship put into a practical version. The Jerusalem Bible – good translation, used by the Church in other English speaking countries.

Translations I am cautious toward: King James Version – written by King James in the 17th century to justify his understanding of Christianity; this version is clunky because it uses Old English phrasing. New International Version – one of the cheaper versions on the market of a good standard Bible; decent scholarship but not the same caliber as the ones I recommend.

Translations to avoid: Most of these version either have poor scholarship, try to promote their own opinions, or are simply bad translations. Good New Bible, Queer Bible, Modern Language Version, Gideon Bible.

My recommendations for Bibles are three-fold: 1. Find a Bible translation you are willing to read. If this translation is confusing or you can't understand it, it is not worth buying. 2. Try to pick one that has reputable scholarship. Even if it is a little more difficult to understand or the language is clunky, a more scholarly Bible translation will help to mitigate some of the personal bias that can seep in through the translation. 3. Purchasing a study Bible can be of great benefit. These Bibles are designed to help the reader understand some of the historical, literary, and cultural concepts we are unfamiliar with.

Interpretation of Scripture:

Scholarly Model: the types of interpretive method used by modern biblical scholars.

Historical-Critical Method: this method was developed in the 1950's with the sole aim to return to an historical understanding of the text and try to reclaim the cultural context in which the text was written.

Literary Method: what literary techniques are employed in this text that will help us understand the message contained in this text? Is it a poem, a story, a prayer, a song, an oracle? Does the author implore rhetoric, narratives?

Canonical Method: how does this text fit in with the rest of Scripture? Are there other passages in Scripture that it references, alludes to, or directly implies?

Grammatical Method: how does the grammar, syntax, and choice of words in the original languages help us to interpret this text? Did the author intend something by the way he/she wrote this text?

Patristic Model: the system of interpretation employed by the early Church Fathers until the advent of the modern era.

Literal Interpretation: what does the text say? What did the author intend to convey in this passage?

Allegorical Method: what are some of the themes and ideas portrayed in this passage? Is there a deeper meaning that this passage is drawing our attention to? How does this passage help us understand God, his ways, or his Church?

Spiritual, analogical, or moral method: how does this text relate to my life? How is God speaking to me through this passage?

Example Passage: John 4:4-42

Historical-Critical Method

- Jesus entered the Land of Samaria. Samaria is the land of the Samaritan people who had been conquered by six different cultures and adopted the practices of those cultures, which is abhorrent to the Jews. Traveling in the land of Samaria would defile a Jewish person and deem them unworthy to partake of the sacrifices.
- Jacob's Well: an important detail for denoting the place and the details regarding this event. In Jewish culture men went to the wells to find a wife implying that Jesus is looking for a wife.

Textual Criticism:

- This text is a story or narrative. The author wrote it to tell us about something or to relay a message
- Each line of dialogue guides us deeper into the point of this conversation.
 - "Give me a drink" – the initial subject
 - Jesus then tells her he will give her water – complete change of subject
 - She responds "the well is deep, how will you get this water?" – subject confusion
 - Desire for water
 - Find your husband
 - Worship God in spirit
 - Jesus is God

Canonical Criticism

- Genesis 29:1-14: Jacob finds a wife, rolls away the stone, waters the flock – Resurrection imagery
- "woman" harkens back to Genesis 2 and the Adam and Eve story
- "I am" refers to God's revelation to Moses on Sinai: Exodus 3:14

Grammatical Criticism:

- "woman" and "I am" are technical words

Literal interpretation: The text is Jesus being God and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Allegorical: The story is about the resurrection and the new life that comes from Jesus. The story is also about the finding of Jesus' body, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the power to become a disciple of Jesus.

Spiritual Interpretation: What well am I going to that doesn't bring me satisfaction? How often am I bogged down in my sins? Who is Jesus to me and how is he teaching me?