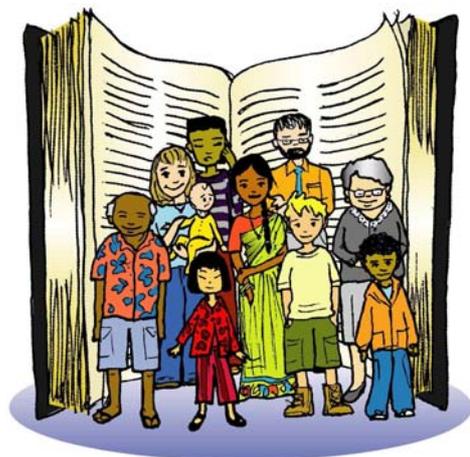


Bible Reading for Beginners



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Centre

Bible Reading for Beginners, 2004
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The Bible is the book that has influenced the whole course of history. It continues to influence millions of people today. It is the book in which God speaks to you.

However, it is a book that many people find hard to read. It can be frustrating, confusing, boring or simply overwhelming. In this course, you will learn how to start reading the Bible for yourself, so that its ancient message is exciting and relevant to you today.

Preface

Our goal is to teach you to read the Bible for yourself. You are certainly capable of reading and understanding this great book, but if you are like most people you are occasionally:

- frustrated
- confused
- bored
- overwhelmed by the task.

We assume that, since you are attending this course, you want help in furthering your understanding of the Bible while avoiding the many roadblocks that hinder progress. We think we can provide you with keys and tips in doing so.

The aims of the course are to help you:

1. become more familiar with the Bible;
2. be able to read and understand the Bible independently;
3. evaluate the claims for the Bible's inspiration.

We are committed to helping you discover the Bible message for yourself, and to be able to evaluate it for yourself. No knowledge of the Bible is assumed—we will start from the very beginning.

We hope this course will meet your needs. It is suitable for people of all religions—you don't have to be a Christian. The only requirement is a desire to learn more about the Bible for yourself.

Rob Hyndman
October 2004.

Session 1

Introducing the Bible

In this first session of the course, we will look at some background information about this fascinating book. It is a book of amazing diversity: read the Bible and you will find a mixture of enchanting history, beautiful poetry, remarkable prophecy, great wisdom, simple proverbs and difficult teaching.

No-one can understand modern society without understanding the history and message of the Bible. It is a holy book for Christians, Jews and Muslims and it has played a major part in the development of world civilization and social values. Whether you believe it or not, you cannot ignore it.

Furthermore, it makes extraordinary claims of itself. For example:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
(2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Question

What do you think “God-breathed” means?

It is only sensible to test these claims for ourselves. If its claims are true, we must read the Bible carefully and thoroughly. This course is designed to help you test the Bible's claims and read it effectively.

A unique book

Record breaker

The Bible is the world's best seller. It has been estimated that between 1815 and 1975, about 2,500 million copies of the Bible were printed. Each year approximately 100 million Bibles or parts of Bibles are distributed. These are staggering numbers when compared with the very few books which ever sell just one million copies. The best-selling novel ever has only sold about 30 million copies over a period of more than 20 years. What is it that makes the Bible consistently out-sell every other book ever produced? It does it every year, and has done so for hundreds of years.

Question
Why do you think the Bible sells in such large numbers?

The Bible also holds the record for being translated into more languages than any other book. Currently at least a portion of the translated scriptures exist in more than 2300 languages, giving 94% of the world's population some access to God's word in their native language. This means that almost any person on earth can have access to the Bible and read or hear the words which have changed the course of history so often. The main groups involved in this work of translation, printing and sale have been the Bible Societies.

Data from the United Bible Societies
(www.biblesociety.org).

No other book is so widely quoted or so widely studied. More books are written about the Bible than any other book.

Survival

The Bible has endured thousands of years of copying by hand, yet it appears to have remained almost unchanged.

It has been burned, banned and outlawed many times. For example, in 1408 England passed the following law:

that no one henceforth on his own authority translate any text of Holy Scripture into English or other language ... and that no book of this kind be read.

Those who did translate it into English (such as William Tyndale) were killed. Others were burnt at the stake for saying the Lord's prayer in English. Only a few years ago, it was a criminal offence in many communist countries to have a Bible in your possession.

Question
Why would owning or translating a Bible be made a criminal offence?

A library of books

The word "bible" comes from a Greek word *biblos* meaning simply "writings". The Bible is not just one book—it is one volume, but it contains 66 separate books written by many different authors. At the front of your Bible you will find a list of these 66 books. You may already know some of the book names and some of the Bible stories. Test yourself in the quick quiz on page 5.

But how do all these books and stories fit together? One of the aims of this course is to help you to gain an overview of the Bible and what it is all about. You can build on your knowledge quickly if you read your Bible regularly.

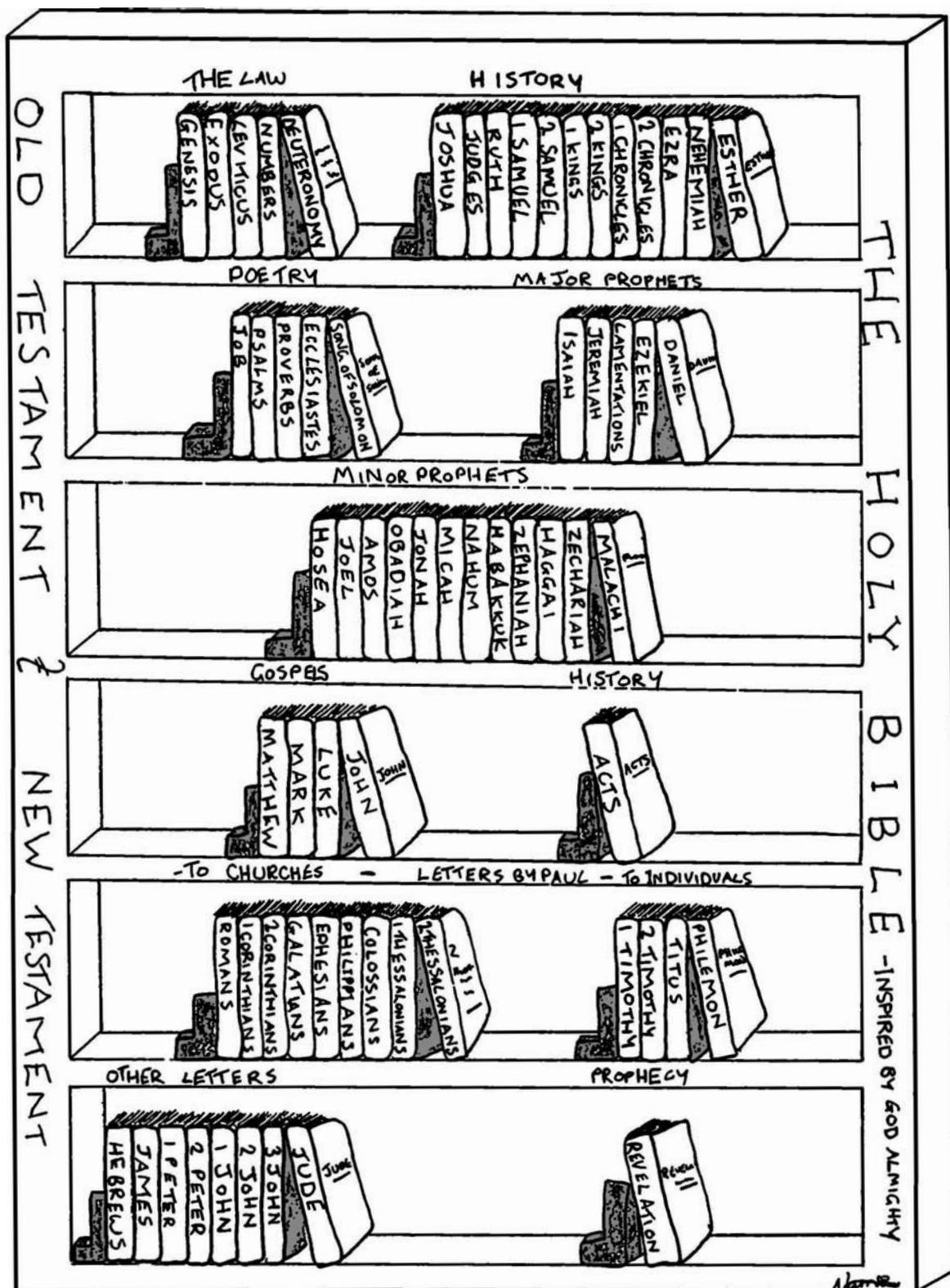


Figure 1.1: The Bible is a library of smaller books.

Test yourself

Genesis	Who was the first man?
	Who survived the great Flood?
Exodus	Includes the 10
Psalms	Written mainly by King
Daniel	Daniel was thrown into a den of
Matthew, Mark,	and
.....	A book of symbols

What Bible stories do you already know?

List other Bible stories you can recall. Do you know where they are found in the Bible?

Story

Reference

- The 66 books were written by about different authors of many different occupations: kings, shepherds, prophets, herdsman, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and so on.
- These authors lived in different countries and wrote over a period of years.
- The Bible was originally written in three languages. These were:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

Remarkably, despite this diverse background, the Bible message is consistent.

Testaments

The bookcase on page 4 shows the 66 books of the Bible divided into two sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. A testament was a covenant or an agreement. So the two parts of the Bible simply record two covenants, each between God and men.

The *Old Testament* tells of events from the creation of man to about 400 years before Jesus Christ was born. It gives God's word as it related particularly to the people of Israel. In contrast, the *New Testament* records God working with people through his son, Jesus Christ. In the New Testament it becomes clear to all that God's promises are to all people, not just to Jews.

Many Christians read only the New Testament. After all, does not the very name *Christians* indicate that only records about Jesus Christ are of use to them? This is a tragic error. It is not possible to fully understand the New Testament without also reading the Old Testament. Jesus said:

You diligently study the Scriptures [the Old Testament] because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me. (John 5:39)

Finding the passage

In these notes (and in most books about the Bible) we use a shorthand way of describing Bible passages. The Bible is a big book and locating a particular passage can be difficult. Each book of the Bible has been divided into chapters and each chapter has been further divided into verses.

When we give a Bible reference we give the book, chapter and verse. For example, **Jeremiah 30:3** refers to verse three of chapter thirty of the book of Jeremiah. Some very short books have only one chapter and so they are referred to just by verse numbers. For example, **Jude 24–25** refers to verses 24 and 25 of the book of Jude.

To find a passage in the Bible, use the index in the front section of your Bible to find the page number of the book you require (e.g., Jeremiah). Turn up the book, then look for the required chapter and verse. To become proficient at moving from one passage to another, memorise the order of the 66 books of the Bible.

Variety

The Bible contains a great variety of different types of literature. The bookcase shown on page 4 divides the books in each testament into categories: law, history, poetry, prophecy, letters, etc. These summarise the type of literature found in each book.

Law	The five law books are at the front of your Bible. They contain the early history of God’s people as well as the laws he gave to Moses for Israel.	e.g., Leviticus 19:13–14
History	The Old Testament contains much of the history of Israel. In the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles gives the history of the early Christians.	e.g., 2 Kings 24:8–12
Poetry	Five of the Old Testament books are largely poetic. For example, you may know some of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd”. Bible poetry does not rhyme (even in the original languages). It is classified as poetry because of its structure.	e.g., Psalm 23:1–3

- Prophecy** Human beings cannot foretell the future. If they could, we would not have insurance companies and bookmakers. Yet the Bible is full of forecasts or prophecies. Some books contain mostly prophecy; these are in the sections labeled “Major Prophets” and “Minor Prophets” in the bookshelf. (The minor prophets are smaller books, not less important!) In these books, God foretold much of the history of Israel and nearby nations. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is also a book of prophecy. e.g., Jeremiah 30:1–3
- Gospels** The four gospels are records of the life of Jesus. They contain parallel accounts of many things Jesus did and said, although each of them contains information that the others omit. The word “gospel” means “good news”. e.g., Mark 12:41–44
- Letters** Much of the New Testament consists of letters. Most of them were written by the apostle Paul to churches and individuals. e.g., Galatians 1:1–11

A summary of each of the books of the Bible is found in *The Bible Readers’ Handbook*.

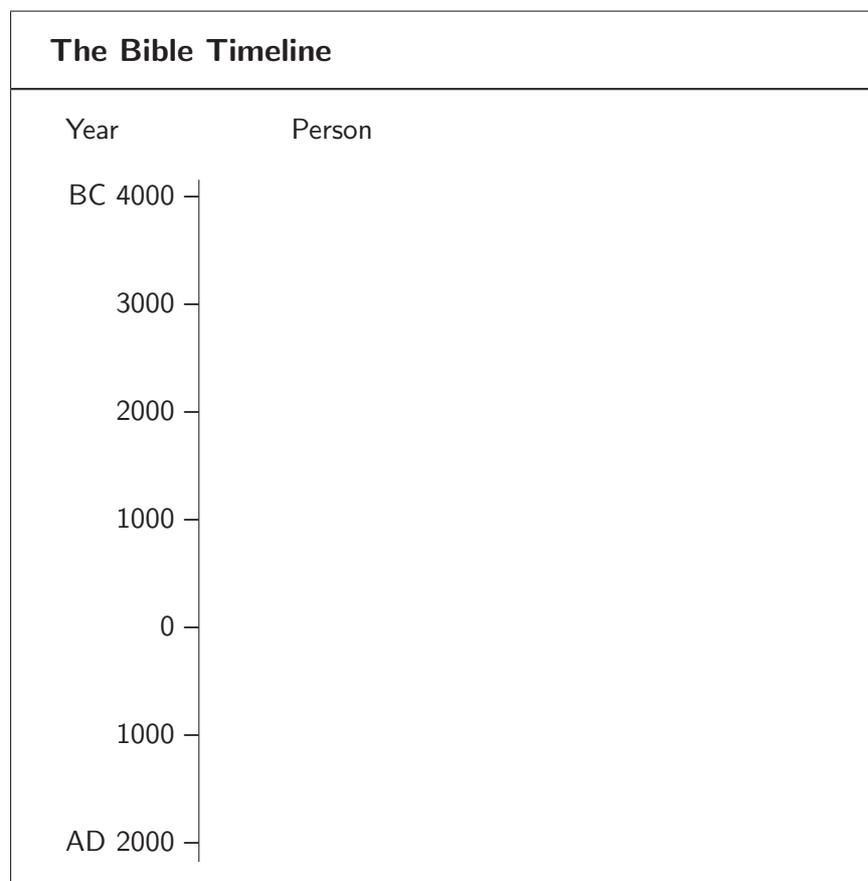
The Bible timeline

The Bible contains quite a lot of information about when events happened. When archaeological information is also taken into account, a fairly detailed chronology of the Bible can be obtained from about the time of Abraham. Before Abraham, there is insufficient information to accurately date any event.

The historical events described in the Old Testament take place over a period of several thousand years. A much shorter time is covered by the New Testament—only about 100 years. Bible history is highly selective. There are long periods about which the Bible says relatively little (such as the time between Adam and Noah), and short periods about which the Bible says a lot (such as the last week of Jesus’ life).

The charts in *The Bible Readers’ Handbook* show more detailed timelines for the Old Testament, New Testament and the ministry of Jesus.

Try putting the following people on the chart below: Jesus, Moses, Adam, Noah, David, Abraham, you.



Bible geography

When the Bible describes the geography of the events it records, it is helpful to look at a map to see where the places were. Almost all of the Bible concerns Israel or neighbouring countries in the Middle East. Of course, modern atlases of the same area aren't particularly helpful because many of the towns and cities have different names or may have ceased to exist altogether. Many Bibles contain maps as an appendix, and some simple maps are found in *The Bible Readers' Handbook*.

Bible places

Find the following places on the maps in *The Bible Readers' Handbook*.

- Israel
- Mediterranean Sea
- Dead Sea
- Galilee
- Jerusalem
- Egypt
- Babylon

Why read the Bible?

Although the Bible has 66 different books, and many thousands of verses, it has a consistent theme. This theme is the relationship between God and human beings—a theme of love and salvation. Through the lives of individuals and nations this theme develops.

Most people who set out to read the Bible seriously soon find it a disturbing book. The Bible claims to be the actual word of God, who created and sustains the universe. As a result, the Bible lays down rules for living and outlines the consequences of obedience and disobedience. No wonder the Bible has a real impact on any serious reader.

The Bible . . .

- makes us wise for salvation.
2 Timothy 3:14–17
- gives us hope
Romans 15:4
- is the power of God for salvation
Romans 1:16–17
- must be read if we want our prayers heard
Proverbs 28:9
- provides direction for daily living
Psalm 119:105; Joshua 1:8.

Make no mistake—the Bible *can change your life*. Not the Bible itself, of course, but its message. In the Bible, God has revealed himself as righteous and holy. By contrast we are all unholy sinners. And in the Bible, God offers us the way of escape from our sin, the saving blessing of Jesus Christ. Jesus has called people to him for 2,000 years and offered them life in a hopeless world.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

(Matthew 11:28–30)

This invitation gives meaningful direction to people’s lives. People who turn to God in faith and respond to the call of Jesus Christ are changed. They are not immediately made perfect, but they are made free of fear and guilt. Take the opportunity over the years ahead to read the Bible, learn more of God and his son, and follow him.

Further reading

- *The Bible, the Lord Jesus and You* by John S Roberts.
- *The 66 books of the Bible* by Norman Owen.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Homework

1. Find the book of Mark
 - (a) In what testament of the Bible is Mark found?

 - (b) What sort of book is Mark?

2. Read Mark 1:1–8
 - (a) What was John the Baptist's main message?

 - (b) How did the people respond to John's message?

 - (c) What was unusual about John?

3. Mark begins this section with a quotation from a prophecy of Isaiah.
 - (a) In what testament of the Bible is Isaiah found?

 - (b) What sort of book is Isaiah?

4. Find the prophecy quoted by Mark and read it.
[Hint: look at the footnotes]
 - (a) Explain how John fulfilled the prophecy.
[Hint: "the Lord" is Jesus]

 - (b) Why doesn't Mark quote it accurately?

5. Read the rest of Mark chapter 1. Write down any questions you have for discussion at the next class.

Session 2

Starting to read the Bible

In this chapter, we introduce a Bible reading plan to help you read systematically through the Bible, and we provide some tips to successful Bible reading. We also look at two common problems new Bible readers have: strange words and strange customs. Finally we consider the use of cross references and footnotes to help you understand the Bible better.

A Bible reading plan

We recommend regular intake of God's Word. Just as we have regular meals of physical food, we need regular meals of spiritual food to be in good health. If you are serious about Bible reading, aim to have a *steady, consistent diet of the Word of God*. For example, God said that the king of Israel was to have God's word

... with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees.

(Deuteronomy 17:19)

Because your Bible is a big book, and because it is so important, it pays to be systematic in reading it. After all, it is a textbook, your textbook for life, and if it is worth reading at all, it is worth reading well. In other words, don't just open your Bible at random each day and read a little; you wouldn't do that to a textbook on an unfamiliar topic.

However, you are not advised to open the Bible to page one, start, and keep reading day by day until it's finished. Some people have

successfully read the Bible that way. But some of the difficulties experienced by people when they first read the Bible lead us to recommend a step by step approach which gives important and useful ideas quite early in your reading, and then progressively builds on them.

There are several ways of achieving this, but we have chosen a reading course that has been widely used and well tested. The reading planner we are using (see page 15) gives daily readings for one year, each day's reading consisting of one chapter. Through the year, you will read from many different parts of the Bible. We will also provide an accompanying booklet which will help fill you in on some of that Bible background you may need as you read each chapter. If you keep up your Bible readings for a year, you will cover many different parts of the Bible and develop a good grasp of the overall plan of God.

Preparing to read the Bible

There are a number of things that need to be considered when reading the Bible.

1. *Pray*

It is important to ask God's blessing on your reading. It is his book and he can help us understand it.

2. *Be comfortable*

To properly concentrate on the Bible, you will need to find a comfortable, quiet place in which to read. Try to avoid places where there is a lot of background noise from the television or other people talking. In the Bible, God speaks to us. It is worth listening carefully.

3. *Allow time*

Bible reading is most effective if you are not rushed. Set aside 20–30 minutes each day to read the passage and think about what it means. It also takes time to become familiar with the Bible message and the background in which it is set. Be patient, and over time it will all start to fit together like a beautiful jigsaw.

Week	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	Psalm 19	Genesis 1	Luke 2	1 Corinth 13	Mark 4	Eccles 3	2 Timothy 3
2	Genesis 2	Genesis 3	Genesis 4	Genesis 5	Genesis 6	Genesis 7	Genesis 8
3	Matthew 1	Matthew 2	Matthew 3	Matthew 4	Matthew 5	Matthew 6	Matthew 7
4	Genesis 11	Genesis 12	Genesis 13	Genesis 14	Genesis 15	Genesis 17	Genesis 19
5	Matthew 8	Matthew 9	Matthew 10	Matthew 11	Matthew 12	Matthew 13	Matthew 14
6	Genesis 22	Genesis 26	Genesis 27	Genesis 28	Genesis 29	Genesis 30	Genesis 31
7	Matthew 15	Matthew 16	Matthew 17	Matthew 18	Matthew 19	Matthew 20	Matthew 21
8	Genesis 32	Genesis 33	Genesis 37	Genesis 39	Genesis 40	Genesis 41	Genesis 42
9	Matthew 22	Matthew 23	Matthew 24	Matthew 25	Matthew 26	Matthew 27	Matthew 28
10	Genesis 43	Genesis 44	Genesis 45	Genesis 46	Genesis 47	Genesis 49	Genesis 50
11	Mark 1	Mark 2	Mark 3	Mark 6	Mark 7	Mark 8	Mark 9
12	Exodus 1	Exodus 2	Exodus 3	Exodus 4	Exodus 5	Exodus 6	Exodus 7
13	Mark 10	Mark 11	Mark 12	Mark 13	Mark 14	Mark 15	Mark 16
14	Exodus 8	Exodus 9	Exodus 10	Exodus 11	Exodus 12	Exodus 13	Exodus 14
15	Luke 1	Luke 2	Luke 4	Luke 5	Luke 7	Luke 9	Luke 10
16	Exodus 16	Exodus 17	Exodus 19	Exodus 20	Exodus 24	Exodus 25	Exodus 32
17	Luke 11	Luke 12	Luke 13	Luke 14	Luke 15	Luke 16	Luke 17
18	Lev 8	Lev 10	Lev 16	Lev 17	Lev 23	Lev 25	Lev 26
19	Luke 18	Luke 19	Luke 20	Luke 21	Luke 22	Luke 23	Luke 24
20	Num 14	Num 17	Num 20	Num 21	Num 22	Num 23	Num 24
21	John 1	John 3	John 4	John 10	John 11	John 15	John 17
22	Deut 1	Deut 2	Deut 3	Deut 6	Deut 8	Deut 18	Deut 28
23	Acts 1	Acts 2	Acts 3	Acts 4	Acts 5	Acts 6	Acts 7
24	Joshua 1	Joshua 2	Joshua 3	Joshua 4	Joshua 6	Joshua 20	Joshua 24
25	Acts 8	Acts 9	Acts 10	Acts 11	Acts 12	Acts 13	Acts 14
26	Judges 4	Judges 7	Judges 14	Ruth 1	Ruth 2	Ruth 3	Ruth 4
27	Acts 15	Acts 16	Acts 17	Acts 18	Acts 19	Acts 20	Acts 21
28	1 Samuel 1	1 Samuel 2	1 Samuel 3	1 Samuel 8	1 Samuel 9	1 Samuel 10	1 Samuel 15
29	Acts 22	Acts 23	Acts 24	Acts 25	Acts 26	Acts 27	Acts 28
30	1 Samuel 16	1 Samuel 17	2 Samuel 1	2 Samuel 2	2 Samuel 5	2 Samuel 7	2 Samuel 24
31	Romans 5	Romans 6	Romans 8	Romans 9	Romans 10	Romans 12	Romans 13
32	1 Kings 3	1 Kings 5	1 Kings 12	1 Kings 17	1 Kings 18	2 Kings 5	2 Chron 36
33	1 Corinth 1	1 Corinth 2	1 Corinth 3	1 Corinth 10	1 Corinth 11	1 Corinth 13	1 Corinth 15
34	Psalm 1	Psalm 2	Psalm 6	Psalm 16	Psalm 19	Psalm 22	Psalm 23
35	2 Corinth 11	Galatians 1	Galatians 2	Galatians 3	Galatians 4	Galatians 5	Galatians 6
36	Psalm 32	Psalm 37	Psalm 45	Psalm 46	Psalm 48	Psalm 49	Psalm 51
37	Ephesians 4	Ephesians 5	Ephesians 6	Philip 1	Philip 2	Philip 3	Philip 4
38	Psalm 67	Psalm 72	Psalm 88	Psalm 90	Psalm 91	Psalm 95	Psalm 96
39	1 Thess 1	1 Thess 2	1 Thess 3	1 Thess 4	1 Thess 5	2 Thess 1	2 Thess 2
40	Psalm 103	Psalm 104	Psalm 110	Psalm 122	Psalm 146	Psalm 149	Psalm 150
41	1 Timothy 1	1 Timothy 2	1 Timothy 6	2 Timothy 1	2 Timothy 2	2 Timothy 3	2 Timothy 4
42	Isaiah 1	Isaiah 2	Isaiah 9	Isaiah 11	Isaiah 25	Isaiah 26	Isaiah 32
43	Hebrews 1	Hebrews 2	Hebrews 3	Hebrews 4	Hebrews 5	Hebrews 10	Hebrews 11
44	Isaiah 40	Isaiah 42	Isaiah 52	Isaiah 53	Isaiah 55	Isaiah 60	Isaiah 61
45	Hebrews 12	Hebrews 13	James 1	James 2	James 3	James 4	James 5
46	Jeremiah 1	Jeremiah 17	Jeremiah 30	Jeremiah 31	Jeremiah 33	Jeremiah 36	Jeremiah 38
47	1 Peter 1	1 Peter 2	1 Peter 3	1 Peter 5	2 Peter 1	2 Peter 2	2 Peter 3
48	Ezekiel 2	Ezekiel 3	Ezekiel 18	Ezekiel 36	Ezekiel 37	Ezekiel 38	Ezekiel 39
49	1 John 1	1 John 2	1 John 3	1 John 4	2 John	3 John	Jude
50	Daniel 2	Daniel 3	Daniel 5	Daniel 6	Daniel 7	Daniel 9	Daniel 12
51	Hosea 13	Joel 3	Micah 5	Zec 8	Zec 12	Malachi 3	Malachi 4
52	Rev 1	Rev 2	Rev 3	Rev 5	Rev 19	Rev 21	Rev 22

Table 2.1: *Table of readings from the Bible Reading Planner.*

4. *Be open to new ideas*

If we are to gain as much as we can from Bible reading, we need to approach the Bible with the right attitude. The people from Berea (in Greece) are described as being

of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.
(Acts 17:11)

We need an openness to new ideas. If we approach all ideas thinking that our main job is to defend our existing beliefs, then we have very little room for growth.

The Bible is a book of strength that has withstood all kinds of attacks during its history. As in all other areas of study, scholars build upon and re-evaluate the work of earlier scholars. We need not fear examining new ideas and evaluating them carefully in the light of all the teachings of the Bible.

5. *Think about it*

God told Joshua

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.
(Joshua 1:8)

To successfully understand the message of the Bible, we must spend time thinking about it carefully. So important is this that God said to the nation of Israel:

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.
(Deuteronomy 11:18–21)

6. *Ask questions*

You will inevitably have questions about what you read. Write them down. You might discover the answers through further reading. Or you can take your questions to a more experienced Bible reader to see if he or she can help. Bring your

questions along to this course and see if anyone can answer them.

7. *Share your ideas*

We need an attitude of willingness to meditate on what we are learning and to think through for ourselves how our learning should be applied in our own lives. To do this, it is usually helpful to share our ideas and interpretations with other Bible students for discussion and evaluation. We can learn from each other.

Bible study can be difficult work. It is also exciting and life-changing. Study of the Bible can enrich us as no other study can. You will experience a new energy as you learn to make your own judgements based on firm principles, and the Bible will become more alive and powerful in your life. Remember, you are intended to understand this remarkable book and to meet God in its pages.

Psalm 19

Let's start using the Bible Reading Planner by reading Psalm 19.

1. According to this Psalm, what two things speak to us about God?
2. What different words are used to describe God's instructions?
3. Are there any words, or verses, that you don't understand?
4. What questions do you have after reading this Psalm?
5. What verse do you find particularly helpful to you? Why?

Strange language

The King James Version (or KJV, also called the Authorised Version) is the most quoted version of the Bible. It was produced in 1611 and is famous for its majestic language. However, these days it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand because of changes in the English language.

Consider the following passage (Psalm 23:1–3).

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Compare the New International Version (NIV):

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Note the archaic form of verbs used in the KJV. Notice, also, that punctuation has changed—the colon (:) is used differently today. However, in this passage, none of the words in the KJV are particularly difficult to understand and the meaning of the passage is clear.

This is not true everywhere. The KJV can sometimes be difficult to understand because of the archaic language. Consider the following two examples.

Psalm 119:147–148	
KJV	NIV
¹⁴⁷ I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word.	¹⁴⁷ I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word.
¹⁴⁸ Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.	¹⁴⁸ My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.
What does the word “prevent” mean in the KJV?	

“Conversation”

Read Philippians 1:27 in the KJV. Turn to a more recent version for comparison. What does the word “conversation” mean in the KJV?

As these two examples show, some words have a different meaning now from the meaning they had in 1611 when the KJV first appeared. In fact, it contains over 500 words which have changed their meaning or become obsolete. Some are shown in the table below.

Language is dynamic—it is always changing. New words are created, old words die out, some words change their meaning. Therefore, if you wish to read an older version such as the KJV, you need to learn the old words.

Even with a modern version, you will come across words that are not in common use. There are things mentioned in the Bible which are not part of everyday conversation, and so the words used may not be familiar. When you come across these words, check the definitions listed in *The Bible Readers’ Handbook*.

Some archaic words from the King James Version

Old word	Modern equivalent	Example
prevent	1 Thessalonians 4:15
bowels	Genesis 43:30
bewitch	Acts 8:9
allow	Luke 11:48
conversation	Philippians 1:27
bruit	Jeremiah 10:22
maketh collops	Job 15:27
trow	Luke 17:9

Strange customs

The people in the Bible lived thousands of years ago in a different culture and a different land. When reading the Bible, you will soon learn some of their ancient customs. For example:

When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. (2 Samuel 15:32)

Tearing your clothes and covering your head with dust seems strange behaviour to us, but in the context it is clear that this was a sign of mourning. The same custom is found many times throughout the Old Testament. It doesn't take long to recognize most of these ancient customs and learn what they meant.

What was the purpose of these ancient customs?

- tearing your clothes
- putting dust on your head
- wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes
- professional wailing women
- walls around cities
- sitting in the gate of a city
- giving someone your sandal

Do you know any other ancient customs mentioned in the Bible?

Footnotes

Footnotes are provided by the translators to explain some words, give alternative translations, or explain some aspect of the text. They are often helpful in understanding a passage. Consider the example below from the Revised Standard Version.

Matthew 5:21–22

Consider the following passage from Matthew 5:21–22 which is part of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the mount". This excerpt is from the RSV.

21 "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brotherⁱ shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults^j his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell^k of fire.

ⁱ Other ancient authorities insert *without cause* ^j Greek says *Raca* to (an obscure term of abuse)
^k Greek *Gehenna*

The basic message of Jesus is quite clear: "in the past you were told not to kill—I am telling you not even to be angry or abusive." He was taking the Old Testament commandment to a new level. However, we can understand the passage better using the footnotes.

The small letters *i*, *j* and *k* after the words "brother", "insults" and "hell" indicate there is a footnote with more explanation.

The first one shows that some of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament give a slightly different form of words, which alters the meaning. Obviously the translators felt the form of words they used in the main text was the most likely but there was sufficient doubt to include the alternative as a footnote.

The second footnote explains that the original Greek actually refers to a particular abusive expression. Because this has little meaning for us, they have translated it.

The third footnote shows that the word "hell" has been used for the Greek word *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a valley south of Jerusalem; it is also known as the valley of Hinnom. It was used as a rubbish dump and always had a fire burning to destroy the rubbish. Previously it had been the site of child sacrifice to an Ammonite god called Molech (Jeremiah 32:35). Jesus uses it as a symbol of complete destruction.

Most footnotes are for the following purposes:

- source of quotations
- explanation of textual variations
- meaning of non-English words
- gives Hebrew or Greek word
- alternative translations

Cross-references

There is no better commentary on the Bible than the Bible itself. No source is more appropriate for interpreting God’s Word than God himself. It is in this area that the use of cross-references can be so valuable. They are verse ‘references’ supplied by the publishers which direct the reader to other locations in the Bible where the same phrase or event may be found, or one very similar.

Example: Matthew 5:21–22

The following example from the NIV Study Bible shows the use of both footnotes and cross-references. The bold superscripts are footnotes. The italic superscripts are for cross-references (given to the side of the text).

²¹“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder,^{t e} and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²²But I tell you that anyone who is angry^f with his brother^u will be subject to judgment.^g Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,^v’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin.^h But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.ⁱ

5:21 ^eEx 20:13; 21:12; Dt 5:17
5:22 ^fEcc 7:9; 1Co 13:5; Eph 4:26; Jas 1:19,20
^g1Jn 3:15
^hMt 26:59; Jn 11:47;
 Ac 5:21,27,34,41; 6:12 ⁱMt 18:9; Mk 9:43,48; Lk 16:24; Jas 3:6

^t21 Exodus 20:13 ^u22 Some manuscripts *brother without cause* ^v22 An Aramaic term of contempt

Look up the following cross-references.

Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17; 1 John 3:15; Ephesians 4:26; James 1:19–20.

Do they help us better understand what Jesus said?

Not all Bibles have cross-references. Bibles which do have cross-references will usually place them in a centre column, after the foot-notes, or at the end of each verse.

Most cross-references take one of the following forms:

1. Quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament, or vice versa;
2. Parallel passage of the same or similar events;
3. More detail about a person, place or subject.

Further reading

- *Bible beginnings* by Richard Purkis and Ian Doveton.
- *On reading the Bible* by A.D. Norris.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Exercise: Genesis 1

The second reading in the Bible Reading Planner is Genesis 1. Read the chapter and discuss the following questions.

1. Were the sun, moon and stars created before or after the earth?
2. How could there be “evening and morning” before the sun was created?
3. What food was assigned to man? There is a cross-reference to Genesis 9:3. What does this tell us?
4. Over what part of creation did man have dominion? How does this affect our care for the environment?
5. Human beings are described as being created “in God’s image”. Look at the following cross-references: Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10; James 3:9. How do these help us understand what Genesis means?
6. Are there any words, or verses, that you don’t understand?
7. What questions do you have after reading this chapter?
8. What verse do you find particularly helpful to you? Why?

Homework

1. Follow the *Bible Reading Planner* every day this week.
2. Start a notebook with questions that arise when you read your Bible. Then you can discuss your questions with the class next week.
3. Read tonight's reading (Luke 2). Several words are used that you may not have come across before. Find out what they mean. (Hint: some of the words are listed in the *The Bible Readers' Handbook*.)
 - Saviour
 - Christ
 - manger
 - circumcise
 - Law of Moses
 - Holy Spirit
 - Gentiles
 - Passover
4. Here are some examples of cross references. Use them to answer the questions.
 - (a) Luke 9:7–9
Why was John the Baptist beheaded?
CR to Matthew 14:1–11; Mark 6:14–18
 - (b) Matthew 12:38–42
Who was the "Queen of the South"?
CR to 1 Kings 10:1

Session 3

The origin and history of the Bible

How do we know that the 66 books in our Bibles were all inspired? What about other books? In this session we answer these questions. We also look at the manuscript evidence that our Bibles are reliable copies of what God originally caused to be written down. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide some fascinating and relatively recent evidence of the reliability of the Bible. Finally, we trace the history of the English Bible through to the most recent versions and discuss the problem of choosing a Bible to suit you.

Inspiration

As we found in Session 1, the word *inspiration* literally means *God-breathed*. The Bible is “inspired” because the words have been breathed by God himself. The Apostle Paul described the Scriptures like this:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Peter described the inspired prophets as

men [who] spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:21)



Sometimes God seems to have inspired what they said word for word to the point that they did not always understand what they

wrote (see 1 Peter 1:10–12). At other times, the writer seems to have had more freedom of expression, although the thoughts expressed were inspired by God. For example, the writings of Paul are distinctive in their style and language used, but were still inspired by God.

The canon of Scripture

The “canon of Scripture” means those writings which are inspired. How do we know what books are part of inspired Scripture and what books are not? Some Bible writers stated explicitly: “This is the word of the LORD” or “This is what the LORD says ...” (e.g., Jeremiah 2:1; Joel 1:1). Other books do not claim to be inspired, but they quickly became recognized as inspired because the person who wrote them was accepted as a prophet of God (e.g., Genesis, Song of Solomon).

The Bible provides two tests for deciding whether a prophet is inspired:

1. he should predict the future accurately (Deuteronomy 18:21–22); and
2. he should not teach people to turn away from God (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

A false prophet

Hananiah was a false prophet. He claimed to be from God, yet his prophecies did not come true. See Jeremiah 28:1–4, 15–17.

What did he prophecy?

What actually happened?

Who was God's true prophet at this time?

Question

Why can we be confident that we have all the inspired books God wants us to have?

The Old Testament was well-established by the time of Jesus. The books had been accepted for centuries because they were recorded by prophets of God such as Moses, Isaiah and Ezra. These men had visions from God and made prophecies that came true. Therefore what they said and what they wrote were accepted as the work of God.

It did not take long for the New Testament writings to be considered “Scripture” also. For example, the gospel of Luke was considered Scripture by the time Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy. Similarly, the writings of Paul were considered Scripture by the time Peter wrote his second letter (see 2 Peter 3:15–16).

See 1 Timothy 5:18 which quotes Luke 10:7 as “Scripture”.

The Apocrypha

Most Bibles contain only the 66 books mentioned in Chapter 1, but some Bibles, particularly Roman Catholic Bibles, contain several additional Old Testament books. Most Catholic Bibles will contain an additional seven books in the Old Testament and several additions to other books. Some Bibles add up to seventeen extra books or parts of books.

These additional books are known as the “Apocrypha”. Protestants reject these books as uninspired—not part of the revealed word of God. They were written between about 200 BC and AD 100, well after the Old Testament was completed.

Apocrypha means “hidden books”.

Some of the books of the Apocrypha are mainly historical: for example, 1&2 Maccabees describe the history of the Jews about 100–150 years before Jesus. Other books are pure fiction: Tobit tells the story of a man named Tobit who travels with his guardian angel, Raphael,

Old Testament Apocrypha	
Title	Approximate date of writing
Psalms 151	200 BC?
Ecclesiasticus	180 BC
Tobit	180 BC
The Prayer of Manasseh	150 BC
Judith	150 BC
1 Esdras	150 BC
Additions to Esther	100 BC
Song of the Three Young Men	100 BC
Susanna	50–100 BC
Bel and the Dragon	50–100 BC
1,2&3 Maccabees	50–100 BC
4 Maccabees	AD 40
The Wisdom of Solomon	AD 40
2 Esdras	AD 100
Baruch	AD 100

and fights off the demon Asmodeus with the organs of a fish! Another fictional story, Judith, contains major historical blunders: it says Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Assyria in Nineveh instead of the king of Babylon. Many of the books falsely claim to be written by people mentioned in the Bible. For example, Baruch claims to be written by Jeremiah’s friend but was certainly written much later. Similarly Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon were written hundreds of years after Solomon, not by Solomon himself.

None of the books of the Apocrypha came from prophets and so they were never accepted by the Jews as inspired. The Jews sometimes quoted from the Apocrypha, but in the same way that we would quote Shakespeare—interesting literature but definitely not the word of God.

There is also a New Testament Apocrypha which is not so well known. No-one suggests these books are inspired and they are not included in any Bibles.

Old Testament manuscripts

The Old Testament was written mainly in Hebrew between about 1450 BC and 400 BC. It has been copied by scribes, many times (there were no printing presses), then later translated into English. It was the job of scribes to copy out the Old Testament onto scrolls of parchment or animal hides, and later into books. The process of copying was carried out with extraordinary care.



For example, several copies of the Old Testament have been found dating from about AD 900. These were produced by a group of Jews known as Masoretes who followed a number of precise rules when copying (see below). As long as such rules were followed, it was highly unlikely that errors would creep in.

Masoretic rules for copying the Old Testament

1. the whole scroll must be carefully ruled before a word is written
2. the ink must be black, made from soot, charcoal and honey
3. each line is to contain 30 letters exactly
4. each column is to contain an even number of lines, the same number throughout the scroll
5. no letter or word is to be written from memory
6. each word must be studied in the original manuscript and spoken aloud before being copied
7. the document is to be carefully checked using word and letter counts
8. the entire scroll is to be checked by a supervisor

Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a large collection of scrolls discovered in the Dead Sea area. The first scrolls were discovered in early 1947 by three Bedouin shepherds. Eventually, some of the scrolls made their way into the hands of archaeologists and Hebrew scholars. They were amazed to find an entire copy of Isaiah which they dated to the first century BC. At that time, this was about 1000 years older than the next oldest manuscript of any part of the Bible. About 800 different manuscripts have since been found in this area. There are manuscripts or fragments of every book in the Old Testament except Esther. Several copies of some books were found including Isaiah, Psalms, Deuteronomy and Genesis.

Dead Sea Scrolls



Dead Sea Cave in which scrolls were found.



Jar containing scrolls.



Part of one of the scrolls found in the Dead Sea area.

All the manuscripts are dated between 150 BC and AD 250. Until this discovery, all translation was based on the Masoretic text which is a little over 1000 years old. The Dead Sea Scrolls are about 2000 years old! Yet when compared with the Masoretic text, there was hardly any difference. Because of their great age, they provide amazing evidence that the Bible has been faithfully copied by scribes for centuries. So accurate has this copying been, that it provides compelling evidence that God has preserved his word for future generations.

The scrolls are also interesting because they help to date prophecies. Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, some critics said

The Isaiah scroll

When a copy of Isaiah was discovered in the Dead Sea caves, the translators of the RSV had already completed their translation of Isaiah. They compared what they had done with the Isaiah scroll and made a total of 13 changes. That is, in only 13 places did they think the Dead Sea Scrolls were more accurate than the later Masoretic text. All changes were minor.

that prophecies about Jesus, such as those in the Psalms and Isaiah, were written after the event. The Dead Sea Scrolls proved that they were true prophecies which predated Jesus, and we know they were fulfilled. Again, this gives further evidence that God inspired the Bible, and preserved it for us to read.

New Testament manuscripts

The New Testament was written in Greek. Its accuracy is also well supported by the manuscript evidence. In fact, there are thousands of surviving New Testament manuscripts from the first few centuries after Jesus. When compared with other ancient writings from the time of Jesus and before, the evidence for the New Testament is overwhelming.

Professor F.F. Bruce has written:

The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no-one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. *The New Testament Documents*, 1960, p.15.

FF Bruce (1910–1990) was Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester in England. He was a famous Bible commentator.

Other support for the reliability of the New Testament comes from early believers who quoted it. For example, Ignatius quoted from Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, James, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy and 1 Peter. Others such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and Tertullian quoted from the New Testament thousands of times. These quotations can also be used to check the accuracy of the surviving manuscripts.

Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch, AD 70–110.

These men were leaders in the church about 100–200 years after Jesus died.

Professor Bruce Metzger has written:

Indeed so extensive are these citations that if all other sources of our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.

The Text of the New Testament, 1968, p.86.

Bruce Metzger (1914–) is Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, USA.

The first English Bibles

There are several translations of parts of the Bible into English dating back to the 7th century. However, English has changed so much that we would not be able to understand any of these!

John Wycliffe

The first translation of the entire Bible into English was by John Wycliffe in 1382. Wycliffe did not translate from the Hebrew and Greek but from a Latin edition of the Bible known as the Vulgate. For the first time, the common people could hear the Bible in their own language. They quickly realised that the church leaders were astray from the Bible in both what they taught and how they lived. Wycliffe and his followers met with great opposition from the church for their work, and many were killed. Forty years after Wycliffe died, his bones were dug up and burned, and the ashes thrown into a nearby river. This was meant to be a lesson for others who might attempt unauthorised translations.

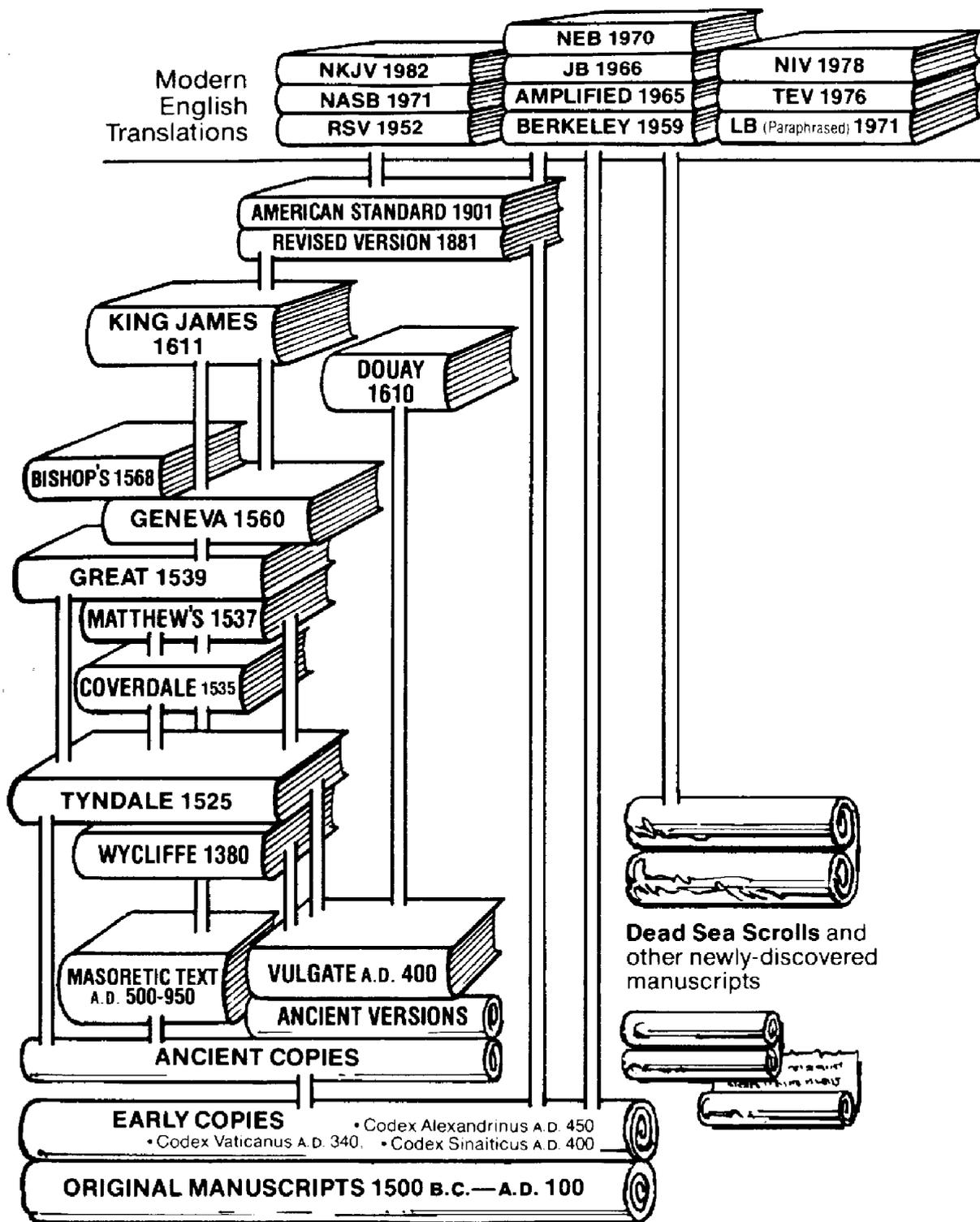
Wycliffe's Bible was handwritten in manuscript form. It took about ten months for each copy to be produced, and cost an educated man a year's salary. Of course, most people could not afford a copy themselves but were thrilled to be able to hear it read by one of Wycliffe's followers. Wycliffe's Bible was one of the first to include chapters (but not verses).

In the 1450s, the first printing press was developed by Gutenberg. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of printing for Bible believers. Suddenly, the Bible was widely available to be read by almost anyone who wanted to do so.



John Wycliffe

The origin and growth of the English Bible



Reproduced from the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, Kirkbride Bible Company.

William Tyndale

Towards the end of the 15th century there was a resurgence of the study of Greek. When William Tyndale graduated from Oxford in 1515, he had studied the Scriptures in both Greek and Hebrew. He developed a strong desire to translate the Bible into English, from the original languages.

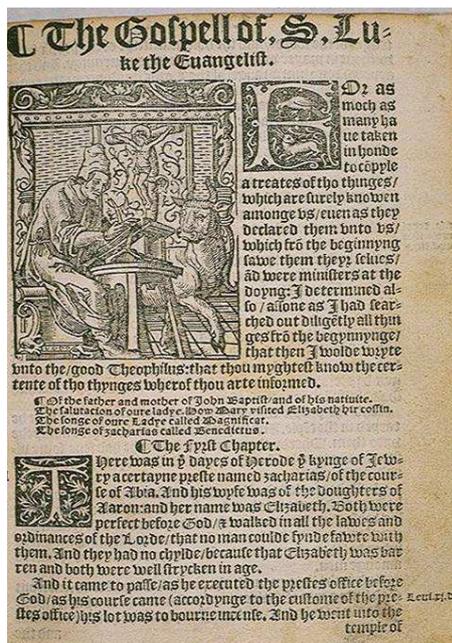
Due to Church opposition he was forced to relocate to Hamburg in Germany, where he completed his translation of the New Testament into English in 1525. English Bibles arrived in England in 1526, where they were gladly received by the common people, and burned by the Church!

After finishing the New Testament, Tyndale began work on the Old Testament, until his arrest and imprisonment in 1535. After over a year in prison, he was first strangled, and then burned at the stake, in 1536.

The Old Testament was finished off by Tyndale's assistant, Miles Coverdale, in 1537. By the time this translation was issued, King Henry VIII was ready to tolerate an English translation. He endorsed Coverdale's Bible without knowing that it was essentially the work of Tyndale, which he had previously condemned!



William Tyndale



*A page from Tyndale's
New Testament*

Some famous mistakes

Some of the most famous early English editions are known for printers' errors or unusual translations. For example, in the very first edition of the KJV in 1611, Exodus 14:10 is repeated, word for word.

Then there was the unfortunate "Adultery Bible" of 1641 where the printer left out the word *not* from Exodus 20:14! He was fined 300 pounds.

In 1702 a Bible was printed where Psalm 119:161 read "Printers have persecuted me without cause." (It should have read "princes".)

Geneva Bible

When King Henry VIII died, his daughter Queen Mary succeeded him. She instituted a bitter persecution of Bible translators and readers. Coverdale escaped to Geneva in Switzerland, where he began work on a fresh translation which was to contain explanatory notes, some additional charts, maps and illustrations, and the first use of verse divisions. It is also the first Bible to have cross-references. The Geneva Bible was published in 1560 and is the one Shakespeare quotes in his plays.

The Geneva Bible is also known as the "Breeches Bible" because in Genesis 3:7 it states that Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made themselves "breeches".

King James Version

The Geneva Bible was immediately popular and acknowledged as the best translation up to that time. However, the marginal notes in the Geneva Bible reflected some beliefs that were not acceptable to the Church of England.

In 1604 King James I convened a church conference which resolved that a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all Churches of England in time of divine service.

In 1611 his resolution bore fruit in the most loved English Bible ever, the King James Version or Authorised Version (KJV or AV). It became the universally accepted version for the English speaking world, and remained so for 350 years.

Modern translations

Towards the end of the 19th century it was considered crucial to produce a new translation as so much of the KJV needed explanation. Changes were needed for two reasons: additional ancient manuscripts had come to light since 1611, and many English words had changed meaning so significantly as to cause confusion for the ordinary reader. As a result, in 1885 the Revised Version (RV) was published in the UK, and in 1901 the American Standard Version based on the same texts.

The twentieth century has seen many new translations of the Bible. More than 80 new versions have been produced since 1948. These newer versions have the advantage of being based on more extensive manuscript evidence. They also contain more modern language which makes them easier to understand by current readers. The most widely used of these newer versions is the New International Version (NIV), first released in 1978.

Choosing a Bible

Once there was no choice. The only English Bible was the King James Version (KJV) and the only colour was black. These days there is a bewildering array of English translations. Some of them are shown in the table below.

Some Bible versions in English		
King James Version also called Authorised Version	KJV AV	1611
Revised Standard Version	RSV	1952
New English Bible	NEB	1970
New American Standard Bible	NASB	1971
Living Bible	LB	1971
Good News Bible also called Today's English Version	GNB TEV	1976
New International Version	NIV	1978
New King James Version	NKJV	1982
New Revised Standard Version	NRSV	1990
English Standard Version	ESV	2001

Each version has its good and bad points. Some have been designed for easy reading in modern English, others stick very closely to the original text but are more difficult to understand, some have more study helps available, and so on. There are also versions that are published by specific denominations. These tend to emphasise certain doctrines that are held by that denomination, often at the expense of accuracy. Many of the popular, readily available translations will be suitable for reliable everyday use.

When selecting a Bible to use, remember:

- what is best for one person, is not necessarily the best for another;
- a study Bible is not necessarily a good reading Bible, and vice versa;
- reading with children may be different from reading with adults or reading on your own;
- using several versions is helpful.

Whichever Bible version you read from regularly, you will often come across words, verses, or ideas, that are not entirely clear. It is an enormous help to have several Bible versions so that you can compare them.

Approaches to translation

One difference between versions is the approach they take to translation. The three main approaches are:

Formal equivalence: literal (word for word). (e.g., ESV)

Dynamic equivalence: thought for thought. (e.g., NIV)

Paraphrase: some interpretation involved. (e.g., LB)

A formally equivalent translation attempts to translate each word into an equivalent word in English. A dynamically equivalent translation attempts to translate each thought or phrase into an equivalent thought in English. A paraphrase contains the same ideas as the original but doesn't follow the original text so closely.

For example, consider the first three verses of Psalm 23. The NIV reads

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me besides quiet wa-

ters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

The LB reads

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need!
He lets me rest in the meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams. He restores my failing health. He helps me do what honours him the most.

Paraphrases are popular for reading because they are designed to be easy to read and they can provide fresh insight into familiar passages. However, there is always a danger that the interpretations of the translator are wrong, and you have no way of finding this out for yourself. Paraphrases are not good for study purposes either.

Exercise: Paraphrases

Read Matthew 5:3–12. These verses are commonly known as “The Beatitudes”.

1. In groups of two or three, write a paraphrase of verse 3. [Ask for help if you don't understand some words or phrases.]
2. How does your paraphrase help people understand the passage?
3. What things did you omit in your paraphrase? Did you insert any new ideas? Will your paraphrase mislead people?
4. Read the same passage from a paraphrase version such as the Living Bible. How does it compare with yours?

At first it might seem that the best approach is literal translation since that is “closest” to the original text. But that is not necessarily the case. Consider these two examples.

- In Luke 18:13, a man “beat his breast” in remorse. In Chokwe (a Zambian language) this means to congratulate yourself—the opposite of what Jesus meant! Therefore, in the Chokwe Bible, the phrase “beat his breast” has been translated “beat his brow”, which carries the idea of remorse. This is not a literal translation, but a “thought for thought” translation.
- In the Philippines, repeating a word shows you are not sure. So when Jesus said “Truly, truly ...”, this would mean “I’m not sure of what I am about to say” instead of “I really mean this and want you to listen”. Again, a literal translation is not the best.

Other differences

Versions also vary in size of vocabulary, traditional or modern tone, use of archaic language, theological orientation and textual layout.

Textual layout means how the text is arranged on the page. A Bible with good textual layout:

- prints the text in the natural paragraphs (instead of printing each verse as a separate paragraph);
- includes subheadings to help the reader see the natural breaks in the text and know what is to follow;
- prints the poetic parts of the Bible in the natural stanzas rather than as prose or in the artificial verse divisions;
- gives lists of names or places in columns instead of as prose.

The NIV makes most use of textual layout to assist the reader. The KJV makes the least use of textual layout. Most other versions are somewhere in between.

Apart from the version, you will also need to consider the *format* of your Bible. It is worth buying one with wide margins around the text. This provides room for notes you may wish to make. Bibles with cross-references are very useful for finding related passages. Some Bibles also have charts and maps in the text which can be helpful.

Homework

1. Read the translations of Acts 1:10–11 below from the KJV and RSV. Find and read one other version of the same passage.

KJV: ¹⁰ And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

¹¹ Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

RSV: ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking to heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

- (a) Which do you prefer?
- (b) Why?

2. In your readings this week, use a few different versions if you have access to them. List what you feel are their strengths and weaknesses.

Further reading

- *The English Bible and its origins* by Richard Purkis.
- *The journey from texts to translations* by Paul D. Wegner.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Session 4

Reasons to believe

The Bible was written so long ago. How can we be sure that it is really the word of God? In fact, there is a lot of evidence that the Bible is divinely inspired. In this session we look at three lines of evidence which give us confidence that the Bible did come from God. These are:

- archaeology
- modern medicine
- the resurrection of Jesus

Together these show us that the Bible is historically accurate, that it was written by God and that the gospel message is true.

Archaeology

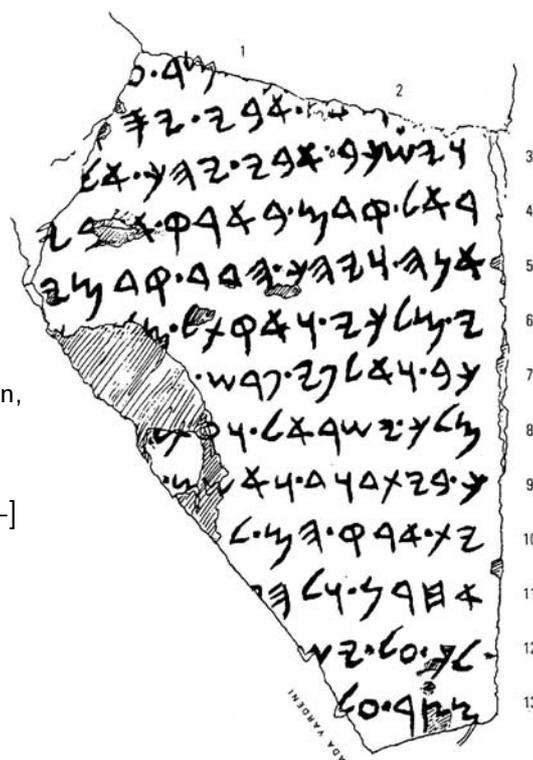
In the past 150 years there has been a large number of archaeological excavations at hundreds of sites in the countries of the Bible. Many finds demonstrate the historical accuracy of the Bible. Some examples are given below.

House of David inscription

In mid-1993, a stone inscription was discovered which referred to the “House of David” and the “King of Israel”. This was the first reference to King David found outside the Bible. The stone has been dated to the ninth century BC and appears to commemorate the victory of an Aramean king over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The inscription provides strong evidence for the existence of King David and the dynasty which he founded.

Translation

1. ...
2. ... my father went up
3. ... and my father died, he went to [his fate... Is-]
4. ... rael formerly in my father's land...
5. I [fought against Israel?] and Hadad went in front of me...
6. ... my king. And I slew of [them X footmen, Y cha-]
7. riots and two thousand horsemen...
8. the king of Israel. And [I] slew [... the kin-]
9. g of the House of David. And I put...
10. their land...
11. other... [...ru-]
12. led over Is[rael...]
13. siege upon...

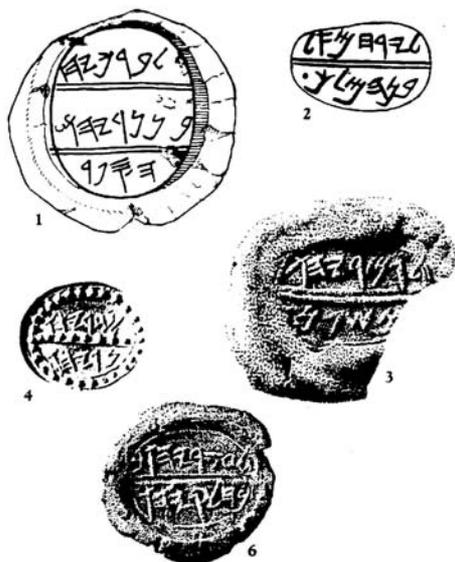


Seals of biblical people

When letters and official documents were sent to someone, they were usually sealed with a wax or clay seal bearing the writer's imprint. This normally had the writer's name and title along with a geometric design. Some of the clay seals have survived and been found (although the documents to which they were once attached have long since crumbled away). Some of them are shown on the following page. These apparently belonged to the following people.

1. Baruch, son of Neriah	Jer 36:4	(Jeremiah's scribe)
2. Jerahmeel, son of the king	Jer 36:26	(near Baruch seal)
3. Gemariah, son of Shaphan	Jer 36:10	
4. Seriah, son of Neriah	Jer 51:59	(Baruch's brother)
5. Azariah, son of Hilkiyah	1 Chr 6:13	(son of high priest)
6. Azaliah, son of Meshullam	2 Kgs 22:3	

All of these seals have been dated to around 600 BC, exactly the right time according to the Bible's chronology.



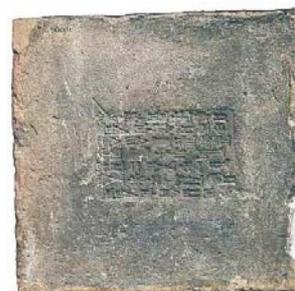
Two copies of seal 1 belonging to Baruch, son of Neriah, have been found. One of them also showed a fingerprint, probably the mark of Baruch himself.

Nebuchadnezzar's bricks

Many bricks have been found in Babylon bearing the following inscription

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who provides for Esagila and Ezida, the eldest son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, am I.

(Esagila and Ezida were temples in Babylon.) Until these bricks were found early in the 20th century, the name Nebuchadnezzar was unknown outside the Bible.



Babylonian chronicle

The Babylonian chronicle was also found and provides a description of Babylon's attack on Jerusalem in 598–597 BC which agrees exactly with the biblical description in 2 Kings 24:10–17.

Babylonian chronicle
 Seventh year: In the month of Kislimu, the king of Akkad [Babylon] called up his army, marched against Syria [lit. Hattu-land], encamped against the city of Judah and seized the town on the second day of the month Adar. He captured the king. He appointed there a king of his own choice. He took much booty from it and sent [it] to Babylon.



Nebuchadnezzar recorded the date as the 2nd of Adar in his 7th year. He also recorded the dates of astronomical events such as solar eclipses which can be accurately calculated and so the Babylonian calendar can be synchronized with our modern calendar. In this way, the date of the attack on Jerusalem is calculated to be 16 March, 597 BC.

Jehoiachin in Babylon

The Bible describes Jehoiachin king of Judah being taken captive to Babylon where he was imprisoned. Many years later, the Bible says he was released and fed by the king of Babylon (2 Kings 25:27–30). Archaeologists have found receipts for delivery of oil to the king's household in Babylon. One receipt listed Jehoiachin as receiving some of the king's oil.

Deliveries of oil to royal household:

$1\frac{1}{2}$ sila for 3 carpenters from Arvad, $\frac{1}{2}$ sila each
 $11\frac{1}{2}$ sila for 8 ditto from Byblos, . . .
 $3\frac{1}{2}$ sila for 7 ditto, Greeks, $\frac{1}{2}$ sila each
 $\frac{1}{2}$ sila to Nabu-etir the carpenter
10 sila to Jehoiachin, the son of the king of Judah
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ sila for the 5 sons of the king of Judah through Qana'a

Sheep's liver

Nebuchadnezzar could not decide whether to attack Rabbah, the capital city of the Ammonites, or Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. In Ezekiel we read

Mark out one road for the sword [of the king of Babylon] to come against Rabbah of the Ammonites and another against Judah and fortified Jerusalem. For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: he will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver. (Ezekiel 21:20–21)

Thus he used a number of methods of divination to determine which city to attack. But how did he "examine the liver"?

Archaeologists have discovered numerous clay models of sheep's livers. These appear to have been used to teach student astrologers. They are divided into 55 different parts and it is thought that the future was predicted based on which part of the liver was infected with parasites—rather like reading tea leaves!



The bones of Caiaphas

When Jesus was killed, he was tried by the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57). Caiaphas was appointed by the Roman governor as high priest, and held this position from AD 18 to AD 36. Jewish historians from the time give his full name as “Joseph Caiaphas” although the Bible only refers to him as Caiaphas, his family name.

In late 1990, a limestone bone-box or “ossuary” was accidentally discovered by workers building a road in Jerusalem. On the side of the box was inscribed “Joseph Caiaphas”. The box was very ornate, suggesting it held the bones of someone important. Inside the box were the remains of a 60 year old man, a younger woman and several children. It is highly likely that these are the bones of the high priest himself, and the first skeleton of a biblical character ever discovered.



The plaza of Erastus

Paul the apostle was in Corinth when he wrote a letter to the church in Rome. At the end of his letter he mentioned some of the people in the church of Corinth:

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings. (Romans 16:23)

Obviously Erastus was an important man in Corinth and held a senior public office. This is supported by archaeology. In the ruins of the ancient city of Corinth lie the remains of a civic plaza with the following inscription:

Erastus, the commissioner of the city, had paved this plaza at his own expense.

Part of the inscription is shown below. Can you make out his name?



These few examples show that the Bible is accurate, in both the history it records and its preservation through time. In fact, there has not been any archaeological find that contradicts the Bible, but there have been many to support it.

The Bible and modern medicine

Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt in about 1445 BC. Having crossed the Red Sea, they camped at Mt Sinai where God gave Moses the laws which were to form the basis for the new nation. Amongst other things, the laws covered cleanliness, morality, ethics and hygiene. Although it was not intended to be a scientific document, the Law of Moses contains many rules that are now recognized as important to the health of the Israelites. They could not have known this at the time. So these laws provide further evidence that the Bible comes from God.

1. Before the improved preparation and refrigeration of foods, eating pork and seafood led to intestinal problems and frequent food poisoning. The Law of Moses prohibited these foods (Leviticus 11:1–12).

2. The Law of Moses emphasises:

- (a) cleanliness of food utensils; Leviticus 11:32–35
- (b) use of running water (not stagnant); Leviticus 15:13
- (c) contaminated implements being scoured before re-use or broken. Leviticus 6:28; 11:33

3. Until relatively recently, it was common for excrement to be dumped into the streets. Flies bred in the filth and spread intestinal diseases that killed millions. Diseases such as cholera, dysentery and typhoid fever took a heavy toll of lives. But none of these things were problems to the Israelites. God had given them the following law:

Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement.

(Deuteronomy 23:12–13)

4. Treatment of bodily discharges was based on hygienic protection. See Leviticus 15:4–12.
5. The laws of leprosy in Leviticus 13 required careful isolation of infection. Medical historians regard this as the first model of a sanitary legislation—thousands of years before the scientific basis for infection control was understood.

Contemporary Egyptian medicine

Compare the Law of Moses with Egyptian medical practice at the time. The *Papyrus Ebers* provides the following advice.

- To prevent hair from turning grey, anoint it with the blood of a black calf which has been boiled in oil or the fat of a snake.
- To cure blindness, mix pigs' eyes, antimony, red ochre and honey and pour into the sufferer's ear.
- For an embedded splinter, apply worms' blood and asses' dung.

No doubt, the Israelites were familiar with these “treatments” having lived in Egypt.

Resurrection of Jesus

Perhaps the most amazing claim in the whole Bible is that Jesus rose from the dead. If the Bible is inspired, this claim must be true. On the other hand, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, the Bible cannot be the word of God.

The resurrection is extremely important to the Christian faith. Josh McDowell has written

... the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men, or it is the most fantastic fact of history.

Josh McDowell,
Evidence That Demands a Verdict

Josh McDowell is well-known as an author and speaker on defending Christianity.

The whole of Christianity hangs on the resurrection. Without it, there is no hope of salvation or hope for the future. The apostle Paul wrote

What happened...

1. Joseph asked Pilate for Jesus' body
(*Matthew 27:57-58; Mark 15:42-45; Luke 23:50-52; John 19:38*)
2. Joseph and Nicodemus laid him in a tomb, but because it the Sabbath was about to begin, they did not anoint him. Some women saw where he was laid.
(*Matthew 27:59-61; Mark 15:46-47; Luke 23:53-56; John 19:39-42*)
3. The tomb was blocked with a large stone across its entrance.
(*Matthew 27:60; Mark 15:46*)
4. The Jewish leaders asked for a Roman guard to be placed on the tomb. The guard was granted and the tomb was officially sealed.
(*Matthew 27:62-66*)
5. The women came back later to anoint him but found the stone moved and the grave empty. Two angels appeared to them and explained that Jesus had risen from the dead. Peter and John also saw the empty tomb.
(*Matthew 28:1-7; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-9*)
6. Mary Magdalene talks to Jesus.
(*John 20:10-18*)
7. The Jewish leaders bribed the soldiers not to tell anyone what had happened, but to say they had fallen asleep and the disciples had stolen the body.
(*Matthew 28:11-15*)
8. Jesus appeared to some of them, and later to the disciples as a group. They were reluctant to believe, but were convinced when they saw him.
(*Matthew 28:8-20; Mark 16:9-14; Luke 24:13-49; John 20:19-21:14; Acts 1:3*)

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still
in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17)

It was also a major part of the message that the apostles taught (see Acts 2:24,32; 4:1-2; 17:18; etc.) So it is important to consider the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

What other explanation is there?

How else can you explain the following facts?

- There was a Roman guard on the tomb.
- The tomb had a large stone blocking the entrance which was moved.
- The body went missing.
- The apostles changed within weeks from being scared and in hiding, to fearlessly proclaiming their belief in a risen Jesus.
- More than 500 eyewitness accounts

Eyewitnesses

A large number of people claimed to see Jesus after his resurrection. Those we know about are listed below.

- Mary Magdalene
- Women returning from tomb
- Peter
- Disciples on road to Emmaus
- Apostles, Thomas absent
- Apostles, Thomas present
- Seven by Sea of Galilee
- 500 believers at one time
- James
- Eleven
- At ascension
- Paul
- Stephen
- Paul in temple
- John on Patmos

In fact, many of them were initially skeptical and Jesus had to give “many convincing proofs that he was alive” (Acts 1:3). The apostle Thomas was not prepared to believe until he saw Jesus for himself (John 20:25). The fact that they all did believe eventually, shows that there must have been convincing evidence.

Their eye-witness accounts were an important part of the gospel message (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 10:39–41; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

Persecution

The disciples had every reason not to believe. By acknowledging their faith in the resurrection, they became subject to fierce persecution. They must have been absolutely convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had no doubts. Anybody with doubts would not have willingly suffered as they did.

Compare the behaviour of the apostles before and after Jesus' resurrection. They had deserted Jesus and fled when he was arrested (Matthew 26:56). Peter crept back but when questioned he denied that he had ever known Jesus (John 18:15–27). John also followed, but the others did not have the courage to appear at all. Less than three months later, they were all willing to stand up in public and proclaim the resurrection. They rejoiced when they were persecuted (Acts 4:1–21; 5:29–42).

It is amazing to think that a defeated little band of cowards meeting in an upper room one day could, a few months later, be a powerful force withstanding great persecution. Something had convinced these men. Professor Simon Greenleaf has written

They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith, and the evidences of the great facts and truths which they asserted . . . It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead.

Simon Greenleaf (1783–1853) was Royall Professor of Law at Harvard University. He originally set out to disprove the resurrection, but he came to the conclusion that the evidence was reliable and the resurrection did in fact happen.

The missing body

Perhaps more than any other reason, the missing body provides ample evidence for the resurrection. The Jews desperately wanted to stop the young Christian movement. They could have done so easily by simply producing the body. In his first public speech in Jerusalem, Peter spoke about Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:24,32). But no one came forward to contradict Peter's claim.

After all, the tomb had been under guard (Matthew 27:62–66; 28:11–

15). Because of the guard, the body could not have been taken by anyone other than the Jews or Romans, and apparently neither knew where it was. Therefore Jesus must have been raised.

The stone

A very large stone was placed across the entrance to the tomb (Matthew 27:60; Mark 16:4). Such tombs were very common in Israel at that time and many have been studied by archaeologists. They have concluded that the stone probably weighed between one and two tonnes and that the stone stood on a ramp which was gently inclined *toward* the tomb. So to seal the tomb, the stone was pushed down the slope. But to open the tomb was very difficult and required several strong men.

The Roman guards

The Jewish leaders asked Pontius Pilate (the Roman procurator) for military guards to be posted at the tomb so Jesus' body could not be stolen (Matthew 27:62–65). It is estimated that a Roman guard unit consisted of between 4 and 16 soldiers. Once the guards were posted, no one would dare attempt to remove the stone covering the entrance.

But while the Roman soldiers were on guard, an angel appeared (Matthew 28:2–4), caused an earthquake and rolled back the stone. When the chief priests heard what had happened, they attempted a cover up. They bribed the guards to say the disciples had stolen the body during the night while the guards were asleep!

Leaving a night watch or sleeping while on guard required the death penalty under Roman law. (Compare the jailer's reaction in Acts 16:25–28 when he thought his prisoners had escaped.)

Furthermore, the tomb had been officially sealed (Matthew 27:66) and to break the seal without permission would also have been punishable by execution. Even if the disciples could have rolled back the huge stone without waking the Roman soldiers, would they have been willing to defy the Roman authority and fight the guards just to steal the body? Given their actions a few days earlier,

Some theories to explain it away

Explain why each of these theories cannot be true.

Swoon theory Jesus could have fainted, revived and escaped from the tomb.

Hallucination theory All the eye-witnesses hallucinated.

Wrong tomb theory The disciples went to the wrong tomb.

Hoax theory The disciples stole the body.

Theft theory Thieves stole the body

Official coverup theory Either the Roman soldiers or the Jewish authorities took the body.

it is hardly likely!

Conclusions

All the evidence points to the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Three days after he was dead and buried, Jesus was resurrected as he said he would be (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 28:6).

We can have hope and faith as a result. Jesus' rising from the dead is evidence of a future resurrection of faithful people (1 Corinthians 15:12–22, 51–55).

Homework

Read John chapter 20

1. How do these verses show that the disciples were not expecting the resurrection of Jesus?
2. What do we learn from the grave clothes being found neatly folded (v7)?
3. Does v19 show the disciples were still doubting? What convinced them that Jesus was truly raised from the dead?
4. What evidence is there in this passage that Jesus did not have an ordinary body after his resurrection?
5. Why is Christ's resurrection so important if the Bible is to be believed?

Further reading

- *God's Truth* by Alan Hayward.
- *The stones cry out* by Randall Price.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Session 5

Bible prophecy

More remarkable evidence for the inspiration of the Bible comes from prophecy. The Bible contains many prophecies about Israel and the surrounding nations. Some were fulfilled almost immediately, some were fulfilled hundreds of years later, some are still being fulfilled today, and some are yet to be fulfilled. Fulfilled prophecy shows that the Bible must come from a powerful God who knows the future.

Predicting the future

People have always wanted to predict the future to reduce their fear and anxiety about the uncertain and unknown. This desire has been satisfied by priests, astrologers, prophets and fortune tellers since the dawn of civilization. In Bible times a range of methods were used.

- Augury: using animal entrails
- Hepatoscopy: using animal livers
- Auspices: using the flight of birds
- Astrology: using stars and planets
- Oracles: often ambiguous answers by priests or priestesses to specific questions

see the sheep's liver
on page 45.

Today we have

- horoscopists
- tarot card readers
- palmists
- tea leaf readers
- clairvoyants



Nostradamus, who was born in 1503, is one who claimed to be a prophet. He wrote a large number of quatrains (four line paragraphs) which together formed his book of prophecy. The quatrains are very vague and mystical. Despite this many people have endeavoured to interpret them as prophecies of significant events such as World War 2 or the deaths of famous people. However, such interpretations are highly subjective. For example, Nostradamus (X.72) wrote

The year 1999 seven months
From the sky will come the great King of Terror.
To resuscitate the great king of the Mongols.
Before and after Mars reigns by good luck.

After the event, some people claimed this referred to the plane crash that killed John F Kennedy in July 1999, others have claimed it refers to a solar eclipse in August 1999. The “prophecy” is so vague that it could be interpreted in many different ways.

Bible prophecy is different. It is usually clear, specific and straightforward to interpret. The Bible claims that the prophets were inspired by God in what they wrote:

Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

(2 Peter 1:21)

Bible prophets

A Bible prophet did not just foretell the future, but was God’s messenger in commanding, encouraging and warning his people. Sometimes this involved relaying God’s plans and intentions for the future, but sometimes a prophet’s message did not involve any prediction. However, in this session, we will look only at prophecies which predicted events in the future.

It is important to see prophecy from God’s perspective. The Bible portrays him as the *controller* of future events. He knows the future because he will make it happen. In this way, Bible prophecy is *history in advance*.

There are different types of prophecy. Some are “short-term” and fulfilled in the lifetime of the prophet. Many are “long-term” and extend beyond the prophet’s lifetime. A prophet often used a com-



What other possible interpretations of this “prophecy” can you think of?

Year B.C.	EVENTS	PROPHET
1500	EXODUS	Moses
1400		
1300	JUDGES	
1200		
1100		Samuel
1000	Saul David Solomon Kingdom split	David
900		Elijah Elisha, Joel ?
800	KINGS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH	Jonah Amos Micah, Isaiah, Hosea Nahum, Zephaniah
700	Assyrian Captivity of Israel	
600	Babylonian Captivity of Judah	Jeremiah, Habbakuk Ezekiel, Daniel, Obadiah Haggai, Zechariah
500		
400		Malachi
300		
200	Maccabees	
100		
0	Jesus born	Jesus

bination of both, the short-term fulfilment providing evidence of the truth of the long-term prophecy. Many prophecies have a dual fulfilment, a partial short-term fulfilment and a more complete long-term fulfilment.

Two tests were applied to see if a prophet was genuinely from God. The first test concerned the teaching of the prophet:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them", you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

Isaiah also stated

When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists ... To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this [God's] word, they have no light. (Isaiah 8:19-20)

The second test was whether the prophet had shown the ability to predict the future before.

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him. (Deuteronomy 18:21-22)

The prophet... will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true. (Jeremiah 28:9)

So a true prophet was one who taught things consistent with the rest of God's revelation and who gave a short-term prophecy which came true.

Question
How do you apply these tests to modern prophets?

The accurate fulfilment of Bible prophecies gives great credibility to the Bible's claim of inspiration. It also gives us confidence in prophecies not yet fulfilled.

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones

Reference: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel prophesied in about 590 BC when the nation of Israel was in captivity in Babylon. He gave many fascinating prophecies, including this vision of a valley of dry bones. The well-known Negro spiritual song "Dem dry bones" refers to this prophecy. It is a very clear prophecy with each element of the prophecy being clearly explained.

Ezekiel's vision was of a collection of dry bones lying at the bottom of a valley. The bones come together and were covered with tendons, flesh and skin, but the bodies which were formed remained dead. Then breath entered the bodies and they became a vast living army.

In verses 11-14, the prophecy is explained. It depicts Israel's revival in two stages.



Vision	Meaning
bones
dried bones
bones come together
breath in bones

The prophecy is unambiguous and clearly explained. The Jews were to be gathered out of many nations around the world. They were to become one nation in the land of their ancestors, the land of Israel. This is precisely what has happened over the past century.

No other nation has maintained a national identity after more than 1800 years of exile. But no other nation has had these prophecies made concerning their history. Other nations which have been dispossessed of their land have lost their identity within a few years. What has happened to Israel is extraordinary. The Jews are a standing miracle, a wonderful example of fulfilled prophecy. The fact that their history was predicted so accurately shows the Bible is God’s book.

We have only seen the first stage of Ezekiel’s prophecy fulfilled. Israel has returned to their land as predicted, but they remain a secular nation uncommitted to God. God’s spirit does not yet dwell in them. A recent survey revealed that most Israelis do not consider that God is responsible for their current position and survival in the land. These prophecies indicate they are yet to become a religious nation relying on God and obeying him.

The last stage in the prophecy is described in verses 24–28. After the Jews turn back to God, they will have a new king “David” who will rule over them forever in peace. Luke 1:30–33 makes it clear that this king will be Jesus, who was a descendant of the earlier King David of Israel. He is to sit on David’s throne in Jerusalem.

We can be confident that the Jews will turn back to God and that Jesus will return to be king, because the first part of this vision has been fulfilled. The Jews are back in the promised land as predicted in the Bible.

Luke 1:30–33

How many common ideas can you find between Ezekiel 37:24–28 and Luke 1:30–33?

Prophecies about Israel

Israel is the subject of more prophecies than any other nation, simply because the Jews are God’s special people. Their entire history has been foretold, including events which have taken place in the 20th century. The existence of the people of Israel, the Jews, and the existence of the nation in its biblical land is clear evidence for the reliability of the Bible.

In 1897 at the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland, a Jew named Theodore Herzl proposed a Jewish homeland in the land known at that time as Palestine. It was under the control of Turkey and formed part of the Ottoman empire. At that time, there was only a handful of Jews living in Palestine. With the Turks in control, Jews weren’t welcome.

Just 20 years later, at the end of World War 1, the British evicted the Turks from Palestine and liberated Jerusalem. For the next 20 years, Britain ruled Palestine with the approval of the League of Nations (the forerunner to the United Nations). Slowly, Jews began to move back to the land of their ancestors. The pace of immigration increased rapidly after World War 2 and the atrocities of Nazi Germany, and many surviving Jews returned to Palestine. The enormity of Jewish suffering in what was to become known as “the Holocaust”, and the concern and guilt of many nations, led to the establishment of the State of Israel, proclaimed on 15 May 1948. This new State of Israel was established nearly 1900 years after the Jews had been exiled by the Romans.

Some prophecies about Israel

1. Israel's national birth was predicted by God to Abraham.
 Genesis 15 2000 BC
 Fulfilled through Abraham's descendants.
2. Israel's disobedience, scattering, preservation and revival was predicted by Moses.
 Deuteronomy 28 1500 BC
 Fulfilled: taken captive to Babylon in 600 BC, returned to land in 538 BC
 Fulfilled: scattered in AD 70, returned to land in 20th century, nation reborn 1948.
3. Israel is a continuing witness to God's existence
 Isaiah 43:1–2, 10–12 700 BC
4. Though scattered throughout the world, Israel would be preserved.
 Jeremiah 30:10–11; 31:10 600 BC
 Fulfilled: The Jews have survived the Spanish inquisition, the Russian pogroms, the Nazi holocaust, and many other attempts to destroy them. Throughout their history, God has preserved a remnant of his people.
5. When Israel is reborn and Jerusalem recaptured, the kingdom of God will soon come.
 Luke 21:24–31 AD 30
 Fulfilled: nation reborn 1948, Jerusalem recaptured 1967, kingdom of God yet to begin.

History of Israel

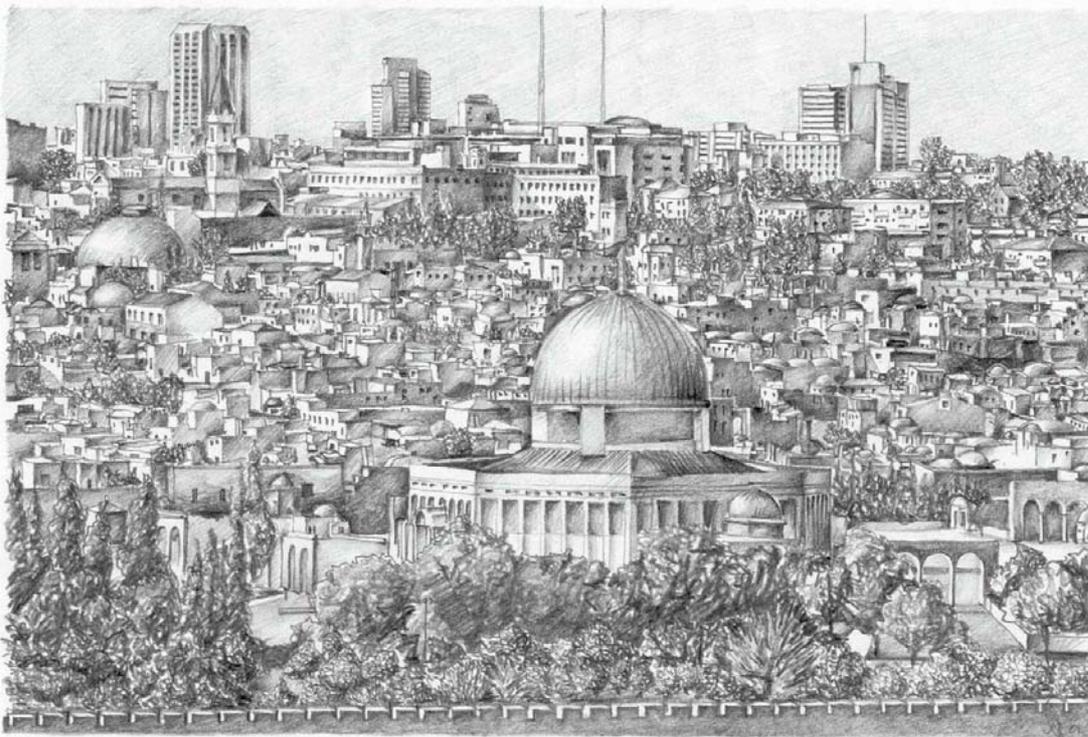
2000 BC	Abraham, the father of the Jews.
1400 BC	Israel invades and conquers Canaan and is established as a nation.
1000 BC	King David.
605 BC	Jews taken captive to Babylon.
538 BC	Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city.
AD 70	Romans capture Jerusalem. Jews scattered throughout the world.
AD 1882	First wave of Jewish immigration as a result of Russian pogroms.
AD 1897	First Zionist congress in Basle, Switzerland.
AD 1900	A handful of Jews living in Palestine; Turks in charge.
AD 1904	Second wave of Jewish immigration.
AD 1917	British capture Palestine; increased Jewish migration.
AD 1945–1948	Many Jews who survived WW2 migrated to Palestine.
AD 1948	State of Israel proclaimed.
AD 1948–	Many wars with Arabs; Israel maintains independence; Jews migrate in large numbers.
AD 1993–	Limited Palestinian self-rule of the Gaza Strip and areas of the West Bank.
AD 1996–	Palestinian terrorist activity within Israel.

The nation has survived against incredible odds, with its hostile neighbours seeking to destroy it on numerous occasions. The most notable of these wars occurred in 1967 when an extraordinary event took place. The city of Jerusalem, divided since the partition of Palestine in 1948, and out of Jewish control for nearly 1900 years, was once again united and brought under Jewish control.

Why has Israel survived? Because God said it would. The prophets taught that, despite the wickedness of the people, God would ultimately remember the promises he had made to their faithful ancestors. Part of these promises involved bringing the Israelites into their own land again.

The attempts to bring lasting peace to the Middle East will certainly fail. One of the consistent stumbling blocks to peace in the region is the status of the city of Jerusalem. God, through the prophet Zechariah, says of Jerusalem:

I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling . . . I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. (Zechariah 12:2-3)



Psalm 83

This psalm contains a prophecy about nations that want to destroy Israel. They are:

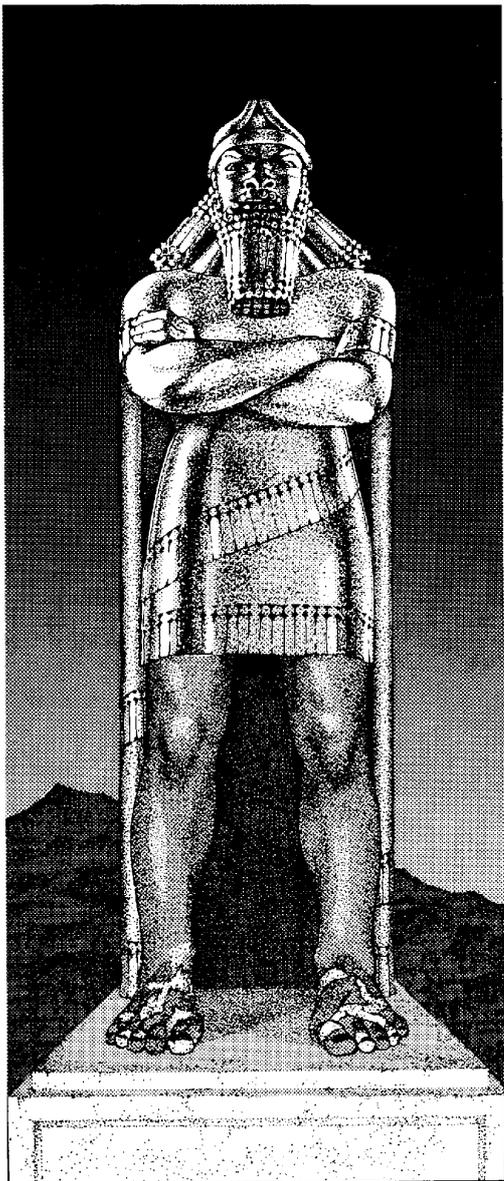
- Edom
- the Ishmaelites
- Moab
- the Hagrites
- Gebal
- Ammon
- Amalek
- Philistia
- Tyre
- Assyria
- the descendants of Lot

Use a map and Bible dictionary to find the modern day names for these places (where possible!). Mark them on the map in *The Bible Readers Handbook*. It is likely that these are the nations that will attack Jerusalem before Jesus returns.

Vision of world empires

One night in about 600 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had a dream. The dream seemed unusually vivid and it concerned him. He called for his advisers to explain it. One of his advisers was Daniel, a captive from Jerusalem. Daniel told the King what the dream was (see Daniel 2:31–35). Nebuchadnezzar had seen a large statue composed of different metals. As he watched, he saw a stone which had been cut (but not by human hands) strike the image on the feet and destroy it. The metals broke in pieces while the stone grew into a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

Then Daniel told him what it meant (see Daniel 2:36–45). The four metals of the image represented four empires that would arise. The statue's head of gold represented Nebuchadnezzar himself and his kingdom of Babylon. The other empires were Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome.



gold head
BABYLON

silver
breast & arms
**MEDO-
PERSIA**

bronze
belly & thighs
GREECE

iron legs
ROME

iron & clay feet
**DIVIDED
NATIONS**

Find these places on the maps in *The Bible Readers Handbook*.

Nebuchadnezzar's image

Head of gold	Babylon	626–539 BC
Chest and arms of silver	Medo-Persia	539–330 BC
Belly and thighs of bronze	Greece	330–63 BC
Legs of iron	Rome	from 63 BC
Feet of iron and clay	Nations today	

A stone came and destroyed the image and grew into a great mountain. This is the kingdom of God which replaces the kingdoms of men.

The history of Israel has followed the pattern of this prophecy. From the time of Daniel, there were four empires which ruled Israel: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. After the Roman empire, the Jews were scattered around the world. Now that Israel is back in their land, there is no dominant empire, but a mixture of strong and weak nations represented by the statue's feet of iron and clay.

The one phase of the prophecy yet to be fulfilled is the shattering of the statue by the rock cut out of a mountain without human hands and the mountain which fills the earth. Daniel says this represents the kingdom of God which replaces the kingdoms of men. Because the rest of the prophecy has been fulfilled, we can be confident that this last phase will be fulfilled too.

So the prophecy ends with a similar scene to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones: a time when God's kingdom will be in the earth. Putting the two prophecies together we can see that this will occur when Jesus returns to be king on David's throne in Jerusalem, ruling in righteousness and peace.

Further reading

- *Israel, Arabs, and Bible prophecy* by Harry Whittaker.
- *Thine is the Kingdom* by Peter Southgate.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Session 6

A consistent message

Despite being written by many different authors over a period of 1600 years, the Bible contains a consistent message throughout. In this session we examine some examples of the extraordinary internal consistency of the Bible and look at the alleged contradictions and how they can be explained. We also consider the exciting discovery of “Bible echoes”, and review the theme of the kingdom of God that runs consistently through the Bible.

Internal consistency

One thing you will notice as you start to read the Bible regularly, is that its message is remarkably consistent. Despite being written by many different authors, from all walks of life, over a period of about 1600 years, the basic message is the same. Of course, this is what you would expect from a book inspired by God.

The Bible is also consistent in the little things, the apparently trivial details. There are many examples in the Bible where different passages support each other, providing “undesigned coincidences”. The idea is best seen by examples.

Goliath the giant

Numbers 13:33 There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight. (NKJV)

Joshua 11:21–22 At that time Joshua went and destroyed the Anakites from the hill country ... No Anakites were left in Israelite territory; only in Gaza, Gath and Ashdod did any survive.

1 Samuel 17:4 A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall.

Find Gaza, Gath and Ashdod on your maps.

These passages were written by three different authors at three different periods of history. Yet they match each other perfectly. The first passage shows that when Israel entered the promised land there were many giants there (the sons of Anak, or Anakites). The second passage shows that Israel destroyed nearly all of these giants, but left a few in three towns: Gaza, Gath and Ashdod. The third passage casually mentions that the giant Goliath's home town was Gath. He must have been descended from one of the Anakites. There is a ring of truth about these three passages. They sound more like accurate history than contrived fiction.



David the shepherd boy fighting Goliath the giant

Healing in the evening

In Matthew 8:16 we read

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.

Why did they come in the evening? Matthew does not tell us. But Mark records the same incident and says that it was on a Sabbath (Mark 1:21). In another passage (Matthew 12:10) we learn that there was a belief among the Jews that it was not lawful to heal on the Sabbath. We also know that the Jews counted 6pm as the end of one day and the start of the next. So the Sabbath ended at 6pm and after that, in the evening, the people brought the sick people to be healed. Putting these passages together, the explanation is clear.

Again, the incident has the ring of truth. Matthew reports that the healing took place in the evening without saying that it was a Sabbath. If the story was contrived, these little details may have been overlooked.

The Jewish Week VS The Roman Week

JEWISH	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th (Sabbath)	1 st
dark/light	 	 	 	 	 	 	 
ROMAN	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun

 sunset to sunrise (approx. 6 p.m. – 6 a.m.)
 sunrise to sunset (approx. 6 a.m. – 6 p.m.)

Ahithophel the traitor

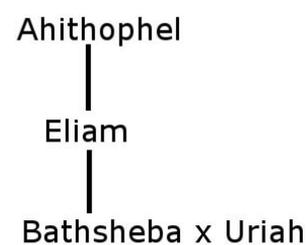
Once King David was walking on the roof of his palace when he saw a beautiful women named Bathsheba bathing. He requested that she come to him, and she became pregnant. David arranged for her husband Uriah to be moved to the front line of the battle where he was killed. David then married Bathsheba. When confronted with his sins, he was filled with remorse and asked God to forgive him. You can read the full story in 2 Samuel 11–12.

Sometime later, David’s son Absalom conspired to seize the throne for himself. David fled with his loyal followers. David’s chief advisor, Ahithophel, remained in Jerusalem and offered his advice to

Absalom. The competing armies fought and Absalom was killed and his army defeated. Thus David retained the kingship. The full story is given in 2 Samuel 15–19. The Bible says this second incident was God’s punishment for the first (2 Samuel 12:11–12).

One curious incident in these events is that Ahithophel was a traitor, and that Absalom expected him to be willing to change sides (2 Samuel 15:12). This is surprising because David described him as “his familiar friend in whom he trusted” (Psalm 41:9). It was so unexpected to David that he never got over it (Psalm 55:12–14). So why did Ahithophel change sides and how was Absalom so sure that he would?

The answer is found by comparing 2 Samuel 11:3 and 23:34,39. In these verses we learn that Ahithophel was the father of Eliam who was the father of Bathsheba, and that Uriah and Eliam had both been in David’s guard. So the girl with whom David committed adultery was Ahithophel’s granddaughter, and the man whose murder David organized was Ahithophel’s grandson by marriage and probably a friend of his son. It seems Ahithophel was seeking revenge.



When Absalom had captured David’s palace, he asked Ahithophel what to do next. He said “Go and lie with the concubines of David on the roof of the palace” (2 Samuel 16:20–22). In other words, “Pay him back. He stole another man’s wife; now you steal his!” What’s more it was on the roof of the palace, the same place from which David had seen Bathsheba.

Such a fascinating story hidden beneath the text could not have been contrived. The Bible didn’t tell this story, but it’s there in the background for us to search out. The internal consistency of the Bible shows it has the ring of truth.

JJ Blunt’s “Undesigned Coincidences”

Professor JJ Blunt was once the Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. He was one of England’s most diligent Bible students, and specialised in finding what he called “undesigned coincidences” including those described above. He published the results in a book in 1847. Today, you can read his work on-line at www.bbie.org/english/resources/blunt/.

Contradictions?

For every person who starts to read the Bible, there must be hundreds who say “Read the Bible? No way! It’s too full of contradictions.” This is important, because if the Bible were full of contradictions then it would not be true, and it would not be worth reading.

It must be said that the charge is most often made by those who are openly enemies of the Bible, or those who have little or no knowledge of what it does say. The thing about alleged contradictions is that they are often shown to be in harmony after a bit more careful reading or study. Apparently, few who claim the Bible is full of contradictions take the trouble to check things out thoroughly before opening their mouth or putting pen to paper.

The sign on the cross

When Jesus was crucified, a sign was placed above his head. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all say what was on the sign. As the four statements are not identical, does the Bible contradict itself? Let’s look at how each gospel records what was written on the sign.

Mt 27:37	This is Jesus	the King of the Jews
Mk 15:26		the King of the Jews
Lk 23:38	This is	the King of the Jews
Jn 19:19	Jesus of Nazareth	the King of the Jews

Does each writer have to record everything? Is it not likely that the sign said “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”?

Jesus clears the temple

In the Bible, Jesus is twice recorded as having cleared the temple of traders. John 2:13–16 records an incident at the start of his preaching while Matthew 21:12–13 has an incident near the end of Jesus’ life. To state unequivocally (as some do) that this is a contradiction is very strange. The simplest explanation is that there were two occasions, not one. This idea is confirmed by a comparison of the context of the two passages.

The ring of truth

The above examples show that some alleged contradictions just require some careful reading and thought. Different reports can highlight certain (different) features and omit others, without being contradictory. Over the centuries, many Bible ‘contradictions’ have been alleged. Careful thought and study have discovered harmony behind most of these.

We believe the Bible is the word of God and is true. Thus it is not contradictory, and so we wait in faith for further knowledge or discoveries to harmonise any remaining ‘contradictions’. We suggest that this is a very reasonable approach to take in the light of past experience.

If all the books of the Bible told exactly the same story and every detail fitted together perfectly, we would probably conclude it was a fabrication, a concocted story that hangs together. True stories don’t tend to be like that and the Bible is not like that either. There are places where it is difficult to make the details from one part fit in with another part. And this is what you would expect from real life. Real life is full of situations that appear contradictory. Only when you learn all the circumstances do you realise that these real life ‘contradictions’ are not contradictory at all. The Bible has that ring of truth about it.

Can you explain these?

Sacrifice or not? In Hosea 6:6, God says “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”. But God had told them to sacrifice!

Did Saul inquire of the Lord? Compare 1 Samuel 28:6; 1 Chronicles 10:13–14.

Which country? Compare 2 Samuel 8:13 with 1 Chronicles 18:12. (NIV corrects the discrepancy.)

How did Judas die? Compare Matthew 27:3–5 with Acts 1:18.

Bible echoes

One of the exciting things in Bible reading is finding in one part of the Bible an “echo” of an idea from another part of the Bible. These often help us understand more about what God is telling us. Finding Bible echoes usually only comes about after you become very familiar with the Bible.

One example is the “failure of the firstborn”. To the Jews, the firstborn son of the family was very important—he was entitled to a double portion of the family inheritance. Yet not one of the successful men of the Old Testament is said to be a firstborn. Every firstborn male of the Old Testament, who might have had a position of honour, was in some way a failure. Only after reading the Bible through many times do you notice this sort of thing. The reason for this remarkably consistent theme is that God is teaching us something: important people in human affairs are not necessarily important to God. The world had to wait for God’s own firstborn son to be born before it could see a successful firstborn.

This also provides additional evidence for the inspiration of the Bible. If the Bible writers were not inspired, what made them all combine to produce this instructive and consistent theme? They certainly didn’t do it deliberately, because none of them draws attention to it.

Finding Bible echoes also adds interest to Bible reading, even after you have been reading the Scriptures for years. Stay alert and you might find another Bible echo, a concealed theme, buried deep in the pages of Scripture, waiting to be unearthed.

Bible echo: In the wilderness
List as many people as you can who were leaders of God’s people and spent a period of time in the wilderness.
Why do you think this happened?

A consistent theme: the Kingdom of God

One theme that runs consistently through the books of the Bible is the Kingdom of God. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible talks about a future time when there will be a worldwide kingdom on earth. It will be a time of prosperity, peace and righteousness. Here are some examples of the theme from different parts of the Bible. What do you learn about the kingdom in each passage?

- Genesis 22:15–18
- Genesis 49:10
- 2 Samuel 7:12–16
- Psalm 72
- Isaiah 2:1–4
- Isaiah 35
- Jeremiah 30:18–22
- Ezekiel 37:24–28
- Daniel 2:44
- Zephaniah 3:8–9
- Zechariah 14:9–16
- Matthew 6:10
- Matthew 19:28
- Mark 13:26–27
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18
- Revelation 11:15–19
- Revelation 22:20

Homework

1. Continue with the Bible Reading Planner. Make sure you write down your questions about anything you don't understand.
2. In Matthew 5:1 – 7:29, we find Jesus' famous "Sermon on the mount". Matthew 5:1 tells us it was spoken "on the mountain". A similar sermon is recorded in Luke 6:17–49. But Luke 6:17 says it was spoken "on a level place". Some have said this is a contradiction. How can we explain it?
3. 1 Samuel 13:19–21 explains how the Philistines planned to keep the Israelites a subject nation. How does this help explain 1 Samuel 17:48–51?
4. How many things in the following paragraph may be untrue?
Some shepherds out in the fields at night saw angels singing in the sky. They were told about a new baby and quickly went to Bethlehem to see Jesus. At about the same time, three kings followed a star across the desert to Bethlehem where they found baby Jesus in the stable.
Check the details in Luke 2:1–20 and Matthew 2:1–12.

Further reading

- *God's Truth* by Alan Hayward, especially chapters 9, 10 and 19.
- *Thine is the Kingdom* by Peter Southgate.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Session 7

Bible language and interpretation

God has revealed himself to us in the Bible and he wants us to understand his message. In this session, we will look at the great variety of language styles used in the Bible and how you can decide what is figurative and what is literal. We will also introduce some ideas and methods which will help you interpret the Bible accurately and confidently for yourself.

Different types of Bible language

The Bible is written using many different language styles. God has probably chosen to use such variety because different styles appeal to different people, and because some styles are better for conveying certain ideas than others. Some books of the Bible contain examples of different language styles within the same book. Some of the diversity found in the Bible is described below.

Laws

God gave laws to Israel via Moses when they were camped at Mt Sinai after crossing the Red Sea. Reading Israel's laws is obviously not as easy as reading stories about people and events. However, it is worth understanding what God required of Israel. Although many of the laws are no longer applicable, they do teach us what God is like and help us understand what he requires of us.

e.g., Leviticus 19:13–14

Examples: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel.

Narrative

Stories of people, events and nations are narrated in many books of the Bible. However, the Bible is not intended to be a general history, and so the events recorded are highly selective. The sections of the Bible which are narrative are usually the easiest to read. For example, the book of Esther is a wonderful story to read right through in one sitting.

e.g., Luke 2:1–7

Examples: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts.

Genealogy

The Bible records several genealogies. These are lists of names over many generations, showing lines of descent. For example, Jesus' genealogy shows he was a descendant of David. Most modern versions print genealogies in a list making it easier to follow the structure of the list.

e.g., Matthew 1:1–17

Examples: 1 Chronicles 1–9, Matthew 1, Luke 3.

Poetry

Hebrew poetry is found in many of the books of the Old Testament. Some books are written entirely in poetry. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme in the way some English poetry does. Instead, it is based on the structure of the text. A common form of poetry is **parallel (or rhyming) thoughts**.

e.g., Psalm 95:1–6

For example, Psalm 95:1–6.

1. Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
2. Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
3. For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
4. In his hand are the depths of the earth
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
5. The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
6. Come let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

Each of these verses consists of a couplet (two lines). In some verses, the couplet consists of lines which mean almost the

same thing, but expressed in different words (e.g. v1,6). Other verses have related things expressed in the two lines (e.g. v4).

Another common poetic structure is an **acrostic poem**. This is a poem based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in Psalm 145 each of the verses consists of one couplet, and the couplets begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (v13 contains two couplets). Psalm 119 consists of 22 stanzas, each consisting of 8 couplets; the couplets within each stanza begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

A stanza is a section of a poem.

It is helpful to understand something of the poetic structure as it makes a difference to how we interpret poetry. It is also important to recognise when the Bible is using poetry, because the sort of language used in poetry is often figurative. For example, Psalm 91:4 speaks of God having wings and feathers, meaning he will protect us as a bird protects her young.

Most modern versions of the Bible print poetry showing its structure in verses, stanzas, etc. This makes it easy to decide if a passage is poetic or not.

Examples: Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

Acrostic Poems

Acrostic poems are based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example:

Psalm 145: Each verse contains one couplet, and the couplets begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (v13 contains two couplets). Here are the first five verses from Knox's translation where he has tried to show the acrostic structure in English.

And shall I not extol thee, my God, my king;
 shall I not bless thy name for ever and for evermore?

Blessing shall be thine, day after day;
 for ever and for evermore praised be thy name.

Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty,
 any thought set limits to his greatness?

Down the ages the story of thy deeds is told,
 thy power is ever acclaimed;

Each magnifies thy unapproachable glory,
 makes known thy wonders.

Psalm 119: 22 stanzas, each consisting of 8 couplets; the couplets within each stanza begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is a collection of proverbs about many aspects of daily living. In general, they have not been arranged in any particular order.

e.g., Proverbs 17:1–5

Prophecy

A large part of the Bible is prophecy. In fact, almost every book of the Bible contains some prophecy. Much of this is written as poetry. Usually, a prophecy was of immediate relevance to the people to whom it was first given. So when we read prophecy, it is important to ask “how would the original readers have understood this?” Placing prophecies in their context prevents the common mistake of looking for modern ‘fulfilments’ in prophecies which were never intended.

e.g., Jeremiah 30:1–3;
Isaiah 11:1–5

However, many prophecies have two fulfilments. They had an initial fulfilment shortly after they were given, and they have a longer-term fulfilment. For example, Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote at the time the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, and predicted that the Jews would return to their own land of Israel. This was fulfilled when the Jews did return to Israel at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, they were later scattered throughout the world, and the prophecy was fulfilled a second time when the Jews returned to Israel to establish the modern nation of Israel in 1948.

See Session 5 for more details of these prophecies.

The biblical prophets did not only foretell the future. The word translated “prophecy” can also mean proclaim. The prophets were God’s spokesmen and they proclaimed his message to the people as well as predicting the future.

When studying prophecy...

Ask the following questions:

1. How would the original readers have understood this?
2. Was it fulfilled shortly after being given?
3. What evidence is there that it is to be fulfilled in the future?

Apocalyptic prophecy

Apocalyptic prophecy is a particular style of prophecy which is highly symbolic. It often involves strange animals representing nations or organisations.

e.g., Revelation 17

Examples: Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation.

Letters

The New Testament contains a number of letters written by the apostle Paul and others. Some of the letters are to churches and other groups of people, and some are to individuals. When reading a letter, it is worth remembering that often the letter is a reply to a previous letter. It is rather like listening to one side of a telephone conversation! Because the letters were written to a specific group of people and often deal with specific problems, it is sometimes helpful to look at who the people were and what problems are addressed in the letter. The letters have been preserved because they have something to teach us about dealing with our difficulties.

Titus 1:1–5

The biblical letters follow the standard format for ancient letters. Many thousands of letters have been uncovered from the time of the New Testament and they generally follow the same structure:

1. Name of writer
2. Name of recipient
3. Greeting
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving (not always included)
5. Body of letter
6. Final greeting and farewell.

Paul's letters to churches:

Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians,
Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians

Paul's letters to individuals:

1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Other letters:

Hebrews, James, 1&2 Peter, 1,2&3 John, Jude

When studying letters . . .

1. Find out about the recipients
(e.g. use a Bible dictionary)
2. Read the whole letter through in one sitting
(use a modern version)
3. Make notes about
 - recipients
 - writer's attitudes
 - purpose of the letter
 - letter's natural divisions

Literal and figurative language

How do you decide if a given part of the Bible is literal or figurative? The Bible does contain some figurative language, but most of it can be understood literally. It can be adopted as a general rule for the Bible, as for any book, that it should be taken literally unless there is a direct statement or very strong indirect evidence that it is figurative.

For example, whenever Jesus described a story he told as a “parable” or said “The . . . is like . . .”, it is clearly literal.

e.g., Matthew 13:33

In other places the use of symbols is clear. For example, Isaiah 11:1 says “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse”. Now Jesse was the father of King David. Describing Jesse as a stump is an obvious metaphor. The verse is a reference to a descendant of Jesse. The rest of the chapter makes it clear that it is referring to Jesus Christ, who was descended from King David.

The general principle is that the Bible should be understood literally unless there is a good reason not to.

Literal or Figurative?

Are the following passages figurative or literal? How can you tell?

Exodus 14:21–22 Zechariah 13:1 Zechariah 14:2
 Matthew 5:13 Revelation 20:14

The Bible interprets itself

The key to easier understanding of the Bible is found within its own pages. Our tendency is to not look far enough for answers within the book when we encounter something we do not understand. A basic principle in reading the Bible more effectively lies in this simple fact:

Your questions about what the Bible teaches are answered in the Bible.

Answers are found near and far. Look in the same chapter or surrounding chapters:

- Jesus' explanation of the parable of the Sower
Matthew 13:3–8 compare Matthew 13:18–23
(note they are not adjacent)
- Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the image
Daniel 2:31–45

Sometimes it is helpful to look in other books of the Bible too (especially New vs Old Testament).

- How long was Moses in Midian?
Exodus 2:15; 3:1–4 compare Acts 7:30–31

Finding answers

DO

- Look first to the Bible for answers to questions
- Read all of the Bible to find answers to your questions
- Write down your question (it may be a while before you get an answer)

DON'T

- Expect quick answers
- Look at isolated passages and draw conclusions

Basic principles for interpreting the Bible

1. Study every passage within its literary context. Literary context includes both a text's immediate setting (the verses around it) and its relationship to the entire book. This also involves noting what language style is being used in the passage.
2. Recognise that the social, historical, and cultural environment of a biblical passage differs from that of today, and then try to understand a passage in light of those differences.
3. Translations often reflect the translator's beliefs. Therefore, when studying a passage, compare several versions to try and discover the most likely meaning of a word or phrase.
4. Interpret any single passage consistently with what the author has written elsewhere.
5. Interpret the Bible as a whole. That is, interpret the Bible consistently with the entire message of the Bible.

Should women teach in church?

Use the above rules to interpret 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.

- Is your interpretation consistent with these other writings of Paul? 1 Corinthians 11:1–5; Titus 2:3–4; Galatians 3:28.
- Is your interpretation consistent with first century practice described in Acts 18:24–26?

Why so many interpretations?

Many people are bothered by the fact that the Christian churches do not seem to be able to agree on what the Bible says. While all Christian churches agree on some things, they do differ substantially in other areas.

The different interpretations of Bible passages are often caused by one or more of the following reasons.

Different emphasis placed on church authority

Some people believe the church has God-given authority to determine Bible teaching. For example, the Roman Catholic church claims to have this authority. Others believe no church has the authority to decide what is truth.

Different attitudes to the Bible text

Some people believe the Bible is completely inspired and authoritative. Other people think that the Bible contains some errors, or that Bible teaching reflects thinking that is no longer appropriate today.

Some people seek to make Christianity more popular

People seeking to make Christianity more popular will often emphasise some Bible teachings and not others. Eventually, some Bible passages can be re-interpreted to fit in with popular thinking or culture. Other people believe you should accept Bible teaching regardless of its popularity or convenience.

Some people seek Bible support for preconceived ideas

It is difficult for anyone to read the Bible with a completely open mind, as we all come to it with some existing beliefs. But if you read the Bible looking for support for your existing beliefs, you are unlikely to make much progress in understanding the Bible better. You are also more likely to misinterpret it.

We suggest that the Bible alone should be used to determine what is true. If your church doesn't teach what is in the Bible, then find another church!

Example: Baptism

The Bible clearly teaches that baptism (i.e., immersion) is essential for salvation. For example,

- Mark 16:15–16
- Acts 2:38,41
- Galatians 3:26–27

Many churches teach that infant sprinkling is better, despite the fact that there are no Bible passages to support it. A few church leaders will admit that this practice is not Bible-based.

“The practice of immersion, apostolic and primitive as it was . . . was peculiarly unsuitable to the taste, the convenience and the feelings of the north and west . . . Not by any decree of Council . . . but by the general sentiment of Christian liberty, this great change [to infant sprinkling] was effected. . . It is a striking example of the triumph of common sense over the bondage of form and custom.”

Arthur Stanley, 1879
Dean of Westminster Abbey

Why the Bible is difficult to read

If you find the Bible difficult to read, it’s probably because it *is* difficult to read! Once we accept this fact and realise that God has a purpose for it, then frustration turns to challenge. Millions of people work on crossword puzzles. So why not spend a few minutes unlocking small puzzles of Scripture?

After all, God wrote the book, and he has told us:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways
higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your
thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

In fact, God has given us a Bible which contains some things which are clear on first reading, and some things which he has deliberately made difficult.

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings. (Proverbs 25:2)

Why did Jesus speak in parables?

The disciples posed this question to him in Matthew 13:10. His answer reveals that it is a separation process.

“The knowledge of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.” (Matthew 13:11)

In other words, by speaking in parables he was sifting out the people who were not willing to search out their meaning. (If you wonder if this is fair, consider Paul’s comment in Romans 9:18–21.)

How does one gain understanding?

1. **By application of time and energy.**

Understanding the Bible takes effort. You’ll get far more out of your Bible reading if you put some time and energy into it.

2 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 5:11–14.

2. **Slowly!**

God never revealed anything all at once and has always taught a sure slow effective method of achieving a task. You cannot speed-read the Bible.

Hebrews 1:1; Psalm 119:99.

3. **With faith.**

We must ask God through prayer to help us understand. Understanding is assured if we believe and are patient.

Matthew 7:7–8; James 1:5–6.

Homework

1. Continue with the Bible Reading Planner. Make sure you write down your questions about anything you don't understand.

2. Read Isaiah 40:27–31.
 - (a) What is the passage teaching us?

 - (b) All but one verse consists of one or more poetic couplets. Which verse is different?

3. Read Ecclesiastes 12:1–8.
 - (a) What shows the passage is an allegory?

 - (b) What is it about?

 - (c) Interpret each of the symbols.

Further reading

➤ *Exploring the Bible* by Harry Whittaker.

➤ *Exploring Bible Language* by Alan and Margaret Fowler.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.

Session 8

Bible study tools

In this section we introduce a number of Bible study tools which are available to help us read and understand the Bible. These range from simple tools like Bible dictionaries to more complicated tools such as concordances and computer software.

Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias

Dictionaries of the Bible give information about a wide range of Bible subjects arranged alphabetically. Suppose you just read about King Darius in Daniel and you want to know more about him. A Bible dictionary will have an entry about Darius including the verses you have just read and other Bible references. It will probably introduce information from history and archaeology as well.

A Bible encyclopedia is similar except it usually has more detailed articles about more subjects and is published in several volumes.

Remember that dictionaries and encyclopedias are the work of uninspired men and women commenting about inspired Bible passages. Such reference books are very useful, but they should always be used carefully. Check what they suggest for yourself, from the Scriptures.

Recommended dictionaries and encyclopedias

- *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, by Trent C Butler.
- *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. Howard Marshall.
- *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 volumes), ed. David Freedman.
- *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 volumes), ed. Geoffrey Bromiley.

Case study: 1 Kings 15:9–14

Use a Bible dictionary, footnotes and/or cross-references to answer the following questions.

1. What was an Asherah pole?
2. Where was the Kidron Valley?
3. What were “high places”?
4. What other Bible passages record the reign of Asa?
5. What lessons are there for us in this passage?

Commentaries

A commentary is a book which follows the Bible order exactly, and adds comments on the interpretation of the text, historical details, etc., as it proceeds. Commentaries are certainly helpful in finding out how other people have understood the Bible. There are many commentaries available on the Bible from single books to large multi-volume sets.

When a passage is unclear, a good practice is to first look up the associated cross-references. If that does not help, then it is sometimes useful to consult a commentary to see how other Bible readers have interpreted the passage.

Example: Matthew 11:28–30

Jesus said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

From the Bible Background Commentary:

When a man carried a yoke he would carry it on his shoulders (cf., e.g., Jer 27:2); Judaism applied this image of subjection to obedience. Jewish people spoke of carrying the yoke of God’s law and the yoke of his kingdom, which one accepted by acknowledging that God was one and by keeping his commandments. Matthew intends Jesus’ words about rest as a contrast with Pharisaic Sabbath rules.

From the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries:

The yoke was sometimes in the Old Testament a symbol of oppression (Isa. 9:4; 58:6; Jer. 27–28), but was also used in a good sense of the service of God (Jer. 2:20; Lam. 3:27). Later it came to be used commonly in Jewish writings for obedience to the law—the ‘yoke of the law’ is one every Jew should be proud to carry. Such a yoke should not be oppressive, for after all the function of a yoke is to make a burden easier to carry. But ... the law itself had become a burden, and a new yoke was needed to lighten the load. Jesus’ yoke is *easy*, not because it makes lighter demands, but because it represents entering a disciple-relationship with one who is *gentle and lowly in heart*... This attractive aspect of Jesus is a vital counterbalance to the sterner side seen in Matthew 7:13–27; 10:34–39; etc. To emphasise either to the exclusion of the other is to miss the real Jesus.

Recommended commentaries

- *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, by John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas.
- *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, by Craig S Keener.
- *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, by Kenneth Barker and John R Kohlenberger.
- *Daily Study Bible, New Testament* (17 volumes), by William Barclay.
- *Tyndale Commentaries* (47 volumes).

Concordances

A concordance is simply an alphabetic list of all the different words that occur in a book and where they are to be found. For many years, Bible students have used Bible concordances. These large books are invaluable for serious study. With an exhaustive concordance to the Bible version you read, it is possible to locate any verse in the Bible provided you can remember at least one key word of the verse.

They are also useful in performing word studies. For example, if you are studying Abraham, a concordance will help you find all the passages in the Bible where Abraham is mentioned.

Recommended concordances

For the KJV:

- *Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, by James Strong, John R Kohlenberger and James A Swanson.
- *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* by Robert Young.

For the NIV:

- *NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, by Edward W Goodrick and John R Kohlenberger.

The most useful concordances are “exhaustive”. That is, they contain *every* word in the Bible. Non-exhaustive concordances contain a selection of the most important words. Some Bibles contain a limited concordance as an appendix.

Concordance exercises

1. Find references to God as a “Rock” in the Psalms.
2. Where is the quotation “they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not grow faint”?
3. Find references to the “Son of Man” in the gospels.

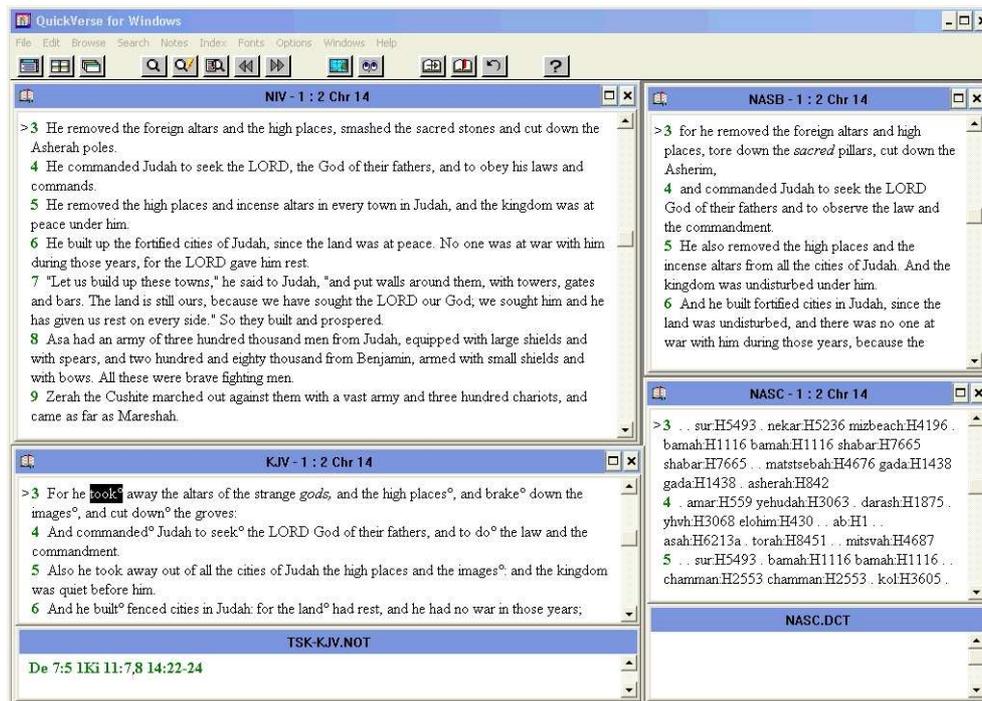
Computer Bibles

There are many software packages which include the text of the entire Bible, often in several different versions. They also enable fast searching for words or phrases. For example, the concordance exercise above asked you to find occurrences of the phrase “Son of Man”. This is difficult using a printed concordance but very easy using a computer concordance because it allows searching for the whole phrase rather than individual words.

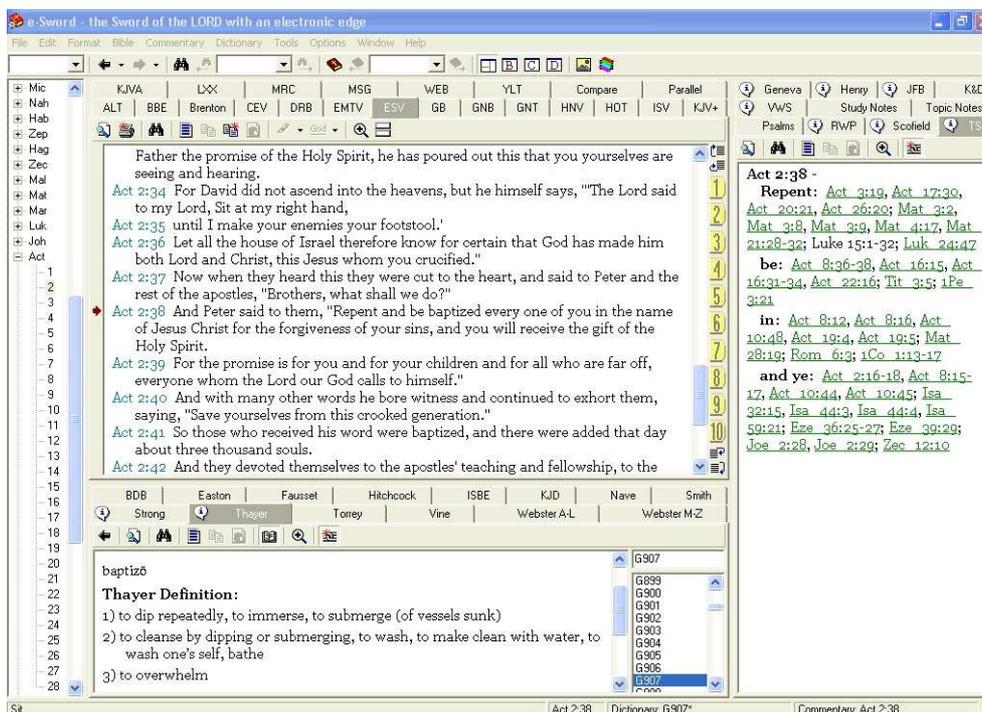
Some computer Bibles also contain lexicons and it is possible to find where the underlying Greek and Hebrew words have been used even when they have been translated differently in different places.

The larger Bible software packages include other Bible study tools such as Bible dictionaries, atlases and commentaries which are all linked together.

A Bible lexicon is an extended dictionary of the Greek words used in the New Testament or the Hebrew words used in the Old Testament.



Screenshot of Quickverse, a commercial Bible software package. The same passage is shown in several different versions.



Screenshot of E-sword, a freeware Bible software package. The dictionary in the bottom panel shows the meaning of the Greek word. The panel at the side shows some other relevant cross-references.

Web resources

The following web sites contain useful materials to assist with Bible reading and study.

- <http://www.biblegateway.com/>
Lots of Bible versions in lots of different languages.
- <http://www.e-sword.net/>
Download the e-sword software including many different Bible versions, dictionaries, etc.
- <http://www.bible.org/netbible/>
The New English Translation of the Bible including many helpful translation notes. You can also download a copy for your own computer.
- <http://www.reference-guides.com/isbe/>
The on-line International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
- <http://www.thechristadelphians.org/btcd/>
Bible Truth CD. Lots of useful tools and information.
- http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/links.htm
A large collection of useful links to Bible resources on the web.

Homework

1. Continue with the Bible Reading Planner. Make sure you write down your questions about anything you don't understand.
2. Try and find all the verses that refer to baptism in the book of Acts. (Hint: there are 23). You will probably need to use a concordance and/or cross-references.
3. Summarise what these baptisms have in common.

Further reading

- *Exploring the Bible* by Harry Whittaker.
- *How to study the Bible for yourself* by Tim Lahaye.

Ask the presenter if you wish to borrow a copy of either of these books.