# Keys to understanding the Bible

The Bible is not what most of us would expect a religious book or a sacred text to be.

In the first place, it is more a library than a single volume. Inside its covers are histories, stories, laws, prayers, poems, letters, visions, prophecies, and other kinds of writing. These are not the work of a single author, but of a range of human authors writing in more than one continent, living in more than one millennium, and speaking more than one language.

So this ‘message from God’ is different from that which some other religions believe they have.

Most of the Bible does not claim to have been ‘dictated’ by God. It is not always God speaking to people. It can be people speaking to God, as in the Psalms. Or it can be people speaking to people, as in the New Testament letters written by Paul.

**God speaks through people**

Throughout the Bible God speaks through people. This means that understanding people can help us to understand the Bible. If, for example, you know what it is like to be in pain, to be angry, to be depressed, to be joyful, to love, or to worship, you will understand and empathize with many of the psalms. If you can put yourself in the shoes of a church leader fretting about a congregation, or of a church member being taken to task by the pastor, that will contribute to your understanding of the New Testament letters, written to the early churches.

**What kind of book is this?**

To understand a particular Bible book, we also need to discover what kind of material we are reading. If we receive four items of mail in the morning, we will read each one in the light of what it is – for instance, an advertising promotion, a bill, a love letter, or a prayer letter. If the mail comes to us from within our own culture, we know instinctively how to read it. If it comes from another culture, we are more likely to misunderstand. We may actually believe the promotional brochure when it says ‘this is a special offer just for you personally’! The Bible books all come from cultures different from our own, so how do we go about understanding them?

Different guidelines apply to different kinds of writing, but more than half the Bible is history or story, so that is where we begin.

**The nature of Bible history**

We need to keep three things in mind if we are to understand the Bible’s books of history and story. First, most of them have an. interest in facts. This makes them more like history than fiction.

The Christian faith is fundamentally a ‘gospel’—a ‘good news’ message from God. It tells people, through story of Israel and the accounts of the life of Jesus, what God has done for them, in the conviction that these things are decisive for the way they relate to God. If God never did anything for Israel or in Jesus, there is no gospel. So facts matter in understanding the Bible.

But we must not impose on the Bible our own expectations about its historical nature. Biblical history is a divinely-inspired combination of facts and literary creativity.

The fact that the Bible story links with the nature of the Christian faith as a ‘gospel’ has another implication. People are often tempted to read the Bible story primarily for examples of how to live their lives. But if the Bible’s story had been designed simply to inspire us in this way, it would have been a different kind of story. The characters in the Bible seem as often to be showing us how not to be people of God as modeling how to live faithful and committed lives.

That in itself reflects the fact that the Bible story is more about what God has done with people than about what people have done. Events come about despite them as often as through them. So in reading the Bible story, a question we have in the front of our minds is, ‘What is God doing here, and how, and why?’

A second feature of a Bible story, like any story, is that it is written for an audience. We do not always know who the audience was. but often we do, and this can help our understanding. For instance, Samuel/Kings and Chronicles give us two versions of the story of Israel in the period of the kings. They are different versions of the same story, because they are designed for audiences in different situations:

\*Israel under God’s punishment after the fall of Jerusalem

\*and Israel a century later, when God has in some measure restored them.

These two communities needed to have different insights brought home to them. If we understand who the book was written for, we will appreciate why the story is told the way it is and understand more of what it is designed to convey.

A third feature of a Bible story is that it is a story, with all the characteristics that make for a good story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a *plot,* with twists and turns (take the Joseph story, or Jesus’story, for example). It has *characters:* some rounded characters as complex as we know ourselves and those close to us to be, and other flatter characters we do not get to know as well (the Ruth story, for example). It has a *theme* (Judges, for example, is about the interwovenness of sex and violence). An interesting story will have more than one theme: Jonah is about how not to be a prophet, and also about how God cares for the Gentiles, and maybe about how God invites Israel to repentance).

So it needs appreciating and understanding as a story. That implies a number of things:  
\*A story needs to be read as wlole, not only in small episides, as often happens in church services and daily Bible-reading schemes.

\*We need to allow ourselves to be drawn into the story; interpreting the Bible requires us to exercise our imagination.

This does not mean we read read things into the story, though we all do that unconsciously. Sometimes this does not matter; the story even invite us to do so. After all, a storyteller does not (cannot) tell us everything, and knows that we learn by making the story our own. But it is important not to read alien meanings into the story. Reading in the company of other people is a safeguard against this, as well as being a positive help in other ways. When we read the Bible with a group of people and discuss it with them, we are nearer to what its writers would have had mind, for the practice of silent reading and study by individuals is a rather modern one.

**Dos and Don’ts**

Inside the big Old and New Testament stories are substantial sections of instructions about how to live.

Neither the Old Testament nor the New is interested in mindless obedience, so we need to understand the reasons for these instructions. In fact the Bible often gives them, though they are some­times taken for granted or only half-explained because they would be readily understood in the culture they come from (for instance, the reason why Old Testament Israelites should not cook a kid goat in its mother’s milk, or why women at Corinth in the New Testament should have their heads covered in church).

We need to work at under­standing the issues behind God’s instructions, in order to see how we can take the equivalent action in our own context. We can ask, for example, what these instructions were meant to achieve. What situation did they presuppose? What problem were they seeking to solve, or what danger were they trying to avert? What theological and moral convictions underlay them? We can then try to work out whether there are equivalent problems and dangers that we nn to address in equivalent ways.

In ancient Israel, for instance, people had to build a wall round the (flat) roof of their houses to stop people falling off. In parts of some large cities today, speed retarders might be a comparable way of protecting people’s lives.

Another sort of question arises out of the varying standards of the instructions in different parts of the Bible. Some seem very liberating for women and slaves, for instance; others seem to accept their oppression. Here we can see God’s ideals confronting real situations in a practical way.

Jesus, in speaking about marriage and divorce, talked of a tension between what God wanted at the creation and what Moses allowed for because of people’s stubbornness (Mark 10). The point he makes about this particular issue can be applied more widely. The question then is, what is the nearest we can get to God’s ideal while allowing for the fact of human stubbornness in *this* context with regard to *this* question?

**Looking at the context**

We have looked at the Bible’s stories and instructions. Bui in addition to these we have the Prophets in the Old Testament and the Letters in the New. These, even more than the other books, need to bee understood in terms of their historical context. The opening verses of a prophecy or a letter commonly makes that point, by telling us about the context.

So we need to discover what we can about (say) life in Judah in the eighth century BC, or life in Ephesus in the 1st century AD, if we are to understand prophecies and letters written to communities there. The prophets’ introductions remind us that they are not talking about Middle Eastern events in our own day. They *are* still relevant to the present day, but we will discover how by looking to see how God was speaking through the prophets to their immediate audiences.

**Askng questions: hearing God speak**

From what we have said about the Prophets and the Letters, it is clearly appropriate for us to ask questions. We are thus involved in ‘biblical criticism,’ but asking questions does not have to mean being critical of the Bible or imposing human evaluations upon it. Asking questions means taking nothing for granted - seeking to understand the Bible on its own terms and allowing it to say what it wants to say.

When we do that, we find that, we find that it speaks to us. It is itself, to use the phrase Christians so often use, the word ofGod’. There are two key implications of that.

\*We find that God says amazing things. God, after all, is amazing, so when God speaks, God is never boring. God constantly surprises and astonishes us. Those who want to understand the Bible must be prepared to be astonished, mind-blown, offended, puzzled, and ultimately turned upside down in the way they look at the world.

\*God’s word is effective. When God speaks, things *happen.* At God’s word (in Genesis 1) the world gets created! When people read the Bible, things happen, too. They see themselves in new ways, they find themselves forgiven and healed, and they are driven to go and do new things.