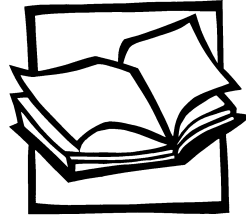


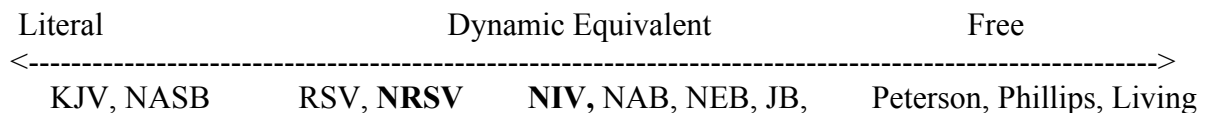
PERSONAL BIBLE READING HELP



I. Find a Good Readable and Reliable Translation (If the sentences and vocabulary are too hard for you, you have the wrong Bible for you right now).

A. Three Types of Bibles and the Theories Informing Them

1. Literal: The attempt to keep as close to the original language and history as possible and still be intelligible in English.
2. Free: The attempt to translate the *ideas* of the original language into contemporary idiom. Tries to minimize both historical and linguistic distance. These are paraphrases rather than translations and are best avoided. The same is true of the so called “Amplified Bible.”
3. Dynamic Equivalent: The attempt to translate the original language into a precise contemporary equivalent while preserving historical and factual details. These work best for most people.



B. Bibles translated from the original language by a committee are more reliable than compositions by individuals. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is what we read publically in church. Although the King James Version (KJV) is one of the great Anglican accomplishments, unless you are fluent in the language of Shakespeare, there are better options. If you have read the Bible through in only translation before, it can be worthwhile to do so in another translation.

II. What is a “Study Bible”?

If a Bible has the word “Study Bible” or “Annotated” in its title that means that it has editorial footnotes explaining the meaning of key terms, strange words, etc. The notes are only as good as their authors and should never be confused with the actual biblical text. The notes in some study Bibles are notoriously flawed (such as the Schofield Study Bible), but others are really helpful (such as the Oxford NRSV Annotated Bible or the NIV Study Bible). The brief notes of a good Study Bible are especially helpful when reading prophets and epistles since they address concrete historical situations that it helps to know something about. Even the best notes, however, can only *inform* your own reading. It is your own direct engagement with the text *forming* you that matters the most.

III. Old Testament

1. Composed from ancient traditions reaching final form between 1000 and 200 B.C.
2. Three sections
 - A. Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy)
 - B. Prophets (Amos, Isaiah, etc.)
 - C. Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Daniel).
3. Books selected by Jews and that decision has been wholly accepted by Christians.
4. Was the exclusive Scripture of the first generation of Christians (no New Testament yet).
5. Written mostly in Hebrew with a few Aramaic sections. Early Christians tended to read it in a Greek translation called the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX).

IV. New Testament

1. Composed between 50 and 100 A.D. in Greek.
2. Three sections
 - A. 4 Gospels and Acts
 - a. Three synoptic gospels (Mt., Mk., Lk., include the same stories and teaching).
 - b. John.
 - c. Acts was originally a continuation of Luke by the same author.
 - B. Epistles (Letters from Paul and others to churches in concrete situations).
 - C. Apocalypse (Revelation)
3. The 22 books were selected and “canonized” by the early Church. Every writing that is in the New Testament had to meet four criteria: 1) it had to be Apostolic, that is, historically connected to an apostle 2) Orthodox, that is, contained beliefs conforming to what was understood to be Christian belief 3) Catholic, that is, sufficiently inclusive with a broad geographic distribution 4) Traditionally used, that is, what was already being read in the public liturgies. Other Early Christian books existed but did not meet all four of these criteria.

V. (Old Testament) Apocrypha (Maccabees, Tobit, etc.)

1. Written by Jews during the period between the testaments.
2. Read for “example of life and instruction of manners,” but not “to establish any doctrine” (39 Articles of the Book of Common Prayer).
3. Initially omitted from Protestant Bibles to save on printing costs, then it became traditional to leave them out.

VI. Tips, Pointers, & Guidelines

1. Don't start at the beginning. Instead follow something like the attached order of reading. Think of it like a series of movies you have seen not in historical order; there is the first part, then the prequel, etc. The Bible's whole story is best experienced in parts.
2. Assume that the Bible is first of all medicine for your soul or mind or heart rather than a compendium of doctrine to be believed, or moral maxims, or a record of primitive science, or history. Read it instead as a therapy that heals the mind and, at its best, leads

its readers beyond their problems toward an experience of God. Daily biblical reading is an exercise for the heart rather than the final word on any topic. You are not interpreting the Bible wrong if you are becoming a better person by reading it. Ask not what a passage “means.” Ask what it “does,” that is, what ailment of the soul is it a cure for? Apply that to your yourself.

3. Assume that the Bible is always reliable and true and that the problematic passages reveal your shortcomings rather than its mistakes. Nothing is gained by sitting in judgment of it. It is a profound, complicated book that one never masters. Better to say, “I don’t understand that passage” than to say, “It is primitive and wrong.” To understand a profound passage requires becoming a profound person.
4. Read very slowly. Think of it more as meditation than what we call “reading.” Your reading is a conversation with yourself and God. Reading involves deep listening. If your reading is feeling more like prayer, excellent! Scripture reading and prayer turn into the same thing when done well.
5. The Bible is a self-involving or self-implicating book. If what you see in it is only other people, you are missing something. Assume that it is a book about you, that is, when you ate of the tree, when you wandered in the desert, when you betrayed the Lord, when you repented, when you were promised such and such, etc. (St. Paul says to read it this way, see 1 Corinthians 10).
6. Read any problematic passage in its full context. Most problems come from isolating verses from one another. Remember that when the Bible was written, it was not broken up into verses or even chapters. Those were added in the late medieval world.
7. Assume that the Bible is one book meant to be read as a whole rather than 66 individual books. Situate the problematic passage within the development of the literary whole.
8. Assume that the God of the Old Testament is the same God as the God of the New Testament. Read for continuity rather than discontinuity. Whatever law is specifically renewed in the New Testament continues for Christians; what is not renewed, does not continue to apply in the same way, but has a spiritual meaning.
9. Let the Bible teach you how to read it. In other words, let the *clear* passages interpret the *unclear* ones. In this way, the Bible supplies its own rules of interpretation. In Matthew 22:34-40 Jesus is asked, “What is the greatest commandment?”, that is, what clear verses should supply the meaning of the unclear ones? He responded, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all you mind.’ (Deuteronomy 6:4). This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like unto it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18). The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” For Bible readers who follow Jesus then, the true reading is the one that ultimately promotes love of God and neighbor. The true reading is the one that makes you are better person, that is, the one that leads you in your particular situation to love God, yourself, and the human beings proximate to you.

10. Be sensitive to metaphor. We are very literal people. The Bible writers were poets. The Bible makes its arguments through images that always mean something. Many mistakes in reading come from not being familiar with what is happening on the deep metaphorical level (Tall trees are proud and bad; valleys are humble and good; climbing up in a tower is likely bad; pressing one's face down to the dirt likely good). The Bible is usually not explicit about "the moral of the story." It expects you to understand because you are familiar with its language and worldview.
11. The Bible does not do its ethics in the same way that we do. Rather than "what you should do in this or that situation," it wants you to discover "who you are." Its "ethics" in the end are about accepting yourself as the kind of creature God made you to be and conforming to who you are in a world you did not make. Evil or "wrong" in the Bible always involves the rejection of oneself as God intended one to be.
12. Assume that the Bible's famous "contradictions" are always purposeful. They trip you up to slow you down and to teach you something important. They prevent us from becoming self-satisfied in our knowledge or too confident in our own point of view. They also prevent us from absolutizing a single "biblical" view as if that gave us access to the way God sees things.
13. Assume that there is more than one right meaning of passages and that your interpretation is only one perspective opened up by the text. Many biblical passages have a surplus of meaning. It is the multiple meanings that allow the book to "grow" with you. In St. Paul's words, it is both milk and meat, depending on your stage of spiritual progress (1 Cor. 3).

VI. Major Themes to Flag Along the Way

- Pride in the Bible is not what we mean by it (legitimate self-love). Pride in the Bible is an unwarranted rejection of one's assigned place in the universe, a kind of egoism that in attempting to make the self more than it is makes a person less. Most of the time, the biblical "proud" are people desiring to make decisions about themselves and the world that are only God's to make.
- Worship. Massive theme beginning to end. You became like what you love and everyone worships something. When you get the worship and wonder wrong, life twists into numerous horrors.
- Love. An outgrowth of the worship theme. Nothing is more important for biblical characters than to get the love right, and there is nothing they have a harder time doing consistently.
- Exile, displacement, homelessness, yearning, longing, faith. The Bible's heroes love what they cannot possess or own. So much longing. Pride only loves what it can possess or own.
- God. The central character in every story even when not mentioned. The Bible's God is a singular eternal omnipotence and goodness. A much larger character than what we tend

to mean by “God.” Human beings are never able fully to understand the God of the Bible; they either worship or rebel by establishing themselves as judges of God.

- Humility. Massive theme of accepting human mortality and finitude and embracing human limits. These only becomes possible through also accepting life as a gift we have no right to in the first place. (On this, notice the Bible’s odd bias against the firstborn anything who believe they have a right to inherit what they deserve. The Bible loves younger brothers who stumble their way into the inheritance they don’t deserve).
- Justice. It really is there in the Bible, but it is really complicated and ultimately not for human beings to establish and decide exactly what it is. Tough theme at times because of our pride and good intentions of wanting the world to be the way we want it to be. The Bible mostly admonishes its characters (and readers) to forgive and love and leave the judgment to God.

VII. A Better Order for Reading (Most of) the Bible for the First Time

- Earliest Christianity: Acts 1-8
- Life of Paul: Acts 9-28
- The Gospel according to Matthew (The life of Jesus with an emphasis on his teaching).
- Genesis 1:1 to 2:25 The creation and goodness of the material world (The universe is not empty random gas that knows nothing of us, but instead is ordered and purposeful).
- Genesis 3-9, 11:1-9 The Fall of the human will and its aftermath (Notice that the tower of Babel is the same story as Adam and Eve before the tree of temptation, just one is two individuals, the other is whole groups. Both stories are about who decides what is right and wrong, who lives and who dies. In other words the temptation is to pretend to be like God rather than accept ourselves as finite, needy, dependent creatures who find our joy in worshipping what is greater than ourselves rather than in our own rule).
- Genesis 12, 15, 16:1-6, 17, 21:1-21, 22, 25:19-34, 27-33, 35, 37-46, 50 (The patriarchs and matriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, a sort of prehistory of Israel, announcing the grand themes to be taken up in later books. Abraham leaves home and its gods to worship the one God. He is promised land and descendants who unite around that worship, but never sees the fulfillment of the whole promise).
- Exodus 1-18, 19:16-25, 32-34 (The fundamental salvation story in the Bible, being freed from slavery to human rule).
- Exodus 20:1 to 23:19, 32-34; Leviticus 18:1-30; 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 7:6-7, 16:12 (The Giving of the Law, notice the law is a gift that gives us the norms of our own nature. In this way, keeping the law and freedom are the same thing. Breaking the law and slavery are the same thing. The historical books to follow illustrate the theology found

here. What happens if we worship other things than God? What happens if we decide to make ourselves the center?).

- Numbers 10:11 to 21:35 (Wanderings in the Wilderness to purge the ways of Egypt from the mind and heart. Later prophets look back at this period as a kind of honeymoon).
- Settlement of Canaan¹: Joshua 1-8, 23-24 (Idealized vision of occupying the promised land. This book is more about acquiring purity of heart and the character involved in committing to God than it is about authorizing genocide).
- Settlement of Canaan²: Judges (entire). Notice that Judges and Joshua or two different versions of the same settlement. Judges is a story of homesteaders living in-between peoples. Joshua's conquering army conquered far less than readers tend to realize. Judges is more about what actually happened still maintaining its biblical idiom and theology from Deuteronomy.
- 1 Samuel (Kingship in Israel—Saul). Beginning of a long decline into inventing a human rule that eventually enslaves us and dooms us to endless war.
- 2 Samuel, 1 Kings 1-11 (Kingship in Israel: David and Solomon). The whole Bible loves this story, a very central part of the Bible. David is a favorite because of his heart.
- 1 Kings 16:29- 2 Kings 9:37: Ahab and Jezebel (more on the destructive pretensions of human power and the prophets Elijah and Elisha).
- Amos and Hosea: The Classic Prophets (notice the themes of the close connection between justice [love of neighbor] and right worship [love of God]). Yes, God commands Hosea to marry a prostitute, have children with her, and name a child "not mine." Very compelling book about God loving an unfaithful people.
- Luke (Time for Jesus again, much like Matthew, but with more emphasis on the poor, the gentiles, and personal discipline). Luke/Acts used to be a single book.
- 2 Kings 24-25 and Lamentations: Fall of Jerusalem; exile in Babylon. Lamentations is an essential book following grief all the way down while people are slaughtered and Solomon's Temple burns.
- Esther and Daniel 1-6 (The God of Israel speaks in Babylon. Notice the powerful biblical theme of living in exile and longing for home).
- Nehemiah (The return to the promised land).
- Proverbs (Wisdom Literature¹: individual sentences to recite repeatedly to further one's moral development).

- Ecclesiastes (Wisdom Literature²: a book questioning Proverbs, this book insists on the limits of human reason and knowledge in order to create mental space for God).
- Psalms (1, 2, 13, 22, 23, 27, 40, 44, 51, 73, 95, 116, 119, 122, 130, 137, 139, 145, 150). An essential book of model prayers or exercises in what to say back to God. Intended to be used in small portions daily and not read in one big swoop. Consider interspersing these through other readings. The other Psalms are also worthwhile. Psalm 118 is a very extended meditation on meditating on the law.
- Jonah (Questioning the prophets and the message of Deuteronomy, be sure to read the final scene which is the often overlooked point of the book).
- Ruth (A book reflecting back on the origins of King David's line).
- The Gospel according to John (A much more theological telling of the Jesus story than Matthew or Luke, notice its unique materials such as its theological prologue, more emotional Jesus, the washing of feet story as instituting the Eucharist).
- Writings of Paul¹: Epistle to the Romans (can be hard reading but one of the most influential Christians writings ever. Look for the themes of grace and freedom. Remember your earlier reading from Acts 9-28. This, and the letters to follow, are real letters from the hero of that story).
- Writings of Paul²: First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians (Struggling with being Greek *and* Christian in a smart problematic congregation. 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, where the theme that love transcends the limits of human wisdom erupts into poetry).
- Writings of Paul³: Galatians (Struggling with emerging Christianity and whether or not Jewish identity markers such as circumcision, sabbath keeping, and kosher food are necessary in a congregation closer to Israel than Corinth. A manifesto of Christian liberty).
- Writings of Paul⁴: Philippians (Letter from Paul from prison quoting one of the earliest Christian hymns in Chapter 2).
- Writings of Paul⁵: Philemon (very short letter of Paul requesting the release of a slave, notice Paul's exhortation to Philemon to find shared commonality with his own slave as brothers in Christ).
- Writings of Paul⁶: Ephesians and Colossians (Paul's message with a fuller account of Christ and the church).

- 1 John: Letter to John's churches, another way of being Christian than Paul's version. Notice how similar in language it is to the Gospel of John, great passages about love for one another.
- James (something of a counter balance to Paul's Gospel of freedom, a more Jewish Christianity here).
- 1 Peter (another counter balance to Paul's letters).
- Hebrews (complicated letter revisiting the relationship of Judaism and Christianity after Galatians and Romans, more developed thinking about Jesus and whole Old Testament)
- Job: Wisdom Literature³, The unsolvable problem of evil and the discovery of the God beyond our self-regarding reason. Be sure to read the ending and then rethink the book in terms of that ending.
- Song of Songs: Wisdom Literature⁴: (A love song between God and the individual soul, and/or God and his people. Notice how much the Bride and Groom struggle to find each other, so much searching and longing. All this Bible reading leads here to the perfection of longing).
- Jeremiah, serious tragic book about a suffering prophet that in all likelihood influenced Jesus a lot (look for themes of true and false prophets and how Jeremiah's own suffering becomes redemptive for all).
- Isaiah, another very serious prophetic book, similar to Jeremiah.
- Ezekiel chapter 37 (Vision of the valley of dry bones, a vision about the restoration of Israel after its trials, but also of the final victory of life over death).
- Daniel 7-12 and Revelation (much misunderstood books written in the literary form of Apocalyptic literature. It is not so much a story of the future as a retelling of the same salvation history already articulated in other books, but this time using colorful imagery to cultivate praise and hope in desperate powerless times).

VIII. ESSENTIAL DATES

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| Exodus from Egypt | 1275 (BC) |
| Davidic Monarchy | 1000 |
| Amos | 750 |
| Fall of the First Temple and Babylonian Exile | 586 |
| Jesus Crucified | 30-33 (AD) |
| Paul's first letter | 50 |
| Fall of the Second Temple | 70 |