

How to start reading the Bible

St Bartholomew's Church, Sydenham, 14th October 2008.

Plan for the series

We shall be having six sessions, which will cover:

1. Introduction to the Bible
2. OT History
3. OT Prophets
4. NT Gospels
5. NT Epistles
6. More on the history of the bible

Please bring your own bible with you if this is convenient – if not, there are copies you can borrow for the meeting. If you don't have a bible, or are not sure you like the translation you have, we shall be discussing choosing a bible in our last session, or you can get some ideas by looking at the church's own bibles and the ones other people bring along.

Session 1: Introduction to the Bible

This material is designed to give you an overview of what books are in the bible, the overall "plan" of the bible, and some of the history, geography and cultural information to help you understand it.

What the bible is (and isn't)

- It's one big, big story – the story of how God created the world and the human race and God's grand plan for us. There are, of course, lots of smaller stories interwoven with this one, and lots of beautiful and important details along the way, but the creation and the redemption of humanity are the big theme throughout. God takes a particular interest in one group of people, the Jewish people, and works with them to make them God's own people, telling them how to worship and behave and get to know God. God then comes to earth as Jesus (the incarnation), living with people and teaching them, and is killed and rises again (the crucifixion and the resurrection) as part of a plan to fix the problems introduced into the world by evil. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the bible follows the early Christians as they figure out how to live and spread the message.

- Because of this big “story arc”, it’s a good idea to sit down and read large chunks of the books of the bible as a whole if you can, as well as just hearing single stories on a Sunday at a service. If time doesn’t permit, it’s still a good idea to read through a whole book even if it’s a few verses every few days, so that you get a connected sense of the whole. This is where bible study groups can be useful as they keep you on track, and we’ll be looking at study guides in the last session.
- The bible is many books bound together, not just one. It doesn’t just have the one author, where we take “author” to mean the person who wrote down and interpreted God’s word into one of the books, like Obadiah or James. So we cannot necessarily expect all of it to have one flavour, one level of difficulty, or never to appear contradictory.
- The many books of the bible are also different types of book. Some of them are stories, some are poetry or hymns, some are practical letters from one early leader to the fledgling churches. This makes for variety and interest when you are reading them, as the same event or issue can be covered in many different ways, but also you need to be careful to read them as what they are – be careful of deducing doctrine from a hymn alone, for example.
- The bible is not a user manual for living your life in the same way that your car or your microwave have instruction manuals. You cannot look up the chapter on stem cell research, or whether war is ever justified, or whether ministers should wear vestments on Sundays.



This means we have to **interpret** what we read. In fact, other people have interpreted it for us:

- *The original author* had to listen to what God was saying to him (it was always a “him”), and write it down in his own language in the most appropriate way.
- *The translators* had to try and rephrase the original language in the target language and keep as much of the meaning as possible.
- *Other authorities* like the tradition of the church throughout its history have made assumptions and pronouncements about what different passages mean, and there are thousands of books, sermons and internet presentations out there giving their own authors’ or churches’ ideas about the bible. In our church our sermons will typically talk about the *Gospel* reading for the day, sometimes also mentioning the other *New Testament* reading and the *Old Testament* reading, as these are often chosen to be related in some way.

Keywords for interpretation:

It may be useful to know what these mean, especially if you read commentaries later:

- *Exegesis: refers to discovering the original intended meaning of a text*
- *Hermeneutics: refers to the contemporary relevance of ancient texts, but can be used more widely to mean interpretation and exegesis too.*

Opening up a bible and finding out what’s inside:

Typically, there will be a table of contents telling you the books which are included and where to find them. Even this is not the same for every bible (we shall see why in the next section), but here’s a typical list:

Testament	Book type	Name
Old Testament (or Hebrew Scriptures)	Pentateuch, Book of the Law, Torah – also part of the History	Genesis
	Pentateuch	Exodus
	Pentateuch	Leviticus
	Pentateuch	Numbers
	Pentateuch	Deuteronomy
	History	Joshua
	History	Judges
	History	Ruth
	History	1-2 Samuel
	History	1-2 Kings
	History	1-2 Chronicles
	History	Ezra
	History	Nehemiah
	History	Esther
	Wisdom	Job
	Wisdom	Psalms
	Wisdom	Proverbs

	Wisdom	Ecclesiastes
	Wisdom	Song of Songs
	Prophet	Isaiah
	Prophet	Jeremiah
	Prophet	Lamentations
	Prophet	Ezekiel
	Prophet	Daniel
	Prophet	Hosea
	Prophet	Joel
	Prophet	Amos
	Prophet	Obadiah
	Prophet	Jonah
	Prophet	Micah
	Prophet	Nahum
	Prophet	Habakkuk
	Prophet	Zephaniah
	Prophet	Haggai
	Prophet	Zechariah
	Prophet	Malachi
New Testament	Gospel	Matthew
	Gospel	Mark
	Gospel	Luke
	Gospel	John
	History	Acts
	Epistle	Romans
	Epistle	1 Corinthians
	Epistle	2 Corinthians
	Epistle	Galatians
	Epistle	Ephesians
	Epistle	Philippians
	Epistle	Colossians
	Epistle	1-2 Thessalonians
	Epistle	1-2 Timothy
	Epistle	Titus
	Epistle	Philemon
	Epistle	Hebrews
	Epistle	James
	Epistle	1-2 Peter
	Epistle	1-2-3 John
	Epistle	Jude
	Apocalypse	Revelation

These are not equal divisions: the New Testament is much smaller than the Old Testament. There are 66 books listed above, 39 in the OT and 27 in the NT.

The “book type” column probably won’t appear in your bible, but it’s useful to know early on, and we’ll be discussing it later. Your bible will probably also list the abbreviations for the books, and they will usually be a set of three-letter codes plus the occasional number (e.g. Mat for Matthew, 1 Cor for 1 Corinthians), or two-letter codes (e.g. Mt for Matthew, Ez for Ezekiel, 1 Co for 1 Corinthians). You will see these used in the cross-references and footnotes of your bible, so go back to the table of contents if you need to figure out whether Ph is supposed to mean Philippians or Philemon.

Looking things up:

You need to be able to understand the abbreviations to find passages.

e.g. John 3:16 means the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16.

1 Cor 13:4-8 means the First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 4 to 8.

Ps 8 means Psalm 8. The book of Psalms is a book of individual hymns/poems, so this is the eighth psalm, not the eighth chapter of a book.

Gen 1-2:4a means Genesis, the whole first chapter, and the second chapter up to halfway through the fourth verse. (This reference will give you the first creation story, where the chapter boundary has traditionally been set in a slightly odd place.)

The Old Testament is sometimes also called the “Hebrew Scriptures” as it is the original set of books sacred to the Jewish people, so calling it “Old” could be seen as disrespectful to them, or dismissing it as “old stuff” which is not relevant any more. These books were written earlier (hence Old) and over a much longer period than the New Testament. The earliest event referred to is the creation of the universe, but in terms of recorded history the early patriarchs (fathers of the tribe) in the bible are living around about 1900BC, which is the Bronze Age in terms of pre-history. The latest of the Old Testament books is the book of Daniel which probably took its present form around 200BC/BCE. (More terms to confuse: you may see dates marked BC/AD for Before Christ/Anno Domini (which in turn is Latin for “in the year of our Lord” or BCE/ACE Before Common Era/After Common Era.) We’ll be covering where the different books fit in with what we know of history in the Ancient Near East, and with each other, later – for now also realise they are grouped in the OT by subject, not chronologically (by date)).

The New Testament refers to events starting from just before the birth of Christ, such as the earlier birth of John the Baptist. These books were written down shortly after the events in them took place, up until about 100 or 150 AD. These dates are all vague as the books originally circulated as scrolls (a big roll of papyrus), codices (an early form of book with separate pages) or letters and were gradually changed and edited and collected together.

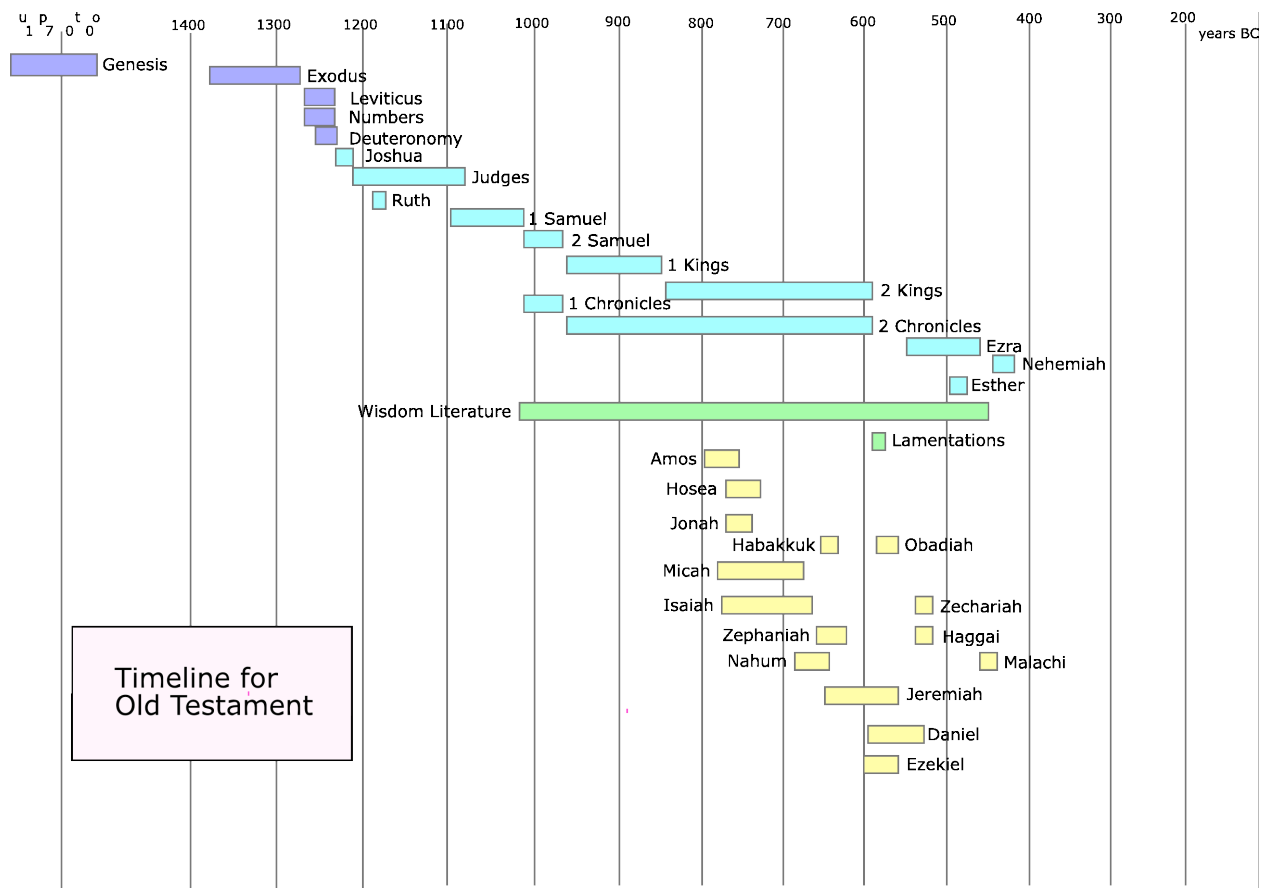
Later on we have a series of conferences in the early church which determine “The Canon” – which books are in, and which are out. Some writings from around the same time as the New Testament we currently know didn’t get included.

In between the Old and New Testament we might find the “Deuterocanonical Works” or the “Apocrypha” – Greek for “the secondary books” or “the stuff tacked on afterwards” respectively. These

books were written in between the last books of the Old Testament and the time of Christ, say in about 200BC to 100BC. The Anglican churches don't see them as essential reading and some bibles include them, some don't. Other traditions e.g. Catholic and Orthodox give some of them different status to others. If you're new to bible reading they are not where you need to start.

What happened when

Here is a timeline for the Old Testament, showing the approximate period *covered* by each book – not necessarily the same as the probable date when the book was first written down.



What happened where

Here are two maps to get you started. The first shows the Holy Land in Old Testament times just after the division of the land into territories for the Twelve Tribes.



The second shows the same area in the first century AD.



The different types of book in the Hebrew Scriptures/ Old Testament

OT Narrative

It is important to remember that the narrative books are “story” – retelling the events of the past to give meaning and direction to the contemporary setting, both for the original hearers, and also to give us a compass for today. The narratives are primarily God’s story, where God writes the Jewish people and then all of us into God’s story. On the highest level, this is the story of how God creates people to bear God’s image, they are then lured away by Satan, but God redeems them (us!). On a slightly more detailed level, the bible is the story of the first and second covenants, where the OT details God’s earliest covenant with the Jewish people, repeated in several different formats.

On the most detailed level, there are the individual stories, some of which will be familiar from Sunday service readings or Sunday school. We should ideally always look at these for how they fit into the levels above as well as considering them separately. The individual stories are not all there to teach individual moral lessons, e.g. consider the polygamy we see in the OT, which is no longer seen as acceptable.

Some pointers to understanding an OT story can be found by remembering that these stories were originally told, not read. In the oral tradition details are often sparse, so any detail which is there is likely to be important, and similarly for characterisation. Parallels are important, e.g. the similarity between Hannah in 1 Samuel and Mary in the gospels, or Elijah in the OT and John the Baptist in the NT. Dialogue is often used as a clue to plot and character, contrasts are important, and there is often repetition or a summary at the end. Stereotyped patterns like the way the kings are described in Kings and Chronicles are also typical of the oral tradition. Hebrew stories use inclusion: bracketing similar items around a story; see also the chiasms in the Psalms.

Poetry and wisdom

The Wisdom books are a mixture of fairly practical, even common-sense advice, and also poetic responses to the beauty of God and the wonders of creation. The Psalms are a very important part of the bible because they express all kinds of responses to God and appeals to God for help, including some very negative emotions, and give us a full range of what the Jewish people went through. Job and Ecclesiastes give us a very forthright picture of what happens when things appear to go very wrong for a faithful worshipper, or how easy it is to be worldly-wise and weary of life’s troubles, and having these books in the bible provides a necessary balance. The Wisdom books have marked similarities to other texts in the Ancient Near East, as well as some distinctly Jewish religious content.

The prophets

Prophets were people with a message from God. They were not just people who told the future in a fortune-telling sense, although occasionally they did make predictions. They were more concerned with encouraging the people to turn to God, to repent, and to amend their lives and purify their worship so that their future would be bright, rather than bad events coming to pass. Many prophets were active before the Exile, the time when first the northern and then the southern part of Israel and Judah were taken captive by powerful empires and taken into exile. The experience of the exile, and then the return from exile, with its echoes of the exodus, was crucial to the Jewish people's understanding of themselves and of their God, and also how "their" God, unlike most other gods of the time, didn't just belong to them and to their country but could and should be worshipped by everyone, everywhere.

The different types of writing in the New Testament

The Gospels

"Gospel" is an old English word meaning "Good news" and is a translation of the Greek "euangelion", meaning the same thing, but also the root or modern words like "evangelist" and "evangelise". The first surprise for new readers of the bible is that there are four of these pieces of Good News! None of them is an exact "biography" of Jesus in the sense we would understand today, they are more like portraits of Jesus and cover different aspects of his life and teaching. The first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have lots of similarities and are called the Synoptic gospels as they summarise similar teachings, sometimes using exactly the same words and sometimes using similar themes in different places. They all make a lot of use of Jesus' teaching in parables; and give us varying amounts of detail about Jesus' life and the context in which he taught as well as what he said. The fourth Gospel, John, is very different. He focuses on Jesus' sayings about himself rather than his teaching by parables, and is also more concerned with the deeper meaning of the stories he includes.

History

Mainly Acts: there is a tendency to try and use this book to recreate a first century "ideal" for the church. This book has the same author as the third Gospel, Luke. He is writing in a tradition of using history to encourage and moralise as well as simply recording facts. Luke is interested in how the early church expanded geographically, from Jerusalem to Samaria and Judaea and then on to the known world; and how the leadership went from the Jews in Jerusalem with Peter, to Paul and the Gentiles with Rome as the new centre.

Epistles

There is a variety of letters in the New Testament, most of them are open letters to specific churches about specific issues e.g. the letters to the Corinthians, often a response to a problem which has been discussed earlier. Some are of very general application e.g. James. Some are more individual, e.g. Philemon. To understand these we need to know the original context and the problem which is being discussed. We can look at this via the historical context and via the structure of the letter. A basic rule is that a text can't mean something completely different to its meaning for the original audience, and also that a comparable situation would lead to comparable advice today. The letters can be described as "task theology" – which means practical theology for a specific problem, not the writer's whole worldview, or even their whole view of a subject.

Apocalypse

Finally, there is the Book of Revelation, which belongs to a category of Jewish literature called Apocalypse. This is difficult to interpret, and beware of sects which think they have it all taped! It's a prophecy about a great cataclysm about to befall the Roman Empire of the time, and how this can be seen as symbolic of how earthly things will come to an end one day and the Kingdom of Heaven will fully replace our temporal world. It's more important to see this as a pointer for how to live today to prepare for the full coming of the kingdom, rather than to be concerned with exactly how the end will come.

Sessions 2 to 5: a preview

During the middle four weeks we shall be looking at a different type of bible literature each week. There will be a short reading or readings and then an overview of how to interpret and read around the chosen passages.

The schedule will work as follows:

- Week 2: Old Testament History
- Week 3: Old Testament Prophets
- Week 4: New Testament – Gospels
- Week 5: New Testament – Epistles

You will have noticed that there are several types of biblical literature that we have left out here – all we can hope to do in a few weeks is to cover an overview of the Bible. At the same time we want to cover some real bible topics in meaningful detail, hence the picking of themes here.