

# Understanding the Bible #1 - Introduction

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

## Bible Reading

*<sup>10</sup>You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. <sup>12</sup>In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup>while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:10-17

## Introduction

This series is going to be looking at how we can better understand the Bible, using ‘The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life’ by Andrew Ollerton as a framework. I’m doing this because many Christians don’t understand the Bible very well. In fact, many Christians don’t read it at all, relying on sermons for their Bible teaching, which is a lot better than nothing, but it’s not ideal.

There is an old Chinese proverb that you’ve probably heard, attributed to Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher in the 6th century BC. It goes:

*Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day.*

*Teach someone to fish and you feed them for a lifetime.*

And that is what I'm attempting to move towards with these talks. I want to encourage you to read the Bible more, and with more understanding.

So, let's get started...

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Towards the end of his life, around 1776, the French philosopher Voltaire wrote 'The Bible Fully Explained', a mockingly skeptical commentary on the whole of the Bible. His conclusion reads:

*'The subject is now exhausted: the cause is decided for those who are willing to avail themselves of their reason... people will no more read this Bible.'*<sup>1</sup>

And yet 20 years after his death, paper that had been specially made for a luxury edition of Voltaire's work was being used to produce Bibles, because the demand for his publications had waned. And, to add to the irony, 58 years after Voltaire's death his house was used as a storehouse for Bibles and religious tracts.

Fast forwarding to modern times, in China, whose government has a 'difficult' relationship with the Christian faith, the Amity Printing Company recently celebrated printing 200 million copies of the Bible.

Thousands of years after its contents were originally written, the Bible is available in hundreds of languages, and read by more people than ever before.

But, what is the Bible?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bellatorchristi.com/2019/03/18/voltaires-prediction-home-and-the-bible-society-truth-or-myth/>

First of all, it is not a book, but a collection of books. The word 'Bible' derives from the Greek word 'biblia' which means 'books'. The word 'Scripture' comes from the Latin 'scriptura' which means 'writings'.

But, spoiler alert, the Bible is not an ordinary collection of books. They were written by humans, but they were inspired by God. This is what sets the Bible apart from all other writings. There are books that are inspirational. There are books that can teach us things about God. But the Bible is special. Really special.

The 66 books of the Bible that we use were written by about forty different authors over a period of at least a thousand years before it was collected into one volume, 1600 years ago. Which should make for a real mess. And yet everything is connected. There are intricate threads that make the stories and themes link together. And the more you read the stories, the more they reveal themselves.

The books inside are organised into two sections, the Old Testament, written mainly in Hebrew with some Aramaic, and the New Testament, which was written in Greek.

Fortunately we have a wide range of translations available to us. However we will still need to engage our brains if we are to properly understand and apply what we are reading to our situation.

When we read the Bible, we encounter a wide range of different people and places with varying customs and cultures.

When Paul ended his letter to the Romans saying, 'Greet one another with a holy kiss' (Romans 16:16) he was encouraging 1st century Christians to be courteous in the manner they were accustomed to. A French person will read this without a second-thought. However, in 21st century England, it is more usual to shake hands, or more recently bump elbows! In Japan people bow.

From this we can see that to understand the Bible, it helps to have some idea of what the text meant to its original hearers. There are

Scriptures that talk about things that went beyond the original writer's and hearers' comprehension (Isaiah 53, etc), but understanding where, when, why and to who something was written will help us to better work out what it is (and isn't) saying to us today.

Another fact that is often ignored when reading the Bible is that it contains a wide range of writing styles, including:

### **Narrative: 60% (Joshua, Gospels)**

Narrative is a posh name for 'stories', and I would have used that word except that for some people it conjures up the idea of something that is not true. The Bible stories are true, and there are a lot of them. Humans love telling and listening to stories. Stories help us understand things better, that's why Jesus (and the Prophets) used them a lot.

### **Prophets: 20% (Isaiah, Jeremiah)**

The Prophets were people commissioned by God to speak his message to the world. Their job was often to try and bring Israel back to a right relationship with God, reminding them of what God required, and warning them of the consequences of abandoning God.

### **Letters: 7% (Romans, Hebrews)**

These are communications of instruction, encouragement and rebuke, sent by the early leaders of the Christian church to the first Christian congregations.

### **Wisdom: 6% (Proverbs)**

Proverbs is a book full of recommendations for how to live a godly life, and also the things to avoid.

## **Poetry: 5% (Psalms, Song of Songs)**

A type of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is enhanced using a range of styles, including rhythm and vivid imagery.

## **Visions: 2% (Daniel, Revelation)**

This is when God reveals his plans to people using words and images.

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The content of the Bible is often hard to classify precisely... what some people would call poetry, others would call wisdom (or both), etc., so the chart is just a rough guide.

Generally humans are good at working out what type of language is being used, whether we are browsing the internet, reading a book or listening to the radio. The Bible is a special book, but we can often use our common-sense to work out what type of text we are reading.

## **Everything's connected**

Although the Bible is made up of 66 books written by a wide range of different people over a long span of history, the Christian church has consistently affirmed that by God's inspiration they work together to tell a coherent story of the way God has worked, works and will work.

Of course, not everyone (including many Christians) agrees with this. Especially in 21st century western culture, it is widely believed that the books of the Bible are un-scientific, riddled with historical errors, and that, particularly the Old Testament, is filled with content that is irrelevant to the world we live in today.

Maybe you are one of those people. Or, you might be fully on board with the Bible being fully trustworthy. Or maybe you are somewhere in the middle.

When I was a young Christian (just before the First World War), a visiting speaker was urging us to read our Bibles more, and mentioned that he had recently read it through in a week.

Not to be outdone (competitive? me?), I spent the next week reading my recently purchased Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Some of it was brilliant. Some of it was horrifying. Some of it I found confusing, and some sections were so weird (Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation anyone?) that I found myself wondering whether the authors were in their right minds!

That was over 40 years ago, and since then I have spent a lot of time studying the scriptures. For many years, as part of my morning devotions, I have read through the Bible using a study plan that takes you through the Old Testament once a year and the New Testament and Psalms twice each year. It means reading about 4 chapters a day.

And, yes, the Bible does contain apparent contradictions, some strange stories and some really, really unpleasant material. But I have come to appreciate what many Christians before me have realised, that the Bible tells a consistent and wonderful story of the God who created the universe, and chose to make humans in his image.

There are a number of themes in the Bible, and the following six give us a helpful way of connecting the stories of the Bible with the way God deals with his church, and with us personally.

## **Origins**

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, explains how the universe came to exist. It explores the beginning of the planet we live on, nature, humans, evil and death. It answers big questions including, 'Where have we come from?' And, 'Why are we here?'

## **Exodus**

The Bible's story focusses on a Middle-eastern man, Abram. He lived 4000 years ago in Mesopotamia, one of the first known civilisations in the world. His descendants end up as slaves in Egypt, but God rescues Israel, with a little bit of help from Moses, and eventually gain a land of their own. The Exodus story demonstrates how God is willing and able to liberate his people and guide them to a place of safety and peace.

## **Exile**

Israel's new home is a wonderful place, but the new nation doesn't remain faithful to the God who had given it to them, and despite many warnings from God, they refuse to change their ways. And eventually they are invaded by the armies of Babylon (Iraq) and many of them were taken there to work for their conquerors. The Bible books written during the exile are full of longing to return to their proper home, but also demonstrate that God is present in times of suffering and pain.

## **Messiah**

A regular theme of the Old Testament is the anticipation of a person who will lead Israel back to God and rescue them from the forces of evil. Jesus is the fulfilment of this hope. During his time on earth he healed the sick, raised the dead, and demonstrated through his words and actions that God is on the side of the poor and unwanted. His teaching about God's overwhelming and undeserved love clarified and fulfilled much of the Old Testament, but the majority of Israel's religious leaders decided that he was a dangerous heretic, and they convinced the Roman authorities to have him crucified. He died, but death could not hold him.

## **Spirit**

After his resurrection, Jesus returned to his Father, but through the Holy Spirit God's presence and power was released in a dynamic new way. As prophesied many times in the Old Testament, God's love is not limited to a single nation, and as Jesus' followers told the story of Jesus's love and offer of forgiveness of sins to the people around them, people from all races and social groups began to form communities who worshipped the crucified and resurrected Christ. This the same community that you and I are a part of, now numbering over 2 billion people, sharing the love of Christ with the world we live in.

## **Hope**

This is one of the most basic human needs. Hope gives us the motivation to live. Sadly, a lot of the hope offered in this world is false, or twisted. The Bible's story is one of hope. Jesus's message was full of hope, both for while we are alive and beyond. The last book of the Bible (Revelation) concludes with earth being restored to its original perfection.

Interestingly, Eden was a garden, but Revelation describes a city where God rules in perfect love, and where his redeemed people live in perfect community. Exactly what the new creation will look like is not clear, it is probably impossible for a non-resurrected mind to comprehend.

The important message is that God is in control of history, and that one day he will transform his sin-damaged creation, and those who belong to his redeemed community will be a part of that amazing place, forever!

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So, that's a very brief overview of what the Bible says from Genesis to Revelation. The events it describes cover the entire life of this universe. And the human stories span thousands of years, and many



different cultures. If Abram had been time-travelled to this building today, he would no doubt be amazed at the technology we possess, and probably amused by our clothing and customs.

But our emotions, our fears, our hopes, would be very similar. In this, Abram and ourselves are not that different, we still look for...

- Meaning
- Freedom
- Peace
- Love
- Community
- Security

And all of these subjects are tackled in the words of scripture.

## **Reasons for reading the Bible**

Well, firstly, Jesus read it (the Old Testament at least!) and used it. When being tempted by the Devil, he quoted Scripture to refute Satan. In answer to Satan encouraging Jesus to misuse his supernatural powers...

*Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Matthew 4:4

Later on in Matthew's gospel he says:

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.*

Matthew 5:17-18

And Jesus was soaked in the Old Testament Scriptures. Even when hanging on the cross, his thoughts were shaped by the words he had read and learned.

And the apostle Paul, writing to his friend Timothy says:

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*

2 Timothy 3:16

Another reason is that throughout history, when people have read the scriptures, there is a regular theme of people discovering that what they are reading is different from other literature.

Napoleon, not maybe someone you would usually think of as being a particularly religious person wrote:

*The Gospel possesses a secret virtue, a mysterious efficacy, a warmth which penetrates and soothes the heart. One finds, in meditating upon it, that which one experiences in contemplating the heavens. The Gospel is not a book: it is a living being, with an action, a power, which invades everything that opposes its extension.*

Napoleon

When I first read John's Gospel as an atheist 17-year-old, I was assuming it would be old-fashioned, boring and irrelevant. What I encountered was something completely different to what I had ever read before. And it was part of the process that led me to accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour.

Of course, others have read the scriptures and found them lacking (remember Voltaire?). The divine inspiration of the Scriptures is not something that can be finally proved historically, although its historical reliability is increasingly recognised even by atheist scholars, historians and archaeologists.

What we can do is read the scriptures through the lens of faith in Jesus Christ, asking him to help us understand them, and apply them to our lives.

Just as part of our Christian testimony is reaching a point where we trust Jesus to be our Lord, and then as we seek to live a life that honours him and his teachings, discovering that he is faithful and loving. So when reading the Bible, we trust what Jesus said about Scripture, put it into practice, then go back to Scripture and read it in the light of what we have experienced, repeating that process for the rest of our lives.

So, that's the introduction done. Next time I'll be looking at origins... starting with the first book of the Bible, Genesis.