

Intro to the Bible

Literary outlines:

The Old Testament: Scriptures revered by the Jews and Christians, written in Hebrew over numerous centuries. The Old Testament contains three kinds of writings: the Torah (the most sacred scriptures for Jews, also called the “Law”), the Prophets, and the Writings. These last two categories are loosely defined terms, more for convenience than strict labels. “Writings” include history, poetry and wisdom literature.

Old Testament:

- Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (the first five books)
- Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the 12 “minor” prophets
- Writings:
 - History: Joshua, Judges, Chronicles, Kings, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah
 - Poetry: Psalms, Lamentations, Song of Songs
 - Wisdom: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Job,

The New Testament: scriptures revered by Christians, written in Greek by the early followers of Jesus. The New Testament books can be grouped as Gospels and Epistles, with the Acts of the Apostles as a “part II” of Luke, and Revelation as an apocalyptic text. Hebrews is also more of a sermon than a letter, but it is traditionally grouped with the epistles.

New Testament:

- Gospels: “according to...” Matthew, Mark, Luke John: accounts of Jesus’ life & ministry
- Acts of the Apostles: account of the Apostles (“part II” of Luke)
- Epistles: letters by Paul to various churches; Hebrews (a sermon) and other letters.
- Revelation: apocalyptic literature: prophecy in vivid visionary form about God’s victory.

Note, the “Apocrypha” is a selection of Jewish literature that is not included in the “canon” of scripture (thus it is not held with the same authority as the word of God). However, these writings were influential to the early church and are still considered important for our instruction.

Historical outlines:

OT: creation & patriarchs, EXODUS → Judges, Kings (Israel & Judah) → EXILE, return

Spans over 1000 years from patriarchs (Abraham, etc) to the return from exile. The Exodus (where God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the promised land) and the Exile (where Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its holy temple, and carried plunder and people into exile) are the two monolithic events in the Old Testament. Added to the destruction of the rebuilt Jerusalem temple by Rome in AD 70, and the Nazi Holocaust, these are the big events in Jewish history. The kingdom split after Solomon (King David’s son) into two kingdoms, north and south (Israel & Judah). Israel was destroyed by Assyria, and Judah was destroyed & exiled by Babylon, later returning under the Persian empire.

NT: Jesus & apostles & revelation.

Spans decades. Written between ~AD 40 (early letters) to ~AD 100 (Gospel according to John). The gospel accounts most certainly had oral origins and their final forms probably derived from combinations of earlier writings.

Interpretive “world-views”

“pre-critical:” So-called by the “modernists” of the enlightenment age who developed new methods of literary analysis, term “pre-critical” cast all earlier Biblical analysis (some of it rather intensely analytical) into a rather wide and disrespected basket. History of Interpretation shows that this assumption doesn’t hold. But the category stuck, so if you hear it, this is what it means.

Modernist: The rise of the renaissance, and the “enlightenment” ideas of pure reason being the road to truth, modernism relied heavily on the scientific method of testable, repeatable truths. Biblical criticism tended to propose alternatives to any supernatural references in the Bible, bringing the Bible more into line with their “Deist” view of a God who made everything, but is never involved in the affairs of creation. This gave rise to a religion that denied the divinity of Christ, preferring to cast Jesus as a great teacher. This fit the “social gospel” that held a completely optimistic view of human nature and the ability of humanity to build for itself the Kingdom of God through social and political reform.

This view survives, but its foundations and zeal were shattered by the reality of human evil displayed in WWI and WWII. Theologians in the middle 20th century responded with “neo-orthodoxy” that re-captured the theological foundations of Christianity, while making use of some of the analytical insights found by the modernists (see below).

Post-Modernism: The scientific skepticism of the spiritual, and the modernist quest for certainty began to give way to a view more open to mystery, claiming that truth cannot be determined. Taken further, there is no truth, or truth is relative, or there are many “truths.” One hears such phrases as “that’s truth for you, but not truth for me—but they are both true.” Post-modernism finds and presents truth in stories or histories that convey meaning metaphorically, but they allow the content of the story itself to be extraneous. At its best, Post-modernism revives a theological approach to the Bible vs. an archeological approach, and is comfortable with mystery and our inability to answer all the questions about God. At its worst, Post-modernism teaches that the Bible is whatever we make it to be, even to Orwellian extremes of “double-speak,” where one can preach the exact opposite of a Biblical passage and call such teaching Biblical.

“Critical realism:” There is no consensus world view replacing Post-modernism, though some have tried to coin various phrases or describe alternatives to both modern and post-modern thinking. One such term used by Sewanee Seminary is “Critical Realism” (this isn’t a commonly used term, but it works as an example of a growing reaction to post-modernism). Critical realism notes the excesses of post-modernism, and concedes that truth can be known, at least to a useful extent, or otherwise our language and education would be meaningless. However, there is still mystery that science and reason may not be able to adequately describe. Thus while the modernist skeptic sees Genesis as a quaint story meaningless for today, and while the fundamentalist regards Genesis as a science text (in itself, a modernist approach), and while the post-modernist makes out of Genesis whatever one wishes to hear, a “critical realist” would listen for the theological truths that Genesis teaches. This category is ill-defined, but there are many thinkers, scholars and theologians who reject modernism’s stark absence of spirituality while also rejecting post-modernism’s avoidance of truth claims. We can make claims about God and humanity and the world, and those claims ought not be limited to only what the scientific method demonstrates. God and God’s activity in the world is real, AND we can still learn a lot by asking tough questions.

How did the Bible become the Bible? –Development of the “Canon of scripture”

Jews had chosen the scriptures holy to them before the time of Christ, These are the Old Testament scriptures, written from oral histories, original writings & chronicles, and compilations by the Jewish communities that preserved them.

The New Testament Gospel accounts and letters were considered authoritative and circulated in the church all over the Roman Empire. In the mid 100s AD, some teachers began to teach theology quite different from the traditional teachings, for instance discounting the whole Old Testament, saying that the God of the OT was a separate god from the God of the NT, and denying that Jesus was human at all, but only a spirit (physical = bad, spirit = good). This “Gnosticism” was wildly different from the Christian witness and needed a clear response from the rest of the church. A significant part of the response was to determine what had always been believed and used by the church everywhere (what was “catholic”), what had apostolic authority, and what had been important for the church’s teaching to preserve in historic centers of the church. This effort brought clarity to which writings met these criteria all over the church. Much of the existing NT was used widely as a complete collection fairly early on—perhaps ~AD 130 or earlier, by evidence from other writings. In the many decades that followed, the finer points of what was included in the “canon” of scripture (there were some questions on a couple of the letters in some quarters) was refined between centers of the church in the East and West of the Roman Empire. Official designation by the church of the complete collection probably happened in the late 300s.

Analytical methods:

Textual Criticism: used especially for the New Testament to evaluate the precise wording of the original document when presented with a number of ancient copies of the same text. Sometimes these texts differ slightly, so Textual Criticism helps to point to the most likely form of the original wording.

Historical/Hermeneutical: this kind of analysis looks at the historical setting so that the text might be better understood—that is, to ask how the original listeners and readers of these texts would have understood them. For instance “The cat had no bread” might mean one thing in a pet shop, but another thing in a Harlem Jazz club.

Source Criticism: one of the original issues for modernists, this analysis of the Bible noticed that certain Biblical passages use certain vocabulary, while other passages within the same book use different vocabulary. A theory might then be suggested that the two passages came from different writers or different oral traditions which were later combined together. Genesis gets the most attention here. When one does this for Genesis, one can find parallel versions of the same story. Modernists would split the two apart and show their differences. Canonical criticism, however (see below) would notice that someone put them together, and that some of the modernist categories don’t always strictly hold to their “rules.” Canonical criticism, therefore, asks what the final form meant to those who put these traditions together, and how the different perspectives complement each other.

Form Criticism: This kind of analysis finds help in understanding a passage by noticing its literary form or genre: is it poetry, history, preaching, parable, narrative, allegory, etc. Genre can give clues to intent of how a piece of writing might be used. Poetry that suggests “God is a rock”

is more likely to be allegorical while “crucified under Pontius Pilate” would be taken as a clear historical reference rather than allegory. This can be taken too far. For instance, taking any account of a supernatural event and labeling it “fable” allows one to avoid the possibility that God might really be involved in history.

Narrative & rhetorical: These approaches look for the way language is used, especially in the context of the time in which the text was written.

Sociological: This approach looks for the interplay between communities, their social and political context, and the way this influences and is influenced by language, beliefs and theology.

Advocacy/Liberation/Feminist/Womanist: These approaches notice the emphasis in many Biblical writings on oppression of the poor, and the problem of how power influences religion and religious teaching. This approach tends to focus almost exclusively on the question of what value the text might have (or not have) in liberating any of a number of social groups (poor, minorities, women, Black women, third world peoples, etc.). At its worst, this approach asks only “what does this say about what I feel is important?” rather than asking “what does this say to me, that perhaps should be important?”

History of Interpretation: this method looks at how texts have been interpreted through the 2000 years of Christian history, looking at the influence of context and the insights to be gained by considering the text from contexts different from our own.

Canonical Criticism: This approach (see “source criticism” above) uses these critical methods, but while recognizing the theological importance of the text and its place within the Bible as a whole. Thus, instead of studying ancient religion (source & historical criticism), or finding a way to express our own views with religious language (advocacy), we might approach the Bible as an integrated theological text, listening for the voice of a living God.

These are tools and perspectives on the task known as “exegesis.” Exegesis is a fancy word that means “getting the meaning from the text—answering the question of what the text meant to those who wrote and heard it in its present form. “Eisegesis,” on the other hand, is taking meaning of our own, and putting it into the text. Eisegesis is where someone works to interpret the Bible so that his or her own opinion could be found (such as slaveholders looking for such a message). Exegesis, however, tries to avoid such mistakes, and tries to hear what the text itself says.

So What?!

Rarely does someone sit down to read the Bible trying to do all these things at the same time, or even some of these things, unless that person does it for a living. Even then, most theologians simply have these tools in the background as they just read the Bible. You don’t have to be an expert in this stuff to do so—most of these are tools of recent history. Ideally, these are just perspectives that enhance this task as one digs deeper into the text. How should one read the Bible? Prayerfully—listening for the voice of the living God, and in community with others who are doing the same (and those from Christian history who have done the same), listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through them as well.