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Introduction

When I was in seminary, a wonderful New Testament teacher tried to help us understand the nature of the Bible with a story. Imagine, he said, a team of archaeologists on a dig, patiently working to unearth a skeleton. They use all sorts of scoops and shovels, brushes and measuring devices. Finally, the skeleton is exposed, laid bare. Suddenly, however, it sits up, grabs a shovel and knocks the scientists over the head.

His point was simple: the Bible is not a dead object, lying there passively for us to study and analyze. It's alive, the living word of God, ready to smack us upside the head with judgment and grace. The Bible is, to borrow author Eugene Peterson's phrase, "The Message," the message from God, the message about God's will, ways and story. As such, it is an indispensable source of the life and faith of the church.

Sometimes modern, critical approaches to the Bible, which have given us great gifts, may also mislead. Working to study and analyze the Bible we may imagine the crucial question to be, "What do we make of the Bible?" Perhaps another, and arguably more important question is, "What does the Bible make of us?" That is, how does Scripture shape a particular view of life and of the world? How does it form our imagination? How does Scripture change us and create a particular people, the church? Instead of thinking the only question is, "What do I make of the Bible?" consider this alternative, "What does the Bible make of me and of us together?"

Yet another way to make this point is to note different meanings of the word "understand." For moderns, "understand" usually means something like figuring something out, explaining it, gaining mastery over it. For ancients "understand" meant something different. It meant "standing under." Standing beneath something that can't be fully seen or comprehended. In our view, Christians and the church are called to humbly "stand under" the Scripture, yielding to its strange, new world.

Our heritage in the United Church of Christ has been, along with other churches of the Protestant Reformation, to take the Bible with a deep seriousness. This booklet reflects that heritage and conviction.

“The Bible and the United Church of Christ” is a collection written by members of the Writer’s Group in response to requests for this kind of resource. You will find several essays on our approach to the Bible, some FAQ’s about the Bible, suggested passages to commit “to heart,” an essay on the hard parts of the Bible, and a list of some of the Bible’s most interesting and arresting stories.

We do understand that the Bible has sometimes, perhaps often, been misused. But the answer to misuse is never disuse; it is always better use. We hope that “The Bible and the United Church of Christ” will be helpful to both UCC members and others who seek better use of this crucial source of the church’s life and faith. We hope, too, that it will encourage us all to listen deeply to the Scriptures for the God who is still speaking.

Anthony B. Robinson

Chairperson, The Writer’s Group

What is the Bible?

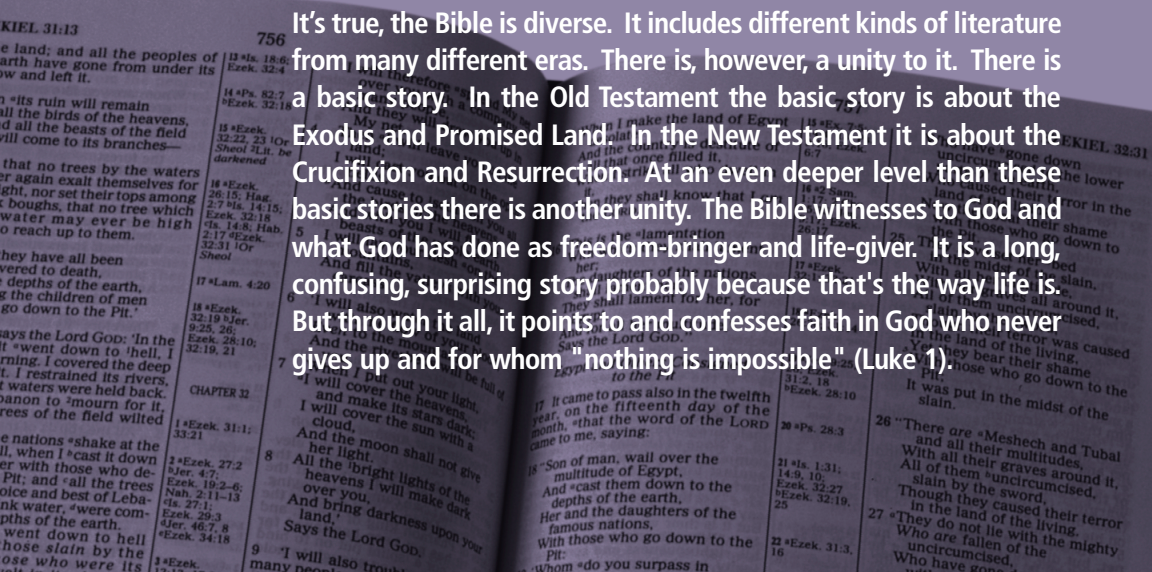
There is more than one way to answer this question! A good place to start may be to say that the Bible is a library. A literal meaning of the word "bible" is "book of books." It is 66 books for Protestants, 73 for Catholics. It divides into the 39 books of the Old Testament, which tell the story of God's dealings with Israel, and the 27 books of the New Testament, which tell the story of Jesus and the church that followed him.

To call the Bible "a library" means that there are different types of literature between its two covers. There is drama, history, law code, song, and poetry. There are gospels, parables, letters and more. Key to using the Bible is knowing what part of the library you are in or what type of literature you are hearing or reading. Even more importantly, a library is defined by its owner and their purpose. This library is the library of Israel and the church. It reminds Jews and Christians who they are and whose they are.



People say, "You can pretty much find anything in the Bible or prove anything by the Bible." Is there an overall unity?

It's true, the Bible is diverse. It includes different kinds of literature from many different eras. There is, however, a unity to it. There is a basic story. In the Old Testament the basic story is about the Exodus and Promised Land. In the New Testament it is about the Crucifixion and Resurrection. At an even deeper level than these basic stories there is another unity. The Bible witnesses to God and what God has done as freedom-bringer and life-giver. It is a long, confusing, surprising story probably because that's the way life is. But through it all, it points to and confesses faith in God who never gives up and for whom "nothing is impossible" (Luke 1).



DO WE BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE?

by Lillian Daniel

Of course, we believe in the Bible. In worship, the reading and understanding of God's holy word is the heart of what we do together. We hold scriptural phrases in our hearts that hold our lives together. These may be words we have memorized or words that sing out to our souls when we hear them for the first time. We cherish these words in Bible studies, sermons, devotionals and music.



While we believe that there are rich expressions of God's word in religions other than our own, for us as followers of Christ, the Bible is the great book, above all others. It is not a god itself, or an idol to be worshipped. It is God's word for us as Christians and we are called to take it seriously.

We take the Bible seriously but not literally. In our tradition, we take it so seriously that we take the time to study the social and historical context in which it was written. So you will hear us talk about the history of the Jewish and Christian people, as well as the work of modern scholars. We believe that God intentionally planted the word in the middle of history and culture, and therefore that background is part of the story we need to learn. We believe in the Bible so much that we think it deserves our best questions. We believe that the Bible is the opening of a conversation in which God is still speaking. We do not think the Bible will shrivel up and die because we dare to question why it says what it does. We believe that the Bible has withstood similar questions for thousands of years and that in asking the questions together, in communities of faith, over time, we are part of a life-changing conversation that will go on forever.

We believe that the Bible is God's own holy word passed down to us through fallible human beings. We can imagine that some of what is in the Bible was a product of a particular time and place and is not what God desires for this time and place. We tread carefully in these waters, using the tools of history and the gifts of the spirit to ask the still speaking God for a word for today.

We honor the word so highly that we do not take one phrase out of context and fling it around. We do not use phrases as stand-alone weapons to prove our point or to injure another person. Rather, we read the phrase as it has been nested in the text. We read the story around it.

We are not afraid to notice and point out places where scripture disagrees with itself. We know that we are not the first generation to notice these things. Those who carefully put the Bible together over the early centuries wrestled to decide which books should be included and which left out. In their wisdom, they left us a collection of holy words that offer a rich variety of descriptions of God.

These different pictures of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and our creator all stand next to one another, sometimes in tension. As mature, thinking Christians, that is a tension we can live with. More than that, we can marvel that God thought so highly of us that we were not left with a mere rule book, but rather a word of so many dimensions that it would take a lifetime to explore. And that is what we must be prepared to give to this holy word, in all its glorious complexity.

Why would we devote so much spiritual passion and intellectual energy to this one book? Because we are a people who believe in the Bible.

FIFTEEN PASSAGES TO KNOW BY HEART

by Quinn G. Caldwell

Here are fifteen short passages worth learning by heart. They don't cover everything important, but they come pretty close. And notice that we said they're worth "learning by heart," not "memorizing." The point isn't just to be able to rattle them off; the point is to know them so intimately that they're written on your heart. We promise it'll be worth the effort.

1 Deuteronomy 6:4-5: Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

2 Psalm 23:6: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

3 Micah 6:8: God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

4 Matthew 13:31-32: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

5 Matthew 28:19-20: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

6 Mark 12:28-31: (...[a scribe] asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered,) "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

7 Luke 12:34: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

8 **John 1:1-4:** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

9 **John 3:16:** For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

10 **John 14:1-2:** Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Parent's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

11 **Romans 8:38-39:** For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

12 **1 Corinthians 13:12-13:** For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

13 **Galatians 3:28:** There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

14 **Revelation 21:3-4:** I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

15 **Your favorite.** Almost everybody who's spent time with the Bible has a favorite verse or passage. Can you recite yours by heart, or do you just describe it by saying, "You know, it's the one about..."? If it's good enough to be your favorite, it's good enough to know by heart. And if you don't have a favorite, get one!

HOW WE READ THE BIBLE IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

by Martin B. Copenhaver

We read the Bible as God's word to us.

There are those who advocate reading the Bible as one would read any other book and, indeed, sometimes the Bible is approached as literature. But as a wise person observed, reading the Bible as literature is about as fruitful as reading *Moby Dick* as a whaling manual. The Bible is literature, but it is also much more than that. Literature is a way human beings communicate with one another. But we also affirm that, through the Bible, God has communicated—and continues to communicate—with us. One of the ways God is still speaking is through the Bible. So we read the Bible as if listening for what God might say to us.

We read the Bible as a book with special authority.

We vest the Bible with special authority and honor the testimony of those who have gone before us, not only those whose stories are recounted in the Bible, but also those who have handed those stories down to us. After all, they speak from within the ongoing experience of the community to which we now belong. Each generation can choose to dig its own new wells, but such wells necessarily will be rather shallow. No single generation is capable of more. But there is another option: we can dip into the deep wells that were dug long ago by many generations of the faith community.

We keep in mind what form of literature we are reading.

The Bible is not so much a book as it is a library, made up of different genres, each of which is to be read in a different way. We are used to making such distinctions when we enter other libraries. For instance, we read a history of nineteenth-century England differently from the way we read a Charles Dickens novel set in the same period. We can learn from both, but we will learn from each in different ways. The book of history may represent the facts, but a great novel deals in truths. There are books of the Bible that attempt to convey history, but not all of them. And something does not need

to be historically true to be eternally true. Each literary genre represented in the Bible—from law to legend, poetry to history—has the power to move, inform and shape us in ways that are peculiar to that genre. The Bible not only has many important things to say, but it also employs many ways of saying them.

We do not always read the Bible literally.

The great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth, famously affirmed, “I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally.” Taking the Bible seriously means receiving it as being inspired by God and as containing God’s word to the community of faith. But taking the Bible seriously also means taking into account the human influences it reflects. The Bible was not dictated by God. Nevertheless, God’s Spirit was at work in the ways in which the narrative took shape. At every point, however, God’s Spirit worked through flawed, limited human beings, so in certain respects the biblical accounts are also flawed and limited. There are historical records in the Bible, and some of them may be accurate, but others may be less accurate. There are eternal truths in the Bible and also time-bound perceptions that reflect the limits of the age in which they were written.



We read the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our study of the Bible is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual endeavor. As the Holy Spirit was at work in those who gave shape to the Bible, we seek the Spirit to be at work in our reading of it. That is, the Spirit not only helped get the words on the page, we rely on the Spirit to get the words off the page. We rely on the Spirit all the more when we attempt to derive God’s truth for our time from passages of scripture that may in some way reflect the limited perspectives of the time in which they were written.

We consider what new things the still speaking God might be saying to us through the Bible.

John Robinson, pastor of the Pilgrims, told his congregation in 1620, “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.” It can take some time for the implications of the truths revealed in the Bible to be fully realized. For instance, today we understand that slavery is wrong and irreconcilable with a Christian way of life. Yet early Christians, including the Apostle Paul, seemed to accept the practice. When Paul said that in Christ there is “no longer slave or free,” it came like a revelatory flash, but even he did not understand all the implications fully. Only hundreds of years later were the full implications of that understanding seen or lived.

We read the Bible in community.

The very word “Congregational,” part of our United Church of Christ heritage, attests to the ways in which we can best discern and follow God’s will when we are together. We do not have a single authority to tell us how to interpret the Bible. It is the church’s book. So we seek to understand the Bible, and live out its teachings, in community. We encourage our members to join a Bible study with other church members. We invite you to bring your insights and your questions and to listen receptively to what others have to offer. We do that, not just because we respect differing points of view, but because we affirm that one can never know whom the Holy Spirit will choose to speak through at any given moment.

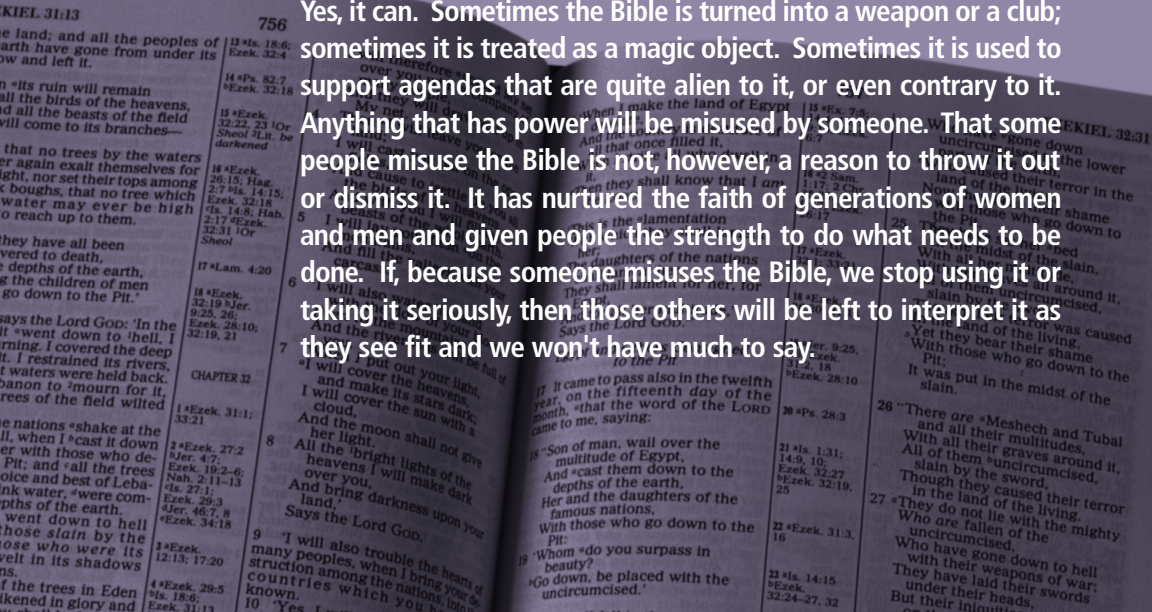
How should the Bible be read or approached?

Again, there are a lot of possible answers to this question! The Bible can be looked at as artifact from another time, as "great literature," or as moral instruction. But all such answers keep the Bible at a distance. We find it truest to the Bible's own intention to approach it as a story, God's story, and a story that intends to include us. The Bible asks as many questions as it answers. It is not a passive, dead "object" which lies there for us to analyze. It is a dialogue partner that "speaks" to us if we give it half a chance. What is the story or drama all about? God. The Bible is really the story of God's persistent and amazing campaign to get our attention, to form a people, and to bring shalom or peace.



Can the Bible be misused?

Yes, it can. Sometimes the Bible is turned into a weapon or a club; sometimes it is treated as a magic object. Sometimes it is used to support agendas that are quite alien to it, or even contrary to it. Anything that has power will be misused by someone. That some people misuse the Bible is not, however, a reason to throw it out or dismiss it. It has nurtured the faith of generations of women and men and given people the strength to do what needs to be done. If, because someone misuses the Bible, we stop using it or taking it seriously, then those others will be left to interpret it as they see fit and we won't have much to say.



TWELVE GREAT READS

by Quinn G. Caldwell

Think the Bible's boring? Think again. Well, think again about some of it, anyway. Check out these stories for amazing exploits, surprising people, Bible swear words, and general trippiness.

1

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman, Matthew 15:21-28

The Son of God gets taught a thing or two by a foreign woman full of humor, strength, and smarts.

2

The Story of Ruth and Naomi, in the Book of Ruth

Two women form their own same-sex family, for a while at least, in a world dominated by men. Don't get us wrong: they're not lesbians, just really strong women.

3

Mary's Annunciation and Song, Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

Mary meek and mild? Yeah, right. How about Mary the Revolutionary? Overthrowing governments, redistributing wealth...read the Magnificat again and see the Mother of God in a whole new light.

4

Exodus, The Book of Exodus, but especially Chapters 1 through 17:7

One of the best stories ever. Moses, Pharaoh, plagues, the parting of the sea, manna, water from the rock, and the beginnings of the people of Israel. For sheer drama, it can't be beat.

5

The Valley of Dry Bones, Ezekiel 37:1-14

"The ankle bone's connected to the, LEG bone..." Starts out creepy, with dancing skeletons; ends happy, with resurrection and the Spirit of God. Which is good news for God's people, if we can just manage to get that song out of our heads.

6

Doubting Thomas, John 20:24-29

Admit it: you'd be skeptical, too. Jesus gives Thomas exactly what he asks for, and more besides.

7

Paul and Silas Singing in Prison, Acts 16:16-40

Paul gets in trouble—again—for telling people about his faith. Angry mobs, prison hymn-sings, earthquakes, and mass conversions.

8

Balaam's Ass, Numbers 22

On the way to do an unholy deed, Balaam discovers his ass is smarter than he is. Also that God isn't down with cruelty to animals. And yes, we know that most modern translations say "donkey," but we think the old language is a lot more fun.

9

The Woman and the Dragon, Revelation 12

Who is that nice lady with the stars in her hair, anyway? And why is she fighting that dragon? If you think all that's in the Bible is straight-up history, prepare to have your mind blown. Or at least that's what the author is hoping for with this, one of the tamer stories in Revelation.

10

The Wedding at Cana, John 2:1-12

Jesus' first miracle, through which we learn that both Jesus and his mother like a party as much as the rest of us.

11

Saul on the Road to Damascus, Acts 9:1-19

Be careful who you persecute; you just might become one of them. Saul (later "Paul") gets a conversion and an eye-opening comeuppance.

12

Pentecost, Acts 2:1-42

The Holy Spirit surprises everybody, and Peter, who 'til this point has been more of a screw-up than you or I will ever be, finally gets it right.

Why do Christians read from the Bible every Sunday and not from other great literature or the writings of other religions?

The Bible, as mentioned earlier, is the library of Israel and the early church. Because of this, the Bible is particularly about our identity as the church: who we are, our calling or mission, what God asks of us as the church. There is lots of great literature and we are exposed to it through sermons, classes and texts of music. But the

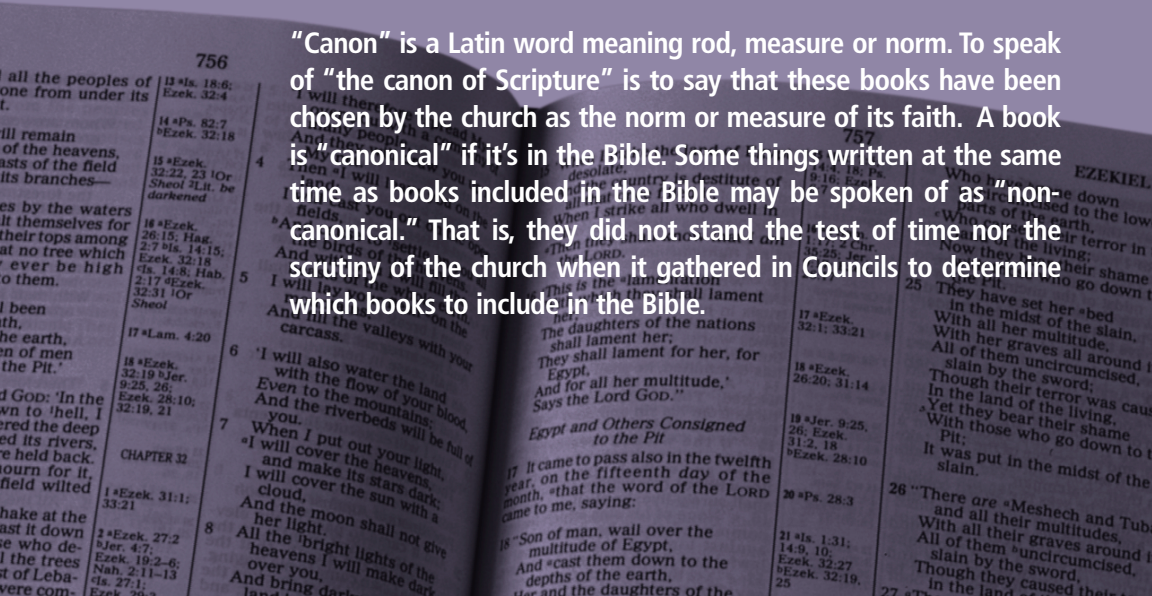


Bible is peculiarly "the church's book," concerned with who we are and whose we are. Even though it is "the church's book," the Bible is not afraid to challenge the church. In fact, the Bible may be the church's best friend and our most severe critic as well. We do learn from the writings of other religions, but they are concerned with shaping their own faithful adherents. When sacred writings are read in worship they are not read as "interesting"

literature that may have something to say. They are read as something the church has experienced as trustworthy and to which it grants a particular intimacy. In other words, the reading of Scripture is an act of faith.

I sometimes hear people speak of "the canon." What does that mean?

"Canon" is a Latin word meaning rod, measure or norm. To speak of "the canon of Scripture" is to say that these books have been chosen by the church as the norm or measure of its faith. A book is "canonical" if it's in the Bible. Some things written at the same time as books included in the Bible may be spoken of as "non-canonical." That is, they did not stand the test of time nor the scrutiny of the church when it gathered in Councils to determine which books to include in the Bible.



THE REALLY HARD PARTS

by Martin B. Copenhaver

An anyone who has read much of the Bible eventually confronts the really hard parts, the parts that—for one reason or another, in one way or another—frustrate, baffle or even offend.

It is important to remember, when we confront the hard parts, that the Bible is not just one book, but more like a library of books written by many different authors over a period of about a thousand years. There is such variety in the Bible that it only makes sense that there should be some hard parts and that they are hard in a variety of ways.

Some parts of the Bible are simply hard to understand.

For those who have not studied the Bible, much of what they encounter in this ancient and complex book could be described in that way. Most often, reading the Bible with a helpful guide is enough to make much of the Bible understandable. But sometimes even study is not enough to illumine a passage. I have spent many years studying the Bible, but I still confront some passages, such as in the letters of Paul, that are so dense and convoluted that I have to read them many times. Even then I sometimes feel like such intense reading will make me go cross-eyed before it will help me understand a particularly difficult passage.

Then there are the passages that are hard to relate to.

For instance, the book of Leviticus, in our Old Testament, was addressed primarily to the priests of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. In its original form, it is like a handbook that instructed the priests on everything from how to prepare an offering to how they were to wash their hands. Actually, further study reveals that much of this book is both important and interesting, but I have to admit that for years Leviticus seemed about as engaging and relevant to my life as reading the owner's manual of a tractor.

Other passages in the Bible depict things that are hard to believe.

Mind you, I believe that God has the power to perform miracles. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus itself is a miracle and I not only believe in it, I base my entire life on its reality. But some of the wonders recorded in the Bible are still hard for me to believe. For instance, one passage relates how the prophet Elisha was able to make the iron head of an ax float on the surface of the Jordan River (2 Kings 6:6). It's not that I don't believe that God could do such a thing through a prophet. It's just that the story makes the act seem so frivolous, like a mere magic trick. I have a hard time believing in miracles that don't mean very much.



I also have a hard time believing that God would harden the heart of Pharaoh against the plight of the Jews held in slavery, as in the fourth chapter of Exodus, and then clobber Pharaoh with a series of plagues because he has a hard heart, as the sixth chapter reports. A God who would act in this way is very different from the God I encounter elsewhere, including elsewhere in the Bible.

Near the end of his life Thomas Jefferson spent a great deal of time editing his own version of the Bible. He took out all of the passages that he found difficult to believe or that offended his sensibilities. When Jefferson was finished, his "Bible" was only forty-six pages long (apparently Jefferson was easily offended!). By contrast, when I encounter such difficult-to-believe passages in the Bible, I have learned not to dismiss them entirely. After all, God is not restrained by the borders of my imagination. But I don't pretend to believe things I don't believe, either. Instead, I try to keep such passages in the kind of place where I will be sure to pick them up again. I treat them much like the pieces of paper on my desk that I am not sure what to do with—I neither file them away nor throw them away. That means that I look at them more frequently than I would papers that I had put in the file cabinet or the trash bin. I try to stay open to new insight and understanding.

Finally, there are those passages in the Bible that are hard to accept.

Usually such passages offer teachings that, for one reason or another, we cannot follow or would rather not even try to follow. For example, the book of Leviticus says that homosexuality is wrong and even advocates that homosexual people should be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:13). I cannot accept that. I believe that this is an instance when, living in a different circumstance several thousand years later, we can see some things differently than did the authors of scripture.

It is harder for me to know what to do with other teachings. For instance, Jesus taught that married people should not divorce. And we're not talking about some obscure verse from a book of the Bible hardly anyone reads. All four gospels record Jesus' teachings on divorce.

Nevertheless, when I am working with a couple whose marriage has become so riddled with conflict that it seems like a death-match in which the parties can neither leave nor come out alive, it can be difficult to accept such a teaching, no matter the source. Sometimes I end up supporting a couple's decision to divorce. Even in such instances, however, I do not take out Mr. Jefferson's scissors to cut out the passages I find difficult to accept. I keep them close at hand because I recognize that my own perspectives are limited and I still have a lot to learn. I pray for fuller understanding and new insight. After all, we often learn the most from other people when we don't readily agree with them. Often that is true in our relationship with the Bible as well.

Although I do try to keep the really hard parts of the Bible close at hand, that doesn't mean that I dwell on them. In fact, I think the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was right when he said that it seems strange that people complain that there is so much in the Bible they cannot understand or accept, when there is enough they can both understand and accept to keep them busy for a lifetime.

My hope is that, over time, you will find that the Bible is much like a dear life-long friend: you may have your points of occasional conflict, but over time you will find that this companion is worthy of your deepest trust.

If someone were just beginning to read the Bible, how would you suggest they go about it?

The cover-to-cover plan usually breaks down along about Leviticus. A better plan may be to take one book and read it straight through. Mark is a good choice in the New Testament, Genesis or Exodus in the Old. Another way to go about reading the Bible is to read the lectionary texts, appointed lessons for each day of the year. (See ucc.org for a list of these lessons.) Over time you will cover most of the Bible. Often the sermon in worship will be on the lectionary text for that Sunday.

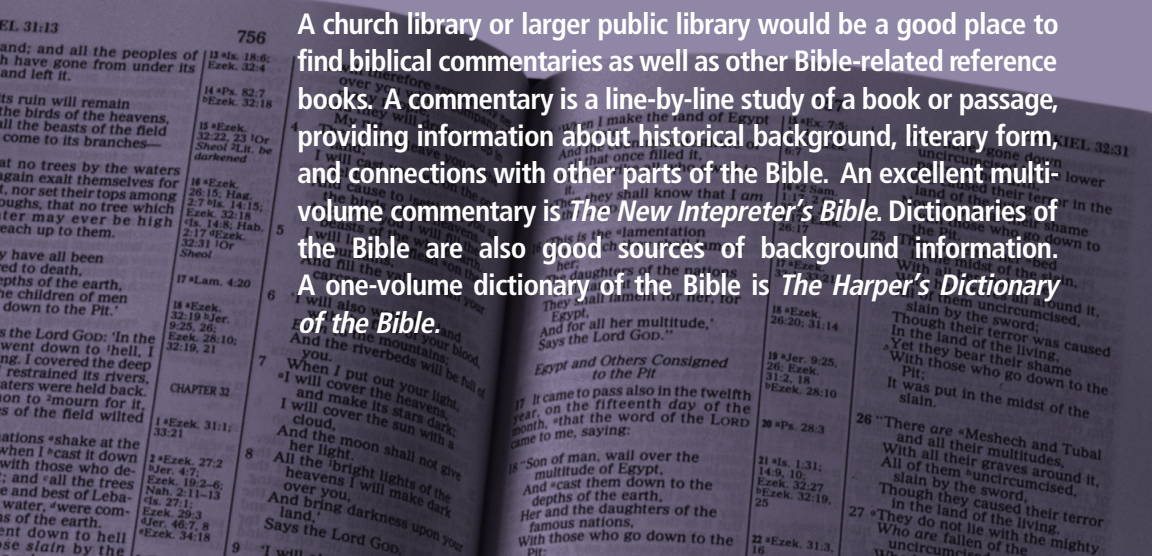


What translation of the Bible should I read?

The New Revised Standard Version (1990), or the New Jerusalem Bible, which is a Catholic version, are recommended. There are many other reliable translations, including the revised New English Bible, the New International Version, and Today's English Version. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* version is often insightful and fresh. Often an "annotated" Bible, which means there will be footnotes and usually brief introductions to each book, is helpful.

Where can I get more information about the Bible?

A church library or larger public library would be a good place to find biblical commentaries as well as other Bible-related reference books. A commentary is a line-by-line study of a book or passage, providing information about historical background, literary form, and connections with other parts of the Bible. An excellent multi-volume commentary is *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Dictionaries of the Bible are also good sources of background information. A one-volume dictionary of the Bible is *The Harper's Dictionary of the Bible*.



C O N T R I B U T O R S

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