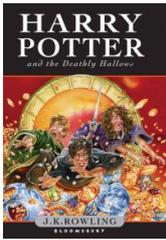


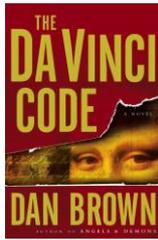


Engaging with the Bible



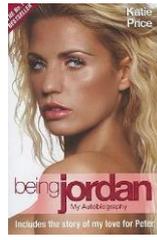
Rank:

Nº copies:



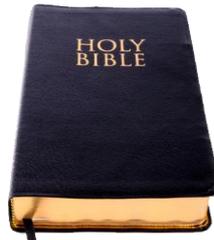
Rank:

Nº copies:



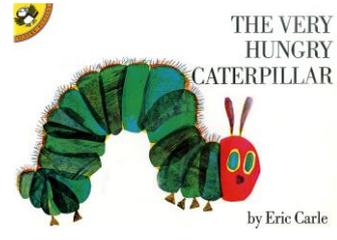
Rank:

Nº copies:



Rank:

Nº copies:



Rank:

Nº copies:

The Bible is by far the most published and yet least read – and even less understood - book of all time. Many people, religious and not, find strength, wisdom and inspiration from its content.

The Bible has shaped the English language. Numerous common phrases come from it:

1. 2 Samuel 1:19: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
2. Matthew 16:3: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _
3. Acts 13:22: _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

The Bible is more than a book

The Bible is more than a book. To be precise, it's a collection or *library* of 66 smaller books – the ultimate anthology – that, since the invention of the printing press in the Fifteenth Century, we've come to expect bound in one single volume¹.

These 66 books were written over a spread of 1500 years by 40+ writers (mostly unknown to each other), drawn from three different continents, numerous cultures and languages, and written in a range of literary genres (historical accounts, legal statements, poetry and song lyrics, prophecies..) to address a diverse range of local and historic issues of their day.

But, again, the Bible is more than a *book*. For me, it carries the message or revelation of God. It's to be read and re-read, meditated on, spoken out in praise, studied, and even wrestled with. The Holy Spirit uses it to encourage, inspire and challenge me.

Unlike Powers, spiritual forces, and religions, God is *knowable*. God seeks relationship with what Father, Son & Holy Spirit has made. Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, is the ultimate *revelation* of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. [Col.1:15; Ph.2:1-11]. Hence, Jesus is the Logos, the Word of God [Jn.1:1]. It's more accurate to say *Jesus is* the Word of God; the Bible *contains* and beautifully *reveals* the revelation or Word of God.

God could have provided a far shorter and concise book or even booklet – a bit like the Highway Code – that only required us to learn and do what it says, without much need for debate, interpretation or questioning. Instead, God provided us with a rich source of Scripture that forces us to think, pray, question, and debate. The Holy Spirit leads us on a lifetime of discovery. We discover even greater depth and profound meaning when we investigate the historical contexts and cultural references, and discover its unity as we relate one part with another.

All Scripture is God-breathed

Paul declared, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..." [2 Tim. 3:16].

What Scripture was he referring to?

Athanasius in 367 AD was the first to refer to the 66 books we understand as being the Bible – the Scriptures. That was 225-275 years after Paul wrote to Timothy. Up until then, there had been much debate about what was considered 'Scripture'.

Was Paul only referring the 39 books of the Old Testament? If so, what does that say about the New Testament?

Did Paul think the letters *he* was writing to the churches were Scripture – on a par with Genesis and Numbers? At the time, did his readers receive them as Scripture? Paul appears to have written more letters than are in the New Testament. For example, when writing to the church in Corinth, he referred to his earlier letter [1 Cor.5:9]. Was that lost letter to the Corinthians Scripture or not? There is debate about the authenticity of John 7:53 to 8:11 because it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. Some translations include it, others include it but alert readers to the debate, whereas others omit it altogether. Is that God-breathed Scripture? John's Gospel concludes, "*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written*" [John 21:25]. Does that mean some things that Jesus did and said were not on a par with Scripture?

When Paul wrote "all Scripture is God-breathed", not all of what we now call Scripture had been written. Was Paul including all Scripture that was to come later or just which was in use at that time? Then – as now – there were lots of religious writings in circulation. Were they *all* God-breathed or were some religious writings not?

The Bible is the unfolding story of God and His relationship with all that He made. It is not principally a set of 'proof texts'.

How do you read it?

How do you read it? I say this simply to state the obvious: *the Bible requires interpretation*. 'Hermeneutics' is the principles, method and process of interpreting the Bible. When asked by

an expert in the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), Jesus replied, “*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*” [Lk.10:25-26]. Jesus was asking, what’s your ‘take’ on faith? How are you interpreting it? Jesus understood that Scripture has to be interpreted.

Let’s be honest, there are some baffling - occasionally, profoundly disturbing – references in the Bible. For example:

- Deuteronomy 21:18-21
- Deuteronomy 23:1
- Psalm 137:8-9
- Isaiah 13:16

Then there are the moments in the Old Testament of violence, judgment, oppression... Does Psalm 137:9 carry the same weight as John 3:16? People take different approaches:

1. *Ignore the difficult bits?*

Many Christians opt to overlook difficult passages, like Jeremiah 5:6, in favour of ‘go to’ sources of encouragement like Jeremiah 29:11. The more straight-forward passages are sufficient for them.

2. *Take it all literally*

They receive the Bible as ‘dictated’ by God and, so, take literally every word, without question. If it says the world was created in six days, the world was literally created in 144 hours. Every word is given equal weight, be it in Deuteronomy, Luke, or Romans. Others may question/ challenge details (e.g. how old was Ahaziah when he became king? 2 Chr.22:2 says 42, but 2Ki.8:26 says 22. Or, what date did Nebuzaradan enter Jerusalem? 2Ki.25:8 says the 7th, but Jer.52:12 says the 10th?), but they choose to accept it all, literally.

3. *Receive it as the inspired story of God*

Imagine you go to the races. From your stand, you can’t see the horses in the distance. You reach for your binoculars, but what you first see is very out-of-focus. Everything looks very hazy – it’s hard to make things out. Gradually, you adjust the focus and what was initially an ‘unseen reality’ comes sharper and clearer into view. Now you see clearly what was always there (the ‘unseen reality’).



Does this work for the Bible too? There was nothing. And then... Genesis is very hazy, but what exists is beyond beautiful; it must have come from something or someone – call it God. Gradually, the focus is adjusted. Abraham senses sacrifice is important; he doesn’t know why, but it feels the right thing to do. Moses ‘gets’ there’s ‘right’ and ‘wrong’; it’s still blurry, but how we live matters to this God. Through the Psalms, David and others show it’s possible to be real with God. Isaiah sees God as ‘one of us’; more than that, the sacrifice that Jacob had fuzzily offered would be fulfilled by God, not us. Then... BOOM! Jesus. Now, what was previously hazy, yet always existed, is seen in all His Glory. This progressive revelation

The Bible reveals a progression of understanding *within* its 66 books (‘progressive revelation’). For example, Apostle Peter was brought up the Jewish way, based on the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy) and the Prophets. He thought like a Jew, he acted like a Jew, he ate like a Jew. Then, one day, God told him through a dream to eat food strictly forbidden by Jewish laws, such as those contained in Leviticus chapter 11. Though initially repulsed, Peter had to revise his theology and practice in light of his new understanding. Leviticus had provided important insights (God was knowable and there were right and wrong ways to live) but then came greater clarity (further revelation): we don’t and can’t earn favour with God; He already delights in us anyway!

Interpreting the Scriptures

Now, the Scriptures might not change, but sometimes our interpretation of them does. The Bible may be ‘infallible’ⁱⁱ to many Christians, our interpretation or reading of it is certainly not. A brief review of Church history confirms just how interpretations have clarified over the centuries.

Flat earth

For example, the Church once taught the sun and all other planets and moons rotated around the earth, which was said to be static. To be fair, that was the common understanding of the timeⁱⁱⁱ. The Church highlighted Bible verses to support this (Joshua 10.13; 1 Chronicles 16.30; Psalm 19.4-6; 93:1; 96.10; 104:5; 119.90; Ecclesiastes 1:5). But then physicist and astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) challenged this interpretation, proving with the help of his new-fangled telescope, that it was the earth that rotated around the sun. For his thanks, Galileo was charged with heresy and placed under house arrest for 24 years. But he was right! Today no-one seriously claims the sun rotates around the earth. The Scriptures didn’t change, but our interpretation of them did.

Slavery

Then there was a time when some Christians used the Bible to justify slavery as a necessary part of the social and global economic system. They zoomed in on a few Bible verses such as Paul’s letter to Philemon, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, Genesis 9:20-25, Titus 2:9. Fortunately, other Christians like Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) and William Wilberforce (1759-1833) saw the bigger picture, and inspired by their full-picture reading of the Scriptures^{iv}, successfully campaigned to bring an end to the barbaric system of slavery. The Scriptures didn’t change, but our interpretation of them did.

Apartheid

Other Christians supported apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation in the United States of America. Their reading or interpretation of the Bible (or at least selective verses from it) convinced them that God had ordained the supremacy of white people over all others. They cited Genesis 1 (they said Creation established a hierarchy of structures or ‘orders’); Genesis 11 and again in Acts 2:5-11 (they said God had created and divided different races); Acts 17:26 (they said God had allocated different races into different spaces); Romans 13:1-7 (they said laws made by Government must be obeyed as God’s authority). Now we look back with deep shame and repentance. Once more, the Scriptures didn’t change, but our interpretation of them did.

Charismatic gifts

Likewise, there was a time when the Church gave little space for the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Then, 1960s youth culture emerged and, with it, Christian young people re-read the book of Acts and ‘discovered’ what had always been in the Bible: that God the Holy Spirit empowers people with spiritual gifts^v. Now many Christians today take this understanding for granted (and are baffled how previous generations could have missed what seems so obvious to them) but fifty years ago very few people read it that way. The Scriptures didn’t change, but our interpretation of them did.

Women’s status

And then, fifty years ago, many churches followed a ‘male only’ understanding of leadership and ministry. A decreasing minority still do today. But others have come to see a very different

interpretation; one that celebrates, actively encourages and calls women into leadership and ministry. Once again, the Scriptures didn't change, but our interpretation of them did.

You get my point. The Bible might not change, but our understanding or interpretation of it sometimes does. That's why "*the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" [Heb 4:12].

Just as our 'reading' of the Bible has changed on issues of race, slavery, charismatic ministry, and women's leadership (as well as, contraception, divorce and remarriage..), what in the future might mainstream Christianity look back on with similar incredulity on our generation's reading of the Scriptures? What if, it turns out, our 'reading' of human sexuality has been similarly flawed?

How can disparity of interpretations have arisen?

Conservatives, liberals and progressives

When watching TV, the picture – and our understanding of what's happening on the screen – is enhanced when we see all pixels in one go. If some pixels are omitted or others zoomed in on to the exclusion of all others, we get a distorted picture or understanding. So, I believe it is with the Bible. To get the fullest picture, we need to see all pixels (chapters and verses) in relation to each other.



I am an evangelical Christian who loves the Bible and who seeks to both better understand and better live it (not always as well as I might!). To gain a more complete picture or understanding, I think, the Bible has to be seen and understood in the whole, not in isolation.

However, I am not a 'fundamentalist' Christian^{vi}. For me, 'fundamentalists' *zoom in* on a few pixels or verses/ sections of the Bible that support what they believe, to the exclusion of all else.

But neither am I a 'liberal' Christian^{vii}. For me, 'liberals' *omit* pixels or verses/ sections of the Bible they don't like or agree with and, in doing so, fail to grapple with the totality of Scripture. And, just like 'fundamentalist' Christians, in doing so, 'liberals' also fail to grapple with the totality of Scripture.

That's why, if I must have a label (other than simply as a follower of Christ), I prefer to be a '*progressive evangelical*'^{viii}. It's not adequate to simply omit sections of the Bible we don't like, but neither is adequate to simply zoom in on the bits we do like, and ignore those bits that confuse or challenge our thinking. Luther (that's *Reformation* Luther, not *Vandross* Luther or *Detective* Luther) championed *Sola Scripture* – Scripture alone. He meant the whole of it, not just a few 'go-to' verses or 'proof texts'.

So, this exploration is about digging deeper with the Bible.

How to read the Bible

Christo-centric hermeneutic

We interpret the whole of Scripture through the revelation of Christ, the Word of God. We understand the Old Testament best when refracted through Christ. We don't use Paul's writings to better understand Jesus. Christ helps us better understand Paul.

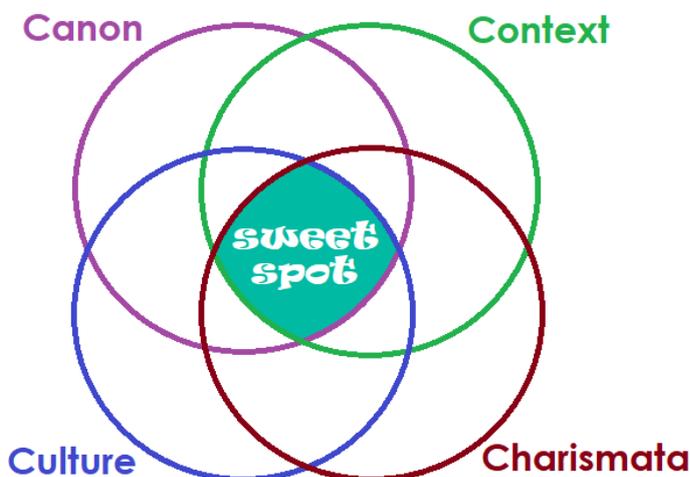
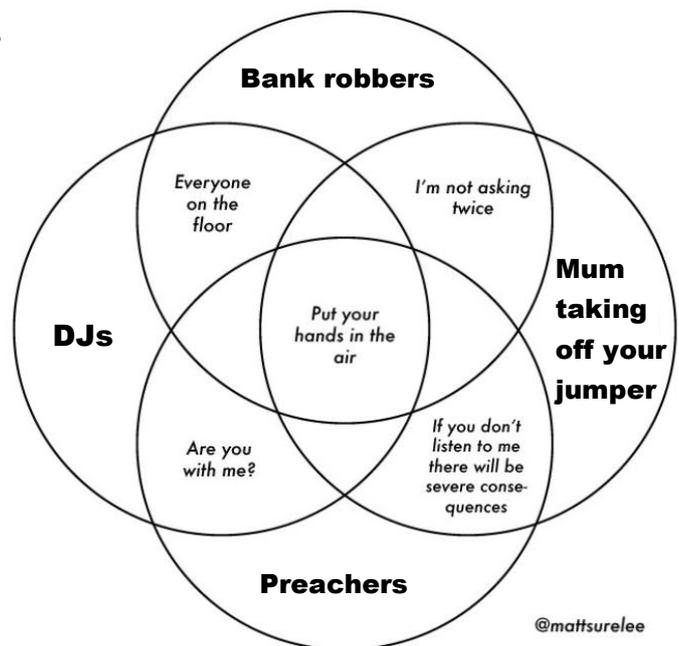
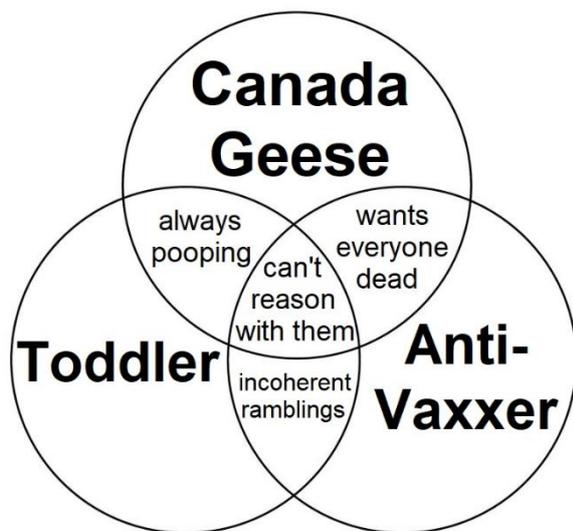
The whole 'big picture' story of the Bible points to Jesus. Paul says:

"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to...". [1 Cor.15:3-5]

Paul wasn't referencing a few 'proof texts'; instead, he was saying, the sum total of the Scriptures – the story of God (which, for Paul, was the Old Testament) – revealed Christ and His coming.

Reading the Bible is all about finding the sweet spot. *I can do all things through a verse taken out of context.*

But, first, who doesn't love a Venn diagram?



Canon: What does the Bible say - both here & elsewhere?
Culture: What was the culture/ custom of the day?
Context: What was the speaker/ writer's intended meaning?
Charismata: What inspiration is God the Holy Spirit revealing?

Live it!

Mark Twain famously said, “*It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.*”

Uncage the lion

Charles Spurgeon, the Nineteenth Century Baptist preacher, said, “*The Bible is like a lion; it does not need to be defended; just let it loose and it will defend itself.*” Instead of trying to tame the Bible - making it conform to our own preconceived ideas, prejudices and beliefs - we should seek to remain open to what the Spirit of God says to us through the Scriptures.

Just do it!

Read it, meditate on it, study it, wrestle with it, seek the Holy Spirit's inspiration, discuss it...

Further reading

1. *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* by N.T. Wright (2013)
2. *What is the Bible?: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything* by Rob Bell (2018)
3. *The Bible Jesus Read: Why the Old Testament Matters* by Philip Yancey (2001)

ⁱ Similarly, today the smartphone is dramatically changing the way people access, read and navigate the Bible.

ⁱⁱ Some Christians refer to the Bible as being ‘inerrant’ or ‘infallible’ as a way of affirming their high belief in, and appreciation for, the Bible but without necessarily knowing what these terms actually mean.

Inerrant means there are no errors in the Bible. Every single word, sentence and detail is exactly and precisely accurate, as God intended. It makes no false, misleading or contradictory statements, be they scientific, historical or geographical.

Infallible means there *can be no* errors Bible. It faithfully and perfectly contains all that is necessary on all matters of faith or practice. If there are any scientific, geographic or historic discrepancies, they are ‘inconsequential details’ that do not affect ‘matters of faith or practice.’

ⁱⁱⁱ For an overview see Alister McGrath’s *Inventing the Universe: why we can’t stop talking about science, faith and God* (Hodder, 2015)

^{iv} Though the Church, in all its traditions, now believe slavery to be sinful, nowhere in the Bible is slavery specifically condemned.

^v See Pete Ward’s *Growing Up Evangelical: youthwork and the making of a subculture* (Wipf and Stock, 2013)

^{vi} Or Conservative Evangelical for that matter.

^{vii} I appreciate this ‘short-hand’ risks offending many liberal Christians who have a long-held passion for wrestling with the Bible in order to better understand and serve God. To get my point across to others, I ask for their grace.

^{viii} I *am* evangelical in my love for and commitment to engaging with the Bible, and in my commitment to enabling others (whether religious or not) to come to know God. But if to be ‘evangelical’ I am required to subscribe to a specific set of conservative ‘religious right’ dogmas and attitudes towards those of difference (be that of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social status...), then I would, with sadness, not use the label. Tragically, ‘evangelical’ has come to mean someone who’s anti-women, anti-gay, anti-environment...