

Understanding the Bible

God gave all the books that make up the Bible to assist us to become mature Christians – disciples who are able to both understand and to apply the Word to our own lives, and to teach others to do the same (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Ephesians 4:11-12).

The Bible is the most widely printed and read book ever written, and there are numerous translations of it, and even more interpretations and views on what it actually means, so how can we really understand what it says, and how we are supposed to apply it to our lives?

We need to understand what the Bible really says – otherwise we can get into a whole lot of trouble trying to understand and apply what we are reading. The best method I know of is the 'literal historical' approach. What does a passage actually say – the literal meaning? Next who wrote it, to whom, and for what purpose, and in what context and under what covenant? When reading any passage we need to keep each of these factors in mind

The first step is to determine what the words actually say, and the next to whom was it originally written, and for what purpose. What does a scripture or a passage actually mean? Any passage must be taken to mean what the author intended it to mean – and specifically to its original audience. This leads us to the next question of what was the context? – to whom it was written – who were the intended audience - and for what purpose, and lastly how, if at all, would that historical meaning apply to us today.

Much of the Old Testament, in particular, contains narrative literature. Any passage therefore needs to first be interpreted in its historical context and then a possible application can be drawn from the characters and events.

To decide what a passage actually says, take a modern, recognised translation, such as the New Living Translation (NLT) and see what it says in plain English, and if in any doubt, use a translation that includes the Strong's Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. Next look at the context: to whom was it addressed, for what purpose, and under what covenant, if applicable.

After this we need to consider if the passage is descriptive, i.e. a historical record that is simply informative; or is it prescriptive; i.e. is God telling us that we should all follow the example given in the passage and do the same? Was it addressed to a particular person or group at a particular time, or can we apply it to our lives as well?

The Bible contains different types of literature - history, law, poetry, songs, wisdom literature, prophecy, personal letters, and apocalyptic literature. Recognizing the fact that the Bible contains these different genres is key in avoiding confusion and misunderstanding. So too we need to appreciate that God entered into several covenants with specific people or groups of people, and hence to understand that the terms of each covenant apply specifically to the relevant person or group, and cannot simply be adopted by anyone else as also applicable to them. As Christians – all who have committed their lives to obeying Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, we are under the New Covenant, and not the Old Covenant (of Moses) – we never were, as this covenant was only for the Israelites.

Many different types of figures of speech are used in the Bible. These are used to illustrate or emphasize a point that is being made. Though the Bible should be understood literally whenever possible, there are many occasions when figures of speech are used. Here are some of the more common types.

Simile: These can be recognised by the use of "as" or "like".

Psalm 92:10 *But you have made me as strong as a wild ox. You have anointed me with the finest oil.*

1 Peter 2:25 *Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls.*

Metaphor: Where a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.

Matthew 11-12 *Why can't you understand that I'm not talking about bread? So again I say, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'* Then at last they understood that he wasn't speaking about the yeast in bread, but about the deceptive teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Parable: A story to illustrate a point, often used as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning – such as the parable of the prodigal son. See e.g. Mark 4:2-20 where a farmer planted seed, some of which fell on the footpath, on shallow soil, among thorns, and others on fertile grounds.

Personification: Presenting non-human things as human.

1 Corinthians 12:15-16 *If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body...*

Sarcasm: When the opposite is said to what is really meant.

Amos 4:4 *"Go ahead and offer sacrifices to the idols at Bethel. Keep on disobeying at Gilgal. Offer sacrifices each morning, and bring your tithes every three days."*

Allegory: A story (or fable) in which ideas are symbolized as people - a way of explaining spiritual matters in easily understood terms.

Galatians 4:24 *These two women serve as an illustration (KJV 'allegory') of God's two covenants. The first woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai where people received the law that enslaved them.*

Hyperbole: An obvious exaggeration of anything in order to make a point.

Mat 5:29 *So if your eye - even your good eye - causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*

The Old Testament

The 39 books in the Old Testament can be divided according to their content, historical period, or purpose for which they were written.

Content

Jesus summarised the Old Testament as consisting of three parts in His statement referring to the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Luke 24:44 *Then he said, "When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled."*

The Law: The first 5 books of Law were known as the 'Torah' by the Jews, and are also known by the Greek word 'Pentateuch'.

Historical Periods: 12 books in the Old Testament record the history of the Jewish nation up to around 440 B.C. with the rebuilding of Jerusalem under the direction of Nehemiah.

Purpose: Each Old Testament book was written with a general purpose: The Law, History, Wisdom Literature, and the Prophets – the 5 major prophets and the 12 minor prophets. The NLT Bible provides a good summary as a preface to each book – this is very useful.

The New Testament

The New Testament can be divided into: The 4 Gospels (the life of Jesus), the History of the Early Church (Acts), the Letters to the Churches (the Epistles), and Prophecy, (Revelation).

The New Testament introduced the New Covenant, which superseded the Old Covenant.

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