



The Essentials Series

Introduction to Reading and Understanding the Bible

St. George's Episcopal Church

Spring 2015

Bible --> **Drama** --> **Doctrine** --> **Discipleship** --> **Doxology**
Knowing the which gives rise to that shapes our and results in

Top Ten Rules for Interpreting the Bible *(in no particular order)*¹

1. **The Bible is for you, but it is not about you.** The Bible is God's Word which is for his people, to show them who God is and what he has done. But the Story of the Scriptures is not about you and me directly. It draws us into its reality, and we are swept up into God's Story, rather than starting with ourselves and pulling out nuggets of advice to make our lives better.
2. **Text and Context.** A passage must be understood in terms of its placement within the flow of thought in its book, and its place in the overall Bible, with regard to its genre, date, authorship, and original audience.
3. **Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament.** All of Scripture is interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ (John 5:39-40; Luke 24:25-27). He is the central figure of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Christ is the fulfillment of the promises and types of the Old Testament. In order to understand just what Christ is fulfilling, one must know the OT patterns and people that set the background for the finished work of Christ. In order to fully know the OT, one must see how it is resolved by Christ in the NT.
4. **Avoid moralism.** Some passages are literally good moral advice (for example, the Book of Proverbs), but in general, and especially when reading about a biblical person, the point is not to see them simply as examples to follow or avoid, but to ask how this person fits into the larger story of salvation pointing to Jesus Christ. The Bible is doing much more than telling us to "Be good for goodness sake."
5. **Scripture interprets Scripture.** Not all passages of the Bible are easy to understand, so we read them in light of other clearer passages. The Bible creates its own categories for understanding itself, and while it is important to rely on corporate reading (tradition and reason), these do not trump the internal witness of Scripture to itself. We also do not allow a difficult or obscure passage to overturn the clearer ones. Avoid getting so focused on the details that you lose sight of where a particular passage (or book) fits into the bigger picture. Like looking at the box top when working on a puzzle, a passage must be understood in its relation to the rest of Scripture - the trees must be known in light of the whole forest.
6. **Avoid spiritualizing the text.** It is problematic if passages get allegorized or reduced to 'timeless spiritual truths', apart from its internal intent and context. For example, Jesus calming the storm gets interpreted as Jesus can calm the 'storms' of your life. That is not the

¹ Derived from the work of Michael, Horton, "How to read the Bible" (November, 2013) and The White Horse Inn, "Top Ten Rules of Interpretation" (December, 2103).

reaction of the disciples in the story! They ask, “Who is this then, whom the wind and waves obey?” If the text requires us to interpret it as allegory, the text usually tells us to do so (for example Galatians 4:21-31).

7. **Avoid doctrinalism.** The Bible is first a drama, a story, which then gives rise to certain doctrines about God. Of course there are doctrines in Scripture, but we can get into trouble when the doctrine supersedes the biblical drama which gives rise to those doctrines. Sometimes it can be tempting to short circuit the drama and go straight to ‘timeless truths’. There are some passages which are clearly direct statements of doctrine (for example, Colossians 1:15-20), but the Bible is not a theology textbook. Doctrine derived from small passages detached from the big picture, i.e. the overall drama, leads to problems.

8. **Be sensitive to motifs.** Be aware of parts in the biblical story (esp. the NT) which carry echoes or allusions to earlier elements of the story, which is different from a specific quote. Exodus, for example: the Gospel of Matthew only makes sense as a whole if you know there was a Passover and Exodus, and what Jesus is doing is recapitulating those events. The Feasts are another example of this, particularly in John’s Gospel.

9. **Know the distinction between Law and Gospel.** Law is not just the OT and gospel the NT. The law reveals what God requires of us, and breaking that law invokes a curse or penalty. Gospel, or promise, reveals what God has done (or will do) for us, in the face of our failure before the law, to bring about his purposes of redemption. See Edward Fisher, “The Marrow of Modern Divinity” addendum (pg. 6). Law and Gospel are revealed and used by God in different ways throughout the biblical drama, falling along the lines of the various covenants established in redemptive history. Misunderstanding this distinction between law and gospel is the primary source of the abuses, confusion, and short fallings of the church throughout its existence.

10. **Recognize that we don’t come to the text without our own baggage.** We are not blank slates, and we always come to read the text with our own presuppositions. The trouble usually occurs when we are not aware of those presuppositions, and as a result we can misread and misapply the Bible. Thus, we must always be ready to test and critique our presuppositions as part of our ongoing reading of the Bible, and ultimately allow the Bible itself to form our presuppositions.

Additional resources for interpreting the Bible

R.C. Sproul, “Knowing Scripture”

Graham Goldsworthy, “According to Plan”

Sally Lloyd Jones, “The Jesus Storybook Bible”

Preliminaries to Studying the Bible

I. What do we think about Scripture as Anglican Christians

A. From the Book of Common Prayer (1979)

(1) Article VI of the 39 Articles of Religion (p868)

(2) Proper 28, formerly the Collect for Second Advent (p236)

(3) Declarations at Ordinations (p538, p526, p512)

B. Richard Hooker (1554-1600), the foremost theologian of the Anglican tradition:

“What Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth.”

R. Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V, 8:2

C. Scripture was not *dictated* by God (what Muslims believe about the Qur’an).

Rather, Anglicans along with most historic Christian churches have believed in the **inspiration** of scripture. It is truthful in what it means to communicate.

“All Scripture is **breathed out** by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

II. How do we read the Bible?

A. Genre – what *types* of literature are in the Bible

Histories (e.g. I and II Kings)

Biographies (e.g. Esther)

Wisdom Literature (e.g. Proverbs) } These are all read in different ways

Poetry (e.g. Psalms)

Apocalyptic Literature (e.g. Daniel)

Prophetic Literature (e.g. Isaiah)

Legal Codes (e.g. Leviticus)

Letters (e.g. Galatians)

B. The False Choice between “literal” and “metaphorical” readings.

Historically, the church has read the different elements of biblical literature according to their genre. However, when we say we read something “literally” we hit a problem. Today, people misuse this word. In the classical way of reading the Bible “literal” means to read the text in the way the first authors meant it to be read.

Examples

Solomon built the Temple

Smoke came from God's nostrils

Jesus rose from the dead

Author's Intent for Reader

Solomon's men built the Temple

God was angry; Psalm 18 describes this poetically

Jesus who was bodily dead is now bodily alive

C. "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Acts 20:27

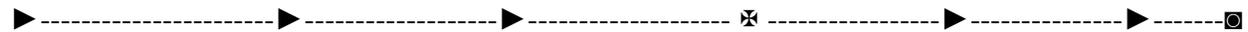
Classic exegesis (interpretation) has a formula for understanding the Bible: **scripture is interpreted by scripture**. What this means is that the tough spots are made clear in light of the whole of the Bible (the whole *canon* or list of books in the Bible).

** This also presumes that we can't shirk the parts that are a challenge for us. For instance, many conservatives tend to downplay Jesus' insistent call for peace. On the other hand, many liberals tend to ignore Jesus' sexual ethic of chastity.

III. Take a step back: what is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of texts which *reflect* on one great story: the story of God's New Creation.

** Please note that while the Bible is in two canons (Old and New Testaments) it is a unified whole. God did not have a 'Plan A' with Israel that failed and then a 'Plan B' with Jesus.



God creates the world;
but through Adam, all
creation universally falls
and is subject to death.

God calls out to
a select People
to be in a
relationship (Israel)

God sends his own Son
as one of this select
people; he defeats death
and ascends to the Father

At the end of the
Age, Christ returns
and all creation will
be remade perfectly.

● It is **critical** to understand that earliest Christianity was foremost a Jewish phenomenon! These Jewish Christians believed that the God of Israel was following through with his ONE plan to redeem the whole of creation, taking death out of the equation through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

IV. Which Version should I use???

This is the single most common question in every Bible study. And there is no simple answer! First, these aren't different *versions*, but different *translations*. Second, as the Bible is a collection of texts written in Hebrew and Greek, **every translation is itself an interpretation**. Let me emphasize that there is no such thing as a perfect translation. Here are some examples of this reality.

☐ The Greek word *ecclesia* is used 115 times in the New Testament. Should this word be translated as “church” or “congregation.” Are we talking about an assembly of believers or are we talking about an organized institution? This question provoked a fight in the production of the King James Version in the 17th Century. Translation involves interpretation!

☐ The Greek word *sarx* is very common in Paul’s letters. It is usually translated as “flesh” but this really misses what Paul is getting at. Paul tells us to avoid the *sarx* – but he isn’t telling us that our “flesh” is bad so much as telling us that the old ways of life are bad. Paul is most certainly **not** dividing a good spirit from a bad body, although that is one of the most common misinterpretations of the whole Christian tradition. So what do we do when there is no single English word for *sarx*? Either we use “flesh” which really doesn’t get at what Paul is saying OR we add words when translating in order to understand what Paul is trying to say. In the end, translation involves interpretation!

So, really, the best way to understand the Bible is to learn Hebrew and Greek! Notwithstanding this reality, for those of us who aren’t going to do that, there are some translations that are better than others. The following represents on a few common translations.

<u>Better</u>	<u>Fine / OK</u>	<u>Better to avoid using for Bible Study</u>
English Standard Version (ESV)	Revised Standard	King James (KJV)
New American Standard (NASB)	New International (NIV)	The Message
New Revised Standard Version	Revised English Bible	

Edward Fisher, "The Marrow of Modern Divinity", pg. 367ff

Briefly, then, if we would know when the law speaks, and when the gospel speaks, either in reading the word, or in hearing it preached; and if we would skillfully distinguish the voice of the one from the voice of the other, we must consider:—

Law. The law says, "Thou art a sinner, and therefore thou shalt be damned," (Rom 7:2, 2 Thess 2:12).

Gos. But the gospel says, No; "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"; and therefore, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, (1 Tim 1:15, Acts 16:31).

Law. Again the law says, "Knowest thou not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God; be not deceived," &c. (1 Cor 6:9). And therefore thou being a sinner, and not righteous, shalt not inherit the kingdom of God.

Gos. But the gospel says, "God has made Christ to be sin for thee who knew no sin; that thou mightest be made the righteousness of God in him, who is the Lord thy righteousness," (Jer 23:6).

Law. Again the law says, "Pay me what thou owest me, or else I will cast thee into prison," (Matt 18:28,30).

Gos. But the gospel says, "Christ gave himself a ransom for thee," (1 Tim 2:6); "and so is made redemption unto thee," (1 Cor 1:30).

Law. Again the law says, "Thou hast not continued in all that I require of thee, and therefore thou art accursed," (Deut 27:6).

Gos. But the gospel says, "Christ hath redeemed thee from the curse of the law, being made a curse for thee," (Gal 3:13).

Law. Again the law says, "Thou are become guilty before God, and therefore shalt not escape the judgment of God," (Rom 3:19, 2:3).

Gos. But the gospel says, "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment to the Son," (John 5:12).