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## How to Read the Bible and How Not To

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The Bible is a collection of 66 books written over a period of about 1500 years by many different authors. These authors represent many different cultural points of view, and often people with seriously conflicting beliefs will claim support from the Bible for their ideas.

People who follow Jesus claim that the Bible is one unified book, and its chief purpose is to introduce Jesus. Whether or not the reader finds a common theme in the Bible depends upon the approach a person uses to read the Bible. Following are some of the principle ways people have used to understand the Bible. Some are more effective than others. It will be helpful for you to know a few different approaches before you begin.

### Religion

The Bible is not a book about religion. This is true despite the fact that millions of people find it of religious value. The Bible does present a religious point of view based on monotheism, but religious practice is not its principle concern. More fundamentally the Bible answers two questions raised in the first three chapters of Genesis. Genesis chapter 1-2 asked, "What does it mean to be human?" Genesis chapter three asks, "Why is there such evil and suffering in the world?" The rest of Genesis demonstrates the effects of evil upon humanity, and shows that God is doing something about it. All the other books of the Bible continue to develop these two questions.

### Ethics and Law

Probably the most common error has been to approach the Bible as a book of law or ethics. There are a variety of ethics presented in the Bible, but the ethics and law of the Bible are subordinate to another question: What is the true foundation of human relationships? Books 2-5 in the Old Testament, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, present the law of God, but by very end of the Bible, (Revelation 20-22), law and ethics have been made obsolete and have disappeared from the conversation. At this point, perfect relationships exist without law or ethics. You will need to read the New Testament to see how this development occurs, paying special attention to Jesus, both his teaching and his action.

### History

To see the Bible as a book of history is better than either of the first two options. Scholarship through the 20th century has showed the Bible to be an extremely good source for historical study, but in the historical approach the reader may get lost in detail, especially when reading the politics of the Old Testament. It is important to keep in mind that all the writers do share a particular view of history, which says, God is the author of

history, and has created a destiny in history for the human race. Understanding the authors' view of history will help to make sense of the detail.

## Social Science

Some people read the Bible to discover its effects upon society. This is a good approach provided that we read it on its own terms within its own culture, and not force our social theories inappropriately. The Bible is a book of humanity. It illustrates what humanity can become by living in a close relationship with the Creator. If we impose a theory that ignores God, we miss the point of everything the Biblical writers want us to understand.

## Literature

The approach I recommend is to look at the Bible as one piece of literature, in the same way one would read a novel or watch a play. I believe this approach best allows the reader to actually find oneself in the story, and hopefully hear the voice of God as well.

The rest of this essay will provide an orientation to the structure of the Bible as a unified literary collection.

## Major Themes and Their Development

Two principal questions are raised in the first three chapters of the first book, Genesis. They are (1) What does it mean to be human? and (2) Why is there evil in the world? There are 10 major themes, which are presented symbolically in Genesis 1-3, which are important to the literary development, which follows. All of these themes appear together in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, most of them in the last 3 chapters.

Every writer deals with these two major questions and one or more of the themes. As you read, don't expect a philosophical discussion. Rather, we are given a story. Every good story has a problem to resolve. In this story the issue is this: "How can humanity be human in the face of evil?" The answer is revealed step-by-step, episode-by-episode, as different facets of the problem are uncovered, and God himself participates in the story. If you have problems accepting or understanding anything in the Bible, remember it is all part of the story, and it is important to read the whole story before making judgments about any particular part. A good story has twists and turns, ups and downs, but if you understand the first 2 books of the Old Testament (Genesis and Exodus 1-20), the 4 gospels of the New Testament, and Acts, you will have the tools to interpret the other parts, and make sense of the whole, as it all leads to a conclusion in Revelation 20-22.

## Ten Unifying Themes from Genesis to Revelation

1. Creation of Heaven and Earth  
Genesis 1:1
2. Humanity is God's Image on Earth  
Genesis 1:26-27
3. Marriage in which Two became one

- Genesis 2:24
  - 4. The Snake that Deceives  
Genesis 3
  - 5. The Unique Child of the Woman  
Genesis 3:15
  - 6. The Fiery Sword, which Separates Humanity from Paradise  
Genesis 3:24
  - 7. The River Bringing Life  
Genesis 2:10
  - 8. The Tree of Life  
Genesis 2:9
  - 9. The Creation of Light  
Genesis 1:3
  - 10. Humanity in Charge of Creation  
Genesis 1:26-28
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- 1. Creation of a new Heaven and Earth  
Revelation 21:1
  - 2. God Lives on Earth with Mankind  
Revelation 21:3
  - 3. The Marriage of the Lamb at which Heaven & Earth become One  
Revelation 19:7-9 & 21:2
  - 4. The Snake that longer Deceives  
Revelation 20:2 & 7-10
  - 5. The Unique Child of the Woman  
Revelation 12:4
  - 6. The Lake of Fire, which Separates Humanity from Paradise  
Revelation 20:15
  - 7. The River of Life  
Revelation 22:1
  - 8. The Tree of Life  
Revelation 22:2
  - 9. God is the Light  
Revelation 22:5
  - 10. The New Humanity Reigns  
Revelation 20:4

## Covenants and Promises

In a book of religion, history, law, or sociology, the main topics are arranged topically or chronologically, depending upon the structure chosen by the author. In a story this is not so. Instead, the meaning is more hidden and unfolds gradually. The more true to real life is the story, the more its depth and complexity will both attract and confound us. As we read, we are changed at a level not yet conscious. The Bible has this affect upon us because it is a story that is completely true. It is God's story about himself, and of how God feels about us.

The structure of the Bible story unfolds for us in a series of covenants (or really promises), which God makes, and then fulfills later on. An outline of these promises follows. Look for them as you read. Together they give the entire Bible a unity, which can be recognized as you progress. It is not necessary to read the entire Bible chronologically because parts of it are not arranged chronologically. However; Genesis, Exodus, the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), and Acts will give the best foundation for beginning your study.

1. The Curse upon the Snake                      Genesis 3:15

This promise of one "seed" who would destroy the serpent is a kind of indirect promise. It was spoken against the snake, but for the benefit of the woman and her descendents. Watch for its fulfillment in the gospels and the last chapters of Revelation.

2. The Noaic Covenant                              Genesis 6-9

The story begins with a world filled with chaos and violence. God decides that the inhabitants are beyond hope and destroys them all except for Noah. At the end of the story God institutes a system of government in which their fellow humans will execute murderers. In this Noaic Covenant, God promises never again to destroy life on earth with a flood, no matter how violent and chaotic things may become. Humanity will be in charge of policing itself. The historic books of Kings, Chronicles, and many of the prophet's writings from Isaiah through Malachi describe the failed attempts of humans to preserve order and justice without God. The solution to chaos and violence is revealed in the New Testament when people begin to think differently about themselves, not as men, women, slaves, owners, or members of different nations, but as one new creation to the glory of God, despite differing unique characteristics. The books of Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians in the New Testament all deal with this topic.

3. The Abrahamic Covenant                      Genesis 12:1-3

God chooses one man through whom to build a people of faith. This man, Abraham, will have a family that brings blessing to the entire world. Abraham's story gives a clear picture of how God disciplines and teaches faith to someone willing to learn. In Genesis 3 the snake asked, "Did God really say that you will die if you eat from this tree?" The snake implied that God couldn't be trusted. The Abraham story answers that question. Yes, God can be trusted. Later as Abraham's family grows into a clan, and from a clan into a nation, the same lesson is continually reinforced. God keeps his promises. People who follow Jesus understand Jesus to be the ultimate blessing which God promised for all the nations in Genesis 12:1-3.

4. The Mosaic Covenant                              Exodus 19, 20, 24:1-7

The Mosaic Covenant was the only Covenant, which was conditional upon two parties keeping mutual obligations. It is structured like an international treaty. In this covenant God's blessing for Israel was conditional upon the Israelite people conforming to his laws and regulations. God promised them protection, prosperity, and a place to live, if they submitted to his laws. Much of the Old Testament discusses the failure of the Israelites to fulfill their part of the agreement, and God's patience with them. This covenant was unique in that it placed demands on both sides. It did not, however, cancel the previous

covenants, which put God in obligation to first Eve and her descendents, then Noah and his descendents, and finally Abraham and his descendents.

5. The Davidic Covenant

2 Samuel 7: 1-13

King David was chosen by God to rule his country. David was a shepherd, musician, poet, and warrior, whom God appointed king. One day David realized that his own palace was far superior to the traditional tent where worship was carried out, and so he determined to build a temple for God. God sent the prophet, Nathan, with a message that said, "David, I did not ask you for a house to live in. In reality you can never build a house for me. Instead I plan to build a dynasty for you which will never end." People who follow Jesus believe that Jesus is the Son of David whose dynasty will never end, and his resurrection from the dead confirms him to be the eternal ruler. The book of Revelation describes Jesus as the conqueror of all evil, and eternal ruler of the universe.

6. The New Covenant

Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24,  
Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Jesus said that the bread and wine of the Passover Meal will be the sign of a new covenant in his blood. By this he means that his death is the sacrifice, which reconciles humanity with God. To understand fully what Jesus had in mind you should read the following background material from the Old Testament:

Exodus 1-20, but especially Exodus 12:1-14, 29-36, and 43-50.  
Also read Jeremiah 31:31-34

With these pieces of structure in place, along with the 10 main themes introduced in Genesis 1-3, you will have a sense of the unity of the entire Bible, and be able to read any of it with a good sense of the whole. Hopefully as you read, you will also find yourself in the story of creation, discover faith to receive God's forgiveness, and live in daily awareness of his grace to you.