

SCRIPTURE : STORY

sunday school module two

*"It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God.
The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the
guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him."
- C.S. Lewis*

The most important thing.

If you take nothing else from this resource, take this: The Bible exists so that we would love God with all heart, soul and mind. The Bible is not an end unto itself and while it is holy, it is not God. The Bible always points beyond itself to God, so that we might know and love him more each time we read it. We should study the Bible so that we can know and love God. We should meditate on the Word, so that we can know and love God. We should attend Bible studies, so that we can know and love God. We should prioritize biblical preaching so that we can know and love God. God chose to reveal himself first through his work in the world and secondarily through the written account of that work. The Bible cannot be our focus or goal, it must simply be a gateway to God himself. The Bible is inexhaustible and without peer simply because it points to a God who is inexhaustible and without peer. We must never allow our detailed and passionate study of the Bible distract us from the very reason we were created, which is to love God with everything that we are.

What is the Bible?

The Bible is the story of God's work in the world. More specifically, it is the story of God's creative work, mankind's rebellion, God's unrelenting pursuit of reconciliation climaxing on the cross of Christ and the promise of a final restoration of all things. It was written by dozens of authors over the course of thousands of years on three continents and in three languages. It contains the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, which tells the story of God and his chosen people, the Jews. It also contains the New

Testament, which tells the story of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection and the subsequent work of the Holy Spirit through the Church.

The Bible is about history, but it is not a history book. Its ideas formed the foundation of modern science, but it is not a science book. It boasts some of antiquity's most beautiful poetry and prose, but it is not a poetry compilation. It teaches profound philosophical ideas that have inspired and confounded every philosopher of the last two millennia, but it is not a philosophy textbook. It records sage pastoral wisdom, but it is not a church handbook. It describes the only true way towards human flourishing, but it is not a moral how-to manual.

It has been studied in every institution of higher learning, it has been translated into thousands of languages and is easily the most influential document in all of western culture. And yet, it is read and understood every day by children and the uneducated. It is the most impressive document in the world, but its primary purpose is to point beyond itself to God, who inspired its writing. The Bible is mankind's primary gateway to know God himself.

Where did the Bible come from?

The Bible was not originally written as one book but as 66 books compiled over thousands of years. How did we get the Bible we have today? Who decided which books to include? How did they translate the books into English? Why are there so many translations? Which version should I read? These questions and more will be answered in this section.

Who decided what books were in and out? What about other Gospels?

The Ecclesiological Councils.

The New Testament books became authoritative for the church formally in the late 4th century at two ecclesiastical councils – at Hippo Regius in 393 and Carthage in 397. The emphasis in the previous sentence should be on formally, because the canon had already existed in the life of the church for more than a hundred years. From as early as 140 A.D. Christians were compiling lists of the books that they considered to be divinely inspired. In an era where communication moved slowly, travel was dangerous and documents fragile, consequently, formalizing these lists took time.

The Books proved themselves worthy.

Over time, the books we have today rose to authority by means of grassroots transformation. Pastors and congregations recognized the power of certain books and the consistency of their message and began to keep track of those books. In 367 A.D., a church father named Athanasius wrote a list of books to be used by the parishes under his care, a list that included exactly the same books we have today in our New Testament. Lists were being compiled long before 367, we have lists from as early as 170 A.D (The Muratorian Fragment), and before 400 A.D. we have lists from church fathers like Augustine, Jerome, Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen and Eusebius, to name only a few. Most of these lists include all of the books we have today, with some consistent exceptions like 3rd John, James and Hebrews which were contentious for varying reasons. By the time the ecclesiastical councils rolled around, the “choosing” of the books was largely complete. These councils just ratified what had been practiced by the church for 150 years.

Who wrote the books?

One of the primary ways that the New Testament books were chosen was because of the credibility of the author. Each of the NT books was written by one of the apostles or their closest disciples. Of the Gospels, Matthew and John were written by Jesus’ disciples, and Mark and Luke by companions of those disciples (Peter and Paul, respectively). Acts was written by the same Luke who penned the Gospel. Paul himself wrote thirteen of the NT books and Peter wrote two more. James was believed to be a brother to Jesus, as was Jude. John, in addition to writing a gospel account, wrote three letters and Revelation. These manuscripts were passed from disciple to disciple, down through the generations and were gradually bound together until finally canonized.

Did they always agree?

Nope. Like all humans throughout history, there was some disagreement about a few of the books. As the church began to grow, so too did false teachers and those looking for fame or fortune. As a result, the church leaders were more cautious and took time to consider their worthiness. This led to a couple of the books being looked upon with skepticism for reasons that are entirely logical. The books in question were Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. Each was held in question for slightly different reasons. The author of Hebrews was (and remains) unclear. Some believe it was Paul, others Barnabus or Apollos. This lack of clarity brought reasonable caution, but the book was ultimately accepted. James was not one of Jesus’ original disciples and some of the content appears to contradict Paul at first blush. In fact, Martin Luther famously called James, the “epistle of straw”. Jude was not an apostle either and he quotes from sources that are outside of the canon (though Paul does this as well). 2 Peter did not have wide circulation after it was written, and 2

and 3 John don't clearly identify the author. Revelation contains a claim of John's authorship, but it is such a unique and mysterious book that it was met with some skepticism and fear.

Though these books met with some resistance during the early church, each was also highly valued and widely enough shared that they were eventually accepted as canonical. Now that we are so many generations removed, it would be impossible (and a bit arrogant) for us to speculate as to whether or not a given book should have been included. The apostles and early church leaders were in a far better position to assess the authority of these books and Christians today should trust their assessment.

When were the books of the Bible written?

Approximate Dates of Authorship

BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT		BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT	
BOOK	DATE	BOOK	DATE
Genesis	c.1250-1200 B.C.	Matthew	c.40-60
Exodus	c.1250-1200 B.C.	Mark	c.45-60
Leviticus	c.1250-1200 B.C.	Luke	57-60
Numbers	c.1250-1200 B.C.	John	c.40-65
Deuteronomy	c.1250-1200 B.C.	Acts	57-62
Joshua	c.1200 B.C.	Romans	57
Judges	c.1200 B.C.	1 Corinthians	55
Ruth	c.1000 B.C.	2 Corinthians	56
1st Samuel	c.700 B.C.	Galatians	56
2nd Samuel	c.700 B.C.	Ephesians	58
1st Kings	c.600 B.C.	Philippians	58
2nd Kings	c.600 B.C.	Colossians	58
1st Chronicles	c.350 B.C.	1 Thessalonians	early 50
2nd Chronicles	c.350 B.C.	2 Thessalonians	50-51
Ezra	c.400 B.C.	1 Timothy	55
Nehemiah	c.400 B.C.	2 Timothy	58

Tobit	c.200 B.C.	Titus	57
Judith	c.150 B.C.	Philemon	58
Esther	c.300 B.C.	Hebrews	c.67
1st Maccabees	c.100 B.C.	James	40's
2nd Maccabees	c.125 B.C.	1 Peter	65
Job	c.500 B.C.	2 Peter	61-62
Psalms	c.500 B.C.	1 John	57-62
Proverbs	c.450 B.C.	2 John	57-62
Ecclesiastes	c.300 B.C.	3 John	57-62
Song of Songs	c.450 B.C.	Jude	61-62
Wisdom	c.100 B.C.	Revelation	68-70
Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)	c.180 B.C.		
Isaiah	c.700 B.C.		
Jeremiah	c.585 B.C.		
Lamentations	c.550 B.C.		
Baruch	c.550 B.C.		
Ezekiel	c.590 B.C.		
Daniel	c.165 B.C.		
Hosea	c.750 B.C.		
Joel	c.400 B.C.		
Amos	c.750 B.C.		
Obadiah	c.500 B.C.		
Jonah	c.450 B.C.		
Micah	c.740 B.C.		
Nahum	c.612 B.C.		
Habakkuk	c.600 B.C.		
Zephaniah	c.620 B.C.		
Haggai	c.520 B.C.		
Zechariah	c.520 B.C.		
Malachi	c.450 B.C.		

Is the Bible reliable?

Our modern, skeptical cultural has caused some to struggle to trust that the early copies of each book of the Bible are trustworthy. To help bolster your confidence in the early copies let's compare the New Testament books with various other books that are widely read and accepted in Western literature. The aim of this exercise is simply to debunk the idea that the Bible we hold in our hands is the result of guesswork or later editing by the church. The truth is that the New Testament is among the most reliable texts in all of antiquity. We arrive at that conclusion by using three tests that are standard assessments of textual reliability.

The tests are: the bibliographical test (number and quality of manuscripts), the internal test (the consistency of the text to not contradict itself), and the external test (the accuracy of the text in relation to other works of history from that period).

Test #1 – The Bibliographical Test

This first test assesses the number of manuscripts available to translators and checks their accuracy across all samples. For this test, the more manuscripts there are, the better the document score will be because it gives the researcher more data points to compare. The researcher will, in effect, lay out all the manuscripts and compare them, word by word, to see how consistent the transmission has been through the years. Keep in mind that the NT was written across nearly a hundred years and on three continents. With that in mind, as you will see below, the NT is nearly without peer in both the number of manuscripts and their consistency.

AUTHOR	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME SPAN	NUMBER OF COPIES	ACCURACY
Homer	Ca. 850 BC			643	95%
Herodotus	Ca. 450 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1,350 years	8	
Euripides	Ca. 440 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1,500 years	9	Not
Thucydides	Ca. 420 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1,300 years	8	enough

Plato	Ca. 380 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1,300 years	7	copies
Aristotle	Ca. 350 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1,400 years	5	To
Caesar	Ca. 60 BC	ca. AD 900	About 950 years	10	reconstruct
Catullus	Ca. 50 BC	ca. AD 1500	About 1,600 years	3	The
Livy	Ca. 10 BC			20	original
Tacitus	Ca. AD 100	ca. AD 1100	About 1,000 years	20	
New Test.	Ca. AD 60	ca. AD 130	About 100 years	About 14,000	99.5%

Taken directly from Ken Boa's "I'm Glad You Asked" page 78

Not only does the NT far outstrip even the most relied upon texts from antiquity, the manuscripts we have are far closer in age to the original autographs than any other. We have manuscripts from nearly every NT book that date within a generation of the originals. You'll notice that the accuracy between manuscripts is listed as 99.7%. If you look at the footnotes of your Bible, each of these approximately 400 differences are recognized and explained. In addition, scholars point out that nearly every verse of the NT is quoted in the works of the church fathers, adding another layer of reliability to the Bible you hold in your hands.

Now, does any of this prove that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God? Not at all. What it does prove is that the Bible we have today accurately reflects what was written two thousand years ago and has been passed down through the centuries. It was not, as some have argued, compiled and edited over the course of time, in order to consolidate power or adjust the Christian message to suit the times.

Test #2 – The Internal Test

One might expect a book written over the course of a few thousand years, written by dozens of hands on three continents and in multiple languages would be a hodgepodge of ideas and full of

contradictions. This is exactly what the Bible has been accused of, and yet the evidence says otherwise. There are hundreds of fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, written down in the Old Testament and often fulfilled hundreds of years later in the New Testament. These are only a few relevant examples, each about Jesus:

1. Born of a woman (Gen. 3:15 cf. Mt. 1:20; Gal. 4:4)
2. Descendant of Abraham (Gen. 22:18 cf. Mt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16)
3. Born of a virgin (Is. 7:14 cf. Mt. 1:18)
4. Born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2 cf. Luke 2:1-7)
5. Prophesied by the forerunner John the Baptist (Is. 40; Mal. 3:1 cf. Jn. 1:19-52)
6. Rejected by his own people (Is. 53 cf. Jn. 1)
7. Presented as a king riding a donkey (Zech. 9:9 cf. Lk. 19:35-37)
8. Betrayed by a friend (Ps. 41:9 cf. Mt. 26:50)
9. Betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12 cf. 26:15)
10. Blood money thrown on temple floor & used to buy a potters field (Zech. 11:13 cf. Mt. 27:5-7)
 - a. Note: the temple was destroyed in 70 AD so the Messiah must have come prior to then.
11. Crucified (Ps. 22:16 cf. Lk 23:33)
 - a. Note: crucifixion was invented hundreds of years after the Psalms were written.
12. Crucified with thieves (Isa. 53:12 cf. Mt. 27:38)
13. Forsaken by God (Ps. 22:1 cf. Mt. 27:46)
14. Lots cast for His clothing (Ps. 22:18 cf. Jn. 19:23)
15. Buried in a rich man's tomb (Isa. 53:9 cf. Mt. 27:57)
16. Resurrected & exalted (Ps. 16:10, Isa. 52:13, 53:10-12 cf. Acts 2:25-32)
17. Ascended into heaven (Ps. 68:18 cf. Acts 1:8, Eph. 4:8).

Many of these prophecies simply could not have been fulfilled by cunning strategy or planning. The Bible is truly unrivaled in its boldness and accuracy and it deserves our full trust.

Test #3 – The Historical Test

The historical test is tricky for one important reason, the Bible doesn't claim to be primarily a book of history. While it is true that most of the historical references in the Bible have been confirmed by extra-biblical sources and there are very few details that are in conflict with historical sources, this may be an unhelpful way to think about the Bible and therefore, an unfair burden to place upon it. Much of the Bible is written in order to communicate the truth about God, his character and his work

in the world. It was also written by men, bound by the time and space in which they lived. The Bible is not a purely divine document in the sense that it was not handed down from on high or written in God's own hand. God chose to reveal himself primarily through his direct work in history which was then recorded by the hands of regular, often uneducated, men.

This is not to say that the Bible is historically inaccurate. In fact, its accuracy places it among the most reliable ancient documents. Non-Christian historians like Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian and Pliny the Younger confirm many of the details recorded in the Bible and there are zero credible historians who dispute the historicity of Jesus himself.

Does the scripture have any errors or contradictions?

As Christians, we believe that God cannot speak falsely (2 Samuel 7:28; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), so all of Scripture is True and Perfect (Num. 23:19; Ps. 12:6; 119:89, 96; Prov. 30:5). But, the Bible also teaches the following:

- God's thoughts are much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9)
- God has secrets that He has not revealed to anyone (Deut. 29:29)
- We sometimes see dimly (I Cor. 13:12)
- We tend to suppress the truth of God's word because of our sin (Romans 1:18-19).

In some ways, this line of questioning misses the point and asks the Bible to prove it is something that it never claims to be. As modern, post-enlightenment philosophy began shape the West, certain questions began to be asked of the Bible. The Bible is a pre-modern, Eastern document so to hold it up to the light of modernist, western ideals is like assessing your dog's cat-likeness. We believe that the Bible is perfect, in the sense that it is exactly what God wants it to be. We also believe that God could have chosen to simply deliver a perfect text directly from heaven, but he didn't. He chose to inspire real men who lived in real times with real cultures that absolutely shaped the way they wrote.

Unfortunately, because of modern philosophy and some Christians' desire to answer those questions, we have imposed expectations on the scripture that it isn't fit to bear. It cannot hold up to this scrutiny and, tragically, some Christians' faith is impacted by it. Many young people who grow up in youth group are taught an unbalanced view of the Bible; that it is a purely supernatural and not at all human document. These same kids then go off to college and learn what should be basic things about the Bible and it crushes them. The truth is that the Bible is massively shaped by the men who wrote it and

the cultures it emerged from. The Law, outlined in Leviticus and Numbers, follows the structure of Middle Assyrian law documents popular in the middle east from the 12th to the 16th century B.C. Sections of Deuteronomy are near carbon copies of Hittite treaty templates. The Sermon on the Mount combines theological elements of Second Temple Judaism with the philosophy of Greek virtue ethics tradition in unmistakable ways. Paul was thoroughly Aristotelian in his philosophy and the way he thought about virtues.

None of this should be shocking to us! What else would we expect? How would Moses or Ezekiel or Peter be able to remove themselves from their culture, shed their language and customs and write in some idealized a-cultural, a-lingual, a-philosophical style? Simply, it would take a miracle of God and that is one miracle that God did not perform. And for good reason! God didn't make humans to be robots who are uninfluenced by the world around them, he made us to create culture! He said so in Genesis 1 and many times since.

The clearest example of this is Christ himself. Jesus didn't come to earth as an angel or a generic human being, he came as a Jewish man in the first century who grew up among gentiles but in a thoroughly Jewish culture. He wasn't anything else but that and so he spoke in ways that both reflected his chosen place in history and that of his audience. This thought shouldn't scandalize us, it should encourage us that who we are matters a great deal to God, so much so that he chose to speak directly to us and relate to us, just as we are.

Why Are There Different Bible Translations?

Many people are led astray with the idea that there are "so many translations" that "no one knows which is right." Nothing could be farther from the truth. First, it may seem overwhelming to a new Bible purchaser that there seem to be hundreds of Bibles to choose from at the local bookstore. There is a reason for this, there are hundreds of different people! Most of these "versions" are not versions at all, but simply Bibles that contain notes and articles geared toward a specific group (i.e. "Students Bible" or "New Believer Bible" or "Children's Bible", etc.). A closer look will reveal the fact that there are really only a few different translations on the shelf, but each with a different focus in the accompanying notes. Beyond this, there are many different styles (just like regular books!). Some have leather covers, some are hardbacks, some use very large writing, some have big margins, and others are meant to fit in your pocket.

Finally, we encounter the different versions. These are not different Bibles, they are the same words translated in slightly different ways to communicate effectively to different kinds of readers. They all teach the same thing, they just use different words.

If you have ever taken a foreign language class, you probably remember that sometimes the "right" translation is difficult to discern. Do you use the exact words in their exact order and their exact tense? Do you re-translate for idiomatic sayings? It may seem at first that to translate one sentence into another language, all you should have to do is figure out what each word means in the receptor language, and plug it in.

For instance:

German: Ich liebe dich

English: I love you

We may at first assume that a literal, word-for-word translation is always the best way to go. It would seem to be the safest route for accuracy. There are, however, many instances where this simply will not work. Sometimes the words would be out of order grammatically, we may need to supply an extra word to get the tense correct, we may not even have the word that is used and may need several words to convey the real meaning.

For instance:

Greek: phileo

Greek: agape

Greek: eros

English: brotherly love

English: unconditional love

English: sexual love

So you see, because English uses only one word for many very different kinds of love, the only word-for-word translation we could make out of any of these Greek terms is "love". In America we say, "I love my dog," and "I love my Mom," and "I love my wife," all using the same word. Context alone tells us which kind of love it is. Now the question: Is it better to "literally" translate phileo, agape, and eros as "love" using the word-for-word theory, or should we instead insert a word that is not in the original to explain what is meant by the author?

Basic Translation/Interpretation Theories

Formal Equivalence: (Word-for-Word) the translator attempts to render the exact words of the original language into the receptor language.

Dynamic Equivalence: (Thought-for-Thought) tries to match the closest natural equivalent of the source language in terms of meaning and style.

Paraphrase: This not really a translation per se, rather, it is the "re-telling" of the particular passage according to how the author understands the text.

You must decide for yourself which translation is best for your purpose. Literal translations are typically better for more scholarly Bible study or teaching preparation while Dynamic Equivalent or Paraphrase Bibles are easier to read. It is best to have at least one or two side by side for study. You can even get Bibles that contain several translations side by side within one book.

Comparison of Popular Translations.

STRICTLY LITERAL: New American Standard Bible

LITERAL: New King James Version

FAIRLY LITERAL: English Standard Version

THOUGHT-FOR-THOUGHT: New International Version

PARAPHRASE: The Message

An Example: 1 John 1:8-10

New American Standard (1977)	King James (1769)	Revised Standard (1977)
If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.	If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.	If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.
New International (1984)	New Century (1991)	The Living Bible (1971)

<p>If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.</p>	<p>If we say we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he will forgive our sins, because we can trust God to do what is right. He will cleanse us from all the wrongs we have done. If we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and we do not accept God's teaching.</p>	<p>If we say that we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves, and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. [And it is perfectly proper for God to do this for us because Christ died to wash away our sins.] If we claim we have not sinned, we are lying and calling God a liar, for he says we have sinned.</p>
<p>New King James (1982)</p>	<p>New Revised Standard (1989)</p>	<p>The Message (1993)</p>
<p>If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.</p>	<p>If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.</p>	<p>8If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. 9On the other hand, if we admit our sins--make a clean breast of them--he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. 10If we claim that we've never sinned, we out-and-out contradict God--make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God.</p>

What are the books of the Bible about?

The Torah.

How do we understand the Law today?

The crux of this discussion is what does the OT mean for us today? It is clear that we are no longer held to the OT Law as a means of salvation, so what role does it play? Should we even read it? If so, how do we apply it to our lives?

We first have to understand the nature of the OT Law. The law was never meant to be an exhaustive decree of every rule for every situation. There are in fact more than 600 total laws found in the Torah alone, which seems like a lot but could not possibly be an exhaustive list of what to do in every

situation that life presents. The progress that you see in the Law is that it goes from simple to complex. The first covenant between God and Adam was very simple, don't eat from the tree and the covenant will be maintained. Then he promises Abraham in Genesis 12 that he will have a great nation as long as he follows the LORD and gets circumcised. In Exodus 20, after being saved out of slavery in Egypt, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Later, we see that as Moses restates the law to the people in Deuteronomy it is even more complex with hundreds of rules. And if that wasn't enough the Jewish Rabbis throughout the years have compiled what is called the Midrash, which is their commentary on the Law and further insight in its role on the lives of the people. The Law is "paradigmatic", or in other words, it sets a framework for what it means to be GOD's people in that time and place. Thus, the spirit of the Law is alive and well today as Christ said that he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. To get specific with different parts of the Law we have to dig deeper. The law is split up into essentially three parts.

First are the ritual laws. These are laws that governed the work of the Levites in their daily priestly duties. These laws also instructed the people on how to engage the priests and the LORD in the temple worship. Sacrificing animals was an important part of OT worship, but is obviously not something that we participate in today. Without the shedding of blood, no forgiveness of sin was possible (Hebrews 9:22), but once Christ came and shed his blood once for all we no longer needed the temple sacrifices. This brings us to another important part of our understanding of OT Law. The ritual laws like animal sacrifice were used to foreshadow the coming of Christ. We see in Jesus the ultimate sacrificial lamb untainted by sin and therefore the only thing able to fully bring redemption. Therefore, the ritual laws are no longer binding; not because they are outdated but because they have been fulfilled in Christ.

The second group, the Ethical Law, is a collection of rules that govern the ethics and behavior of GOD's people. This instruction ranged from how to prepare food to eat, to behavior on the wedding night and everything in between. The Ethical Law is, in spirit, still alive and well today, but it is to be read through the lens of the New Testament. To put it plainly, we only uphold those Ethical Laws that Christ or one of the Apostles re-iterated in the NT. Thus, we can clearly see the spirit of the Law and the value that it had for the people of ancient Israel, but we are not held to laws about shaving your face because Christ did not reiterate their importance. In fact, Christ, when pressed, said that all of the Law and the Prophets could be summed up in two commandments "Love the LORD your GOD with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." We can see these two laws as threads that run through the whole of the Law, binding them together and making them universal

human principles. As was stated earlier, the Law was not written in a vacuum but was presented in a specific time and place. The early statements of law are far more universal in their scope (ie. The 10 Commandments) and as time goes on, they get more specifically applicable to premodern Jewish culture. There is no reason to think that those specific applications of the Law would be applicable today. Modern day Christians have myriad ways in which we apply the command to love God and neighbor that would have been impossible and nonsensical to Abraham or Moses.

Lastly are the civil laws, which can be thought of as the consequences of the moral law. This has changed in large part because we are no longer a theocracy, as ancient Israel was. These laws largely outlined the way in which Jewish society and politics were to operate. In our modern liberal democracy, we don't have the jurisdiction to bring about the theocratic application of consequences for breaking God's moral law.

To sum up, the priestly law was fulfilled in Christ (as he claimed himself throughout his ministry), the ethical law remains today in its universal form, though the specific applications have changed with the times. Lastly, the civil laws are largely irrelevant because of our larger political situation.

Below is a brief description of each of the books of the Torah along with some important sub-plots that help drive the over-arching story of GOD.

Genesis – Creation and Covenant

Genesis' first words, "in the beginning God created..." imply the reality of God's eternal existence and announce the spectacular transition to time and space. Genesis tells the story of God's relentless care for and pursuit of his creation. Starting with Abraham in Genesis 11, it tells the story of God's chosen people, Israel, from its inauspicious beginnings to the death of Joseph in Egypt.

Exodus – Slavery and Freedom

The second book of the Pentateuch records the miraculous deliverance of Israel from slavery to Egypt and the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It recounts the beginning of a repeated cycle of idolatry as Israel makes for themselves a god out of a golden calf.

Leviticus – Law and Holiness

Leviticus is a book of laws, containing God's vision for the flourishing of his people and their means of maintaining covenant relationship with him. It contains both priestly laws for the tabernacle and holiness laws for the people.

Numbers – Counting and Wandering

This book's title in the Hebrew Bible accurately represents the content – "Wilderness". Due to lack of trust in God, Israel did not want to engage its enemies militarily in order to claim the Promised Land. After seeing God's Promised Land, the Israelites respond in fear and lack of trust. As a result, God cause them to wander in the wilderness for an entire generation.

Deuteronomy – Law and Practice

Deuteronomy is a sermon preached by Moses on the Plains of Moab in preparation for GOD's people to enter the land of covenant promise (Gen. 12:1-3). The book focuses on the restatement and, to some extent, the reapplication of the law to Israel's new circumstances.

The Histories

How do we read the Histories?

The answer is at the same time simple and complex. At first glance we would read these books as simple histories, a telling and re-telling of the story of GOD's people, the Jews. But this is only scratching the surface as to the significance of these books. Many of these books are intertwined historically and each highlight different aspects of the story. For instance, the books of Samuel and Chronicles narrate nearly the same time period but from different perspectives. As stated above, the point of these books is not to give an exhaustive account of Israel but rather to show how GOD interacted with his people, leading them to the Promised Land and establishing their Kingdom.

Guidelines for Interpreting Biblical Narrative

History is the most common genre in the Bible, which makes it imperative that we understand how to read it well. One of the most important convictions of the Christian faith is that God has chosen to reveal himself primarily through the story of his involvement in human history. This involvement includes both astonishing moments like Israel's miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt and normal, human events like Jesus's remarkably unremarkable birth in Bethlehem. The idea that God primarily reveals himself through the story of his work in the world has led us to see the whole Bible as primarily a story about God.

The following principles of interpretation might be helpful to keep in mind as you read the histories:

- 1) First and foremost, as we mentioned above, the text is never an end unto itself. The text always points beyond itself to God. It is meant to be a means by which we know God more, so that we will love him more. We are to read “through” the Bible to see God behind them and the histories are no exception. We are meant to see God more clearly by seeing how he has worked in the world.
- 2) The Bible is not primarily a history book, so the text’s primary purpose is rarely to simply recount a blow-by-blow portrayal of events. The Bible is primarily the revelation of God to man, so the recounting of stories is meant to communicate God, his character and work in the world and the stories are told through that lens. Remember that the greatest commandment is to love God with all that you are. The scriptures then, are designed with that end in mind, not the filling of your brain with detailed accounts of premodern events.
- 3) Just like you would read any story, understanding the elements of the story are important, but only insofar as they contribute to the larger reading and effect of the text, not as ends unto themselves. The setting of a narrative, or historical context, involves physical (specific places, objects, or activities), cultural (customs, social values, belief systems, world view, attitudes), and temporal (political, national, and world events) dimensions.
- 4) In Scripture, narratives exist only in relation to a larger whole, not as isolated stories. The location of a particular story within a larger collection of stories or book (literary context) provides an additional setting for hearing the story. While the story itself may be studied on its own for its own message, the surrounding stories, the flow of thought of the larger work, as well as its historical and cultural setting affect how the individual story is to be heard.
- 5) God is always the central character of Scripture; it is God’s story. This suggests that we should be cautious about making Scripture directly address modern political, social, historical, or scientific issues.
- 6) Narrative is not a comprehensive report of data and will not answer all the questions that we want to ask it. Every storyteller is trying to accomplish something beyond simply recounting the details. Ask yourself, as you read, what is the author trying to accomplish?
- 7) The Bible does not always teach directly; often, the “teaching” is indirect and interactive, calling for us to decide what is the point or message, and whether the characters in the story acted appropriately. The point is to draw you “through” the story and into God.

- 8) Not all narratives are positive messages. Since the narratives reflect real life, the characters are not always heroes. Sometimes they demonstrate what we should not be or do. Sometimes even elements like prayers are negative models and represent how people should NOT approach God.
- 9) The application of the message of a narrative must be in a context that shares some dimension of the story. In other words, all narratives are not truth about everything; they are "incarnated" truth. A story cannot be used to mean something or address an issue that lies totally outside its original meaning or message.
- 10) Biblical narratives are not in and of themselves developed systematic theology or doctrine. That comes as the community of Faith reflects on and processes the narrative story of God in light of later and different circumstances, ways of thinking, and needs of the community.

Below is a brief description of each of the Historical books of the Bible along with some important sub-plots that help drive the over-arching story of GOD.

Joshua – Promise and War.

Joshua is the story of Israel under the leadership of its namesake, Joshua. It recounts the process of claiming the Promised Land of Canaan, war by war. Several famous stories are contained in it, including the story of Rahab and the miraculous, sonic destruction of Jericho's walls.

Judges – Sin and Repentance.

The story of Judges stands in stark contrast to Joshua. While Joshua is a story of Israel's faithfulness and, as a result, conquest, Judges describes a repeated cycle of disbelief, sin and consequence. Led by a series of judges, Israel struggles to keep themselves from the idols of the Canaanites. God used the judges to bring Israel to repentance but as soon as the judge died, they often returned to their idolatry and God punishes them.

Ruth – Humility and Repentance.

Ruth is the story of an ordinary woman who faced extraordinarily difficult circumstances but remained faithful to her family and to God. Widowed by her husband, Ruth returns to her mother-in-law Naomi's hometown, Bethlehem. Ruth is a Moabite, which makes her an outsider, but she soon meets a man named Boaz, a Jew who is related to her husband's family. Boaz has the power to "redeem" Ruth and bring her back into the family, but at great cost to himself. Boaz, the "kinsman redeemer" marries Ruth and in so doing rescues her and Naomi from a difficult life on the margins.

1 & 2 Samuel – Kings and Kingdoms.

Written in part by the prophet Samuel, these books give an account of one of the most memorable and important eras in Jewish history. It begins with the birth and calling of Samuel and his installation as prophet for Israel (Ch. 3). Israel then demands a King from God (Ch. 8), who, after warning them, relents and gives them Saul (Ch. 9). A brief period of conquest follows his anointing, but soon Saul's disobedience causes God's blessing to leave him. Saul is replaced by David as King who reigns over one of the most prosperous eras in Israel's history. Notable stories include David's battle with Goliath (Ch. 17) and David's affair with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) and Solomon's birth (2 Sam. 12). 2 Samuel ends with David's death amidst rebellion and royal chaos.

1 & 2 Kings – Wisdom and Prosperity.

The book of Kings (in two parts) recounts more than 150 years of Israel and Judah's history, including the entirety of Solomon's reign. Solomon rules an extremely prosperous time for Israel in which they enjoyed worldwide renown. Famous stories include Solomon's wish for wisdom granted (Ch. 3, 5), his judgment in the case of the two mothers (Ch. 3), a visit from the Queen of Sheba (Ch. 10) and the defeat of Israel at the hands of Babylonian and their deportation into captivity at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24, 25).

1 & 2 Chronicles – David and Solomon, again.

Chronicles covers the same time period as Kings but from the perspective of the Temple and the priesthood. It was written much later and is considered less reliable as a historical document. It functions more as a commentary on this period and reflects more positively on David and his reign than does Samuel.

Ezra & Nehemiah – Hope and a Wall.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the same story, each from the perspective of their titular character. The books record the end of the Babylonian captivity and the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. Nehemiah goes before King Artaxerxes and requests permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild his home city. The king grants his request and Nehemiah, together with Ezra, works to raise money and organize the Israelites to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and restore the culture of their people.

Esther – A Queen and a Rescue

The Book of Esther is set in the third year of Ahasuerus and tells a tale of palace intrigue, attempted genocide and a brave Jewish queen. The book of Esther is one of the most controversial books in the Old Testament. It is the only book that doesn't ever mention God and is widely considered a work of allegorical fiction. As allegory, it serves as a story of bravery and loyalty in the face of anti-Semitism.

The Wisdom Literature

How do you read Wisdom Literature?

The section of the Old Testament called the Wisdom literature makes up some of the trickiest parts of scripture from an interpretive standpoint. Each book is different in its literary style and substance and therefore cannot be directly connected to the other "Wisdom" books. For instance, the Psalms are poems and songs but were written for different purposes so even they cannot all be read the same way. The Proverbs are observations about how the world works from an incredibly wise man but are more descriptive than prescriptive. Job is a masterwork but a tangle of dialogue, heavenly narrative and possibly some allegory that all must be unraveled. Song of Solomon is an erotic love poem that has, at times, been banned from use in religious settings because of its provocative content. Because of this, we must look at each of these books separately, even though they are considered one genre in scripture.

Job – Pain and Suffering.

Job is the story of a wealthy family who lost everything, and the one survivor who had to keep it all together. Job loses all of his property, wealth, sons and daughters and then his own health in just the first two chapters of the book. What is unique about the story is the reason Job endures so much hardship, which is his holiness. Job is a righteous man, but Satan thinks that it's because God has protected and blessed him. He challenges God to allow him to curse Job as a test of his faith. God agrees, and Job suffers. The remaining forty chapters are Job's response to this tragedy, his wife's unhelpful input and the terrible advice of his friends. It ends with God's response to Job's suffering, which is to bless Job with twice what he had before Satan's intervention.

The Psalms - Praise and Lament.

The Psalms have been a source of inspiration and comfort for its readers for centuries. Some of our greatest contemporary songs of adoration come directly from the words of the Psalmist. There are all kinds of psalms and they are traditionally separated into a few categories. Laments, which constitute the largest portion of all the Psalms, are an expression of disappointment, struggle or grief to GOD.

Thanksgiving Psalms are just what they sound like, praises to GOD in times of blessing or protection. Hymns of Praise are specifically designed to give glory and praise to GOD for who he is and what he has done. These Psalms are different from Thanksgiving because they are independent of human history; they simply express eternal, blessed truths about God. Salvation Psalms are beautiful ways to remind the people of GOD of his provision throughout their lives. Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation could also be thought of as political Psalms. They were often songs of joy celebrating the enthroning of a King or the dedication of a city. Wisdom is a common theme throughout Jewish literature, so it should be no surprise that the Psalmist dedicates eight psalms to the subject of praising wisdom. The Jews were a people that had a long history of wars, slavery and strife, so Songs of Trust were a necessary part of their life as a people. These songs were sung during tough times and they often served as theological statements about GOD's trustworthiness.

How do read the Psalms?

Much like what we will find in Ecclesiastes and much of Proverbs the Psalms are, in many cases, more descriptive than they are prescriptive. Thus, we have to learn to be able to decipher the difference between a command of GOD for his people to be faithful, and a description of the faithfulness of Israel in times of trial. The Psalms should be read almost like you are peering into the diary of a loved one; at times you read for information, at times for inspiration, at times for guidance, and at times simply to know that someone else has experienced whatever pain or joy you are experiencing.

Proverbs – Wisdom and Folly.

The central theme to the book of Proverbs can be found in Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction." For the authors of Proverbs, there is no higher virtue than wisdom. It is the foundation of a godly way of life and mankind's only hope for flourishing. Proverbs is an unusual book in the sense that it is primarily descriptive, rather than prescriptive. For the most part, each proverb is an observation about the way life works, often connected to some advice about how to live in light of that observation. Because of this, we should read the proverbs as we might consider the wise words of a godly grandparent or elder in our church. These words are soaked in scripture, dripping with godliness and absolutely useful for everyday life.

Ecclesiastes – Meaning and Vanity.

In this powerful book, the author (probably Solomon near the end of his life) begins by saying, "All of life is vanity!" In the Hebrew, the word for vanity can also be translated "vapor" or "breath", so the

author (named as Qoheleth, Hebrew for teacher) frames his discussion in an almost nihilistic tone. By the end, he declares, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.” In between, he takes down nearly everything that mankind holds dear, from work to money, power and sex. For him, compared to knowing God, all else is vanity and a “chasing after the wind”.

How do we read Ecclesiastes?

Imagine sitting at the feet of a wise old person, perhaps a grandmother, and hearing her recount to you stories of her life and all that she learned from them. As a man that had seen many things, owned many things, traveled to many places, and experienced just about all this life has to offer Solomon has many stories to tell and much to reflect back on. Ecclesiastes is King Solomon’s swan song of sorts. He is considered to be the wisest man to ever live and as this wise man looks back at his life he sees patterns emerge that lead him to a few profound conclusions. His conclusion? That nothing in this world will ultimately satisfy so the only truly noble pursuit is God himself.

Song of Solomon – Love and Sex.

Song of Solomon is a dialogical poem between two lovers, a male and a female soon to be married. It is highly erotic in parts and genuinely romantic in others. Over the centuries, Christians have allowed puritanical impulses to make the poem about God’s relationship with Israel, but this misses the spirit completely (and is kind of gross). According to Jewish tradition, Solomon is responsible for three Old Testament books which parallel three states in a man's life: Song of Songs, which conveys the passionate energy of young adulthood; Proverbs, which expresses the earned wisdom of growing maturity; and Ecclesiastes, which articulates the cynicism that can come with age. Christians should embrace Song of Solomon as it is, a romantic poem that beautifully captures the passion and pain of young love.

The Prophets

Sometimes when we think of prophets, we picture something like fortune tellers. We envision these men of GOD as being somehow connected to the supernatural in such a way that they have insight into our lives today. Christians comb through the scriptures looking for hidden codes and double meanings to apply to our 21st century context. But, according to Jeffrey D. Breshears, the reality of the situation is that:

Less than 2% of OT prophecy is Messianic

Less than 5% specifically refers to the New Covenant Age

Less than 1% of all events pertain to things yet to happen

The prophets did speak of the future, but it was often the immediate future that was in view. In light of this, we need to recalibrate our thinking when it comes to Old Testament prophecy. It is therefore easier to understand the prophets if we think of them in these three categories.

They were covenant enforcement mediators.

This means that they were simply acting on GOD's behalf to enforce the law that had already been given to the people. So, whether it was judgment or praise coming from GOD, it was the prophet's job to communicate that to the people. There is a distinct format that the prophets often used to make their point. They would identify either the sin committed, or the obedience being commended and then tell the people what GOD was going to do in response to their actions.

The prophet's message was not their own, but GOD's

This means that we shouldn't read the prophets as angry self-righteous Jews who simply wanted to stick it to the Israelites or elevate their own standing in the community but as the direct voice of GOD in matters of faith and practice.

The prophet's message is unoriginal

Even though at times it may seem that a prophet is teaching Israel something new or unique the role of the prophet is never to make new doctrine or law. The prophet always rephrases GOD's law in his own words to make the law easier to understand, more particular to their historical context or to accentuate certain relevant aspects.

How do we read the Prophets?

We should read the prophets with much care and not without a Bible Commentary or Handbook. Many Christians think that anyone can simply go to scripture with nothing but the Holy Spirit and their brains and walk away with its true meaning. This is not true and is in fact a dangerous way to read scripture. All of scripture, but especially the prophets, require a great deal of understanding about the historical and spiritual context of the passage. For instance, many of the prophetic books are separated into distinct oracles or prophecies that are not necessarily in chronological order. This can confuse a reader as a prophet can seem to "jump around" from topic to topic with no clear direction.

Many modern Christians also read the Bible and prophecy specifically, as if it were focused on 21st century America, and assume that there are direct one-to-one correlations to events and people in the world today. We need to approach the prophets as they are, a direct word from God to particular people for a particular reason. Therefore, we must first understand those people and their context before we can begin to understand the teaching.

Isaiah – Judgment and Salvation

The overarching theme of Isaiah is one of Israel's rebellion in the midst of God's consistent blessing. Time and again, Israel turns from God and yet God remains in relationship with them, showers them with grace and promises a coming Messiah to ultimately bring about reconciliation. For Christians, Isaiah is a gold mine of messianic prophecy. It contains the Old Testament's greatest concentration of prophecy about Jesus first and second coming. See especially the 53rd chapter.

Jeremiah – Suffering and Exile

Jeremiah lived a difficult and turbulent life. He saw kingdoms fall, his message of salvation rejected, his hometown turn on him, Jerusalem sacked and many Israelites exiled to Babylon. The major theme of Jeremiah is God's coming judgment for Israel's sin coupled with his interminable aim to establish his people on earth.

Lamentations – Despair and Hope

Lamentations is a unique and powerful little book. It is filled with lament, a genre which is not normally a significant part of Christian worship. It honestly expresses the raw human emotion born out of the great destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting indignities at the hands of Israel's enemies. Though the wounds are deep, the book ends on a note of hope. In spite of – or perhaps because of – the candid agony of these laments, the author (or authors) comes through to the other side and is able to see God's sovereign hand in and through it all.

Ezekiel – Warning and Comfort

Two common themes emerge among all the exilic prophets, warning and comfort. On the one hand, each of the prophets spend ample time warning Israel about the coming judgment as a result of their sin. They mince no words about the depth and breadth of Israel's sin, and yet each of the prophets is quick to remind the exiled Jews that God is faithful despite their sin. In the end, God's covenant faithfulness cannot be undone by Israel's sin.

Daniel – Faithfulness and Sovereignty

Daniel follows the story of the young exiles Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael growing up in Babylonian captivity. Theirs is a story of faithfulness and flourishing in the midst of an oppressive monarchy. These young men face down fiery furnaces and lions' dens only to be faithfully rescued by their God. The book ends with a series of visions, delivered to Daniel, assuring him that despite the madness of the world around him, God still reigns sovereignly in heaven and nothing happens on earth outside of his control.

Hosea – Adultery and Mercy

Hosea's words scream off the page, in agony and rage. He calls Israel whores, unfaithful wives, a wayward son and a stubborn cow, leaving no doubt about the idolatry that has infected his people. It is among the most emotionally visceral books in the entire Bible and it makes it both exceedingly readable and exegetically unmanageable. In the end, God the faithful husband is loyal to his wayward bride.

Joel – Judgment and Spirit

The "day of the Lord" is the theme of this short book. This day of judgment will be for God's people and pagans alike, the difference being that those who maintain covenant faithfulness with God will be spared from destruction. In the last days before this final judgment, God will pour out his spirit on his people, empowering them to prophecy and dream.

Amos – Judgment and Accountability

Continuing the "day of the Lord" theme from Joel, Amos reminds Israel that God's judgment will be poured out on them, in addition to their neighboring enemies.

Obadiah – Jacob and Esau, redux

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. The theme of the book is the destruction of Edom as punishment for the harshness of Esau against his brother Jacob, which may or may not symbolize Edom's treatment of Israel.

Jonah – Mission and Racism.

Jonah is a prophet whom God asks to go to Nineveh to preach repentance so that the Ninevites might avoid God's judgment. Jonah hates Nineveh and, as a result, runs the other direction. In short, he gets swallowed by a large fish, prays hard, gets puked up on the shores of Nineveh three days

later, preaches, everyone converts and then he throws a fit because, if you remember, he hates the Ninevites. The last scene is God mocking Jonah for his selfishness and immaturity but hey, let's put this story on felt boards!

Micah – Exile and Messiah

Like most of the exilic prophets, the theme of Micah is judgment and forgiveness. This theme really sums up the Old Testament vision of God himself. God is unrelenting in his hatred and judgment for sin but also faithful to forgive and reconcile with the people he loves.

Nahum – Punishment and Destruction

Nahum prophecies the downfall of Assyria for their sins against God and Israel.

Habakkuk – Injustice and Demand

Habakkuk was a bold man. Seeing the sin of the Israelites and, he calls out to God for their destruction. He outright questions God for his delay in retribution and the Lord responds! By the end of the book, Habakkuk praises God for his wisdom and patience.

Zephaniah – idolatry and Wickedness

Zephaniah is a prediction of the destruction of Judah and the salvation of a small remnant of the faithful.

Haggai – Temple and Restoration

Haggai is a prophecy about the rebuilding of the Temple and the reconstitution of religious life in Jerusalem among the Jews.

Zechariah – Temple and Messiah

Zechariah, a contemporary of Haggai, encourages the people to not lose heart in their rebuilding project and his preaching proves effective. The temple is rebuilt under Zechariah's watchful eye.

Malachi – Gentiles and Jesus

Malachi's audience is not stricken by sin like most of the prophets but rather, the malaise of dead religion. His prophecy is a wakeup call to the Jews that the Messiah is coming and if they are not ready, salvation will come to the gentiles.

The four-fold Gospel...and Acts

The four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John recount the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Together they give the reader a multi-angled narrative of Jesus, that only one of them alone could not provide. Thus, from early on, the gospels were bound together and collectively known as “the gospel”. These books, separated in most Christian translations, are the heart of the Christian faith. Most of what the world knows about Jesus Christ comes from these texts and consequently they are arguably the most influential words ever written.

Each gospel is written by a man, from a perspective and to an audience. This may seem like stating the obvious, but it is critically important. The attentive reader will notice right away that there are differences between them. Each gospel picks up themes that are particularly relevant to them or their audience. Each uses words that reflect their own minds and they tell the story by using different structures. Every one has a different purpose for writing and that becomes clear through the narrative as particular stories are given attention in one account and scarcely mentioned in another. This can be disorienting to the modern mind, which expects scientific accuracy and expert reporting in all of their true stories, but it shouldn't be.

Imagine you and some friends are out one night to celebrate your birthday. You get dinner, see a movie, grab some drinks and then catch an Uber home. Imagine that on the way home, you get in an accident and each of you are asked to file a police report. The officer asks you to describe your evening and all of the events leading up to it. Would you expect that everyone in your party would give the same testimony, verbatim? I wouldn't. I would expect some to mention the movie and some to forget, some to give a larger narrative with commentary and unnecessary detail and some to start the moment we were hit. Now imagine that each of your party is telling the story to someone else. One to the police officer, another to a spouse, still another to a worried parent and the last to a co-worker the next day. Now would you expect them to be the same? This isn't far from what we see in the gospels. Each author is writing from the perspective of what they saw, heard and remembered. Each experienced those moments differently and cared about them to different degrees. Some were scandalized by the woman at the well and others transfixed by the Sermon on the Mount. Each also has a different audience and purpose for writing it all down in the first place. We simply can't read the gospels accurately or respectfully without first entering into the world of each author.

Matthew was a Jewish man writing to a primarily Jewish audience to announce the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. We know this because he chooses to use Jewish phrases like “the Kingdom of Heaven” and he quotes the Old Testament more than any of the other writers. Mark was written by Peter travel companion, John Mark, while he was in Rome. The content of the gospel assumes that his readers had little to no Jewish background or familiarity with the customs. Luke and John are no different in the sense that they are written by particular people to particular people and for a particular purpose. Thus, each takes on a slightly different flavor from the others. A lot of unnecessary ink has been spilled trying to reconcile these accounts to one another, but it misses the point and causes needless angst in the minds of Christians.

How do we read the gospels?

There are several different literary types used by Jesus in the gospels and we will look at each of them individually.

Parables

These are simple, folksy stories that Jesus uses to explain a complex theological concept in a way that common people could understand. Jesus was trying to describe a timeless omnipotent GOD to an agrarian, pre-modern people, so he relied heavily on the use of story to communicate eternal truths. Obviously, they are not intended to be read as historical or literal, they are inherently metaphorical and should be read as such.

Apocalyptic

There are some sections of Jesus’ teachings in the gospels that are considered apocalyptic in nature. Matthew 24 and Mark 13 are the clearest examples of this. Interpretations differ on these passages but our approach to reading them should be consistent. Apocalyptic literature uses metaphor and visual elements to reveal the otherwise unseen reality of a situation. Apocalypse, as a genre, isn’t primarily concerned with revealing the future but rather pulling back the veil to reveal what is true. It often unmask the apparently benign forces in the world as being evil and complicit in the larger struggle between good and evil. Much of the apocalyptic sections of the gospels are specifically about the fall of the temple in A.D 70, though some of it has a double (or telescopic) meaning for the future. It’s wise to read these sections alongside a trusted commentary and to remember that the goal of such a text is to cause us to turn to God more fully in light of persecution and uncertainty.

Narrative

Narrative is just what it sounds like; it is the story of Jesus' life on earth and should be read as you would any story. Much of the gospel simply tells the story of what Jesus did and who he met along the way. These are great opportunities for us to be able to enter into the life and times of Jesus to get a fuller picture of the world in which he lived and ministered. It can be a helpful reminder that Jesus wasn't a modern American, but a middle-eastern man who lived in a very different time and culture.

Metaphors

The gospel is full of metaphors and word pictures that Jesus paints to teach his disciples. For instance, when questioned about fasting in Matthew, Jesus answers by talking about a bride and a bridegroom. Similar to parables, these metaphors are an attempt to apply a universal truth to a specific situation. These references can seem anachronistic to us but with a little bit of creativity, we can often find easy modern analogs.

The Gospel according to Matthew – Messiah and Kingdom.

The primary theme of Matthew's gospel is summed up in this verse, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (5:17). Matthew aims to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for and specifically that he fulfilled the entire arc of the Old Testament, especially as the heir to David's throne. He does this by quoting the OT more than sixty times and alluding to it many times more.

The Gospel according to Mark – Discipleship and Sacrifice

John Mark was the disciple of and traveling companion to Peter. Mark's gospel, according to church father Eusebius (who was himself a disciple of John), was Peter's testimony about his time with Jesus. This gospel is almost completely devoid of Jewish references or Old Testament allusions. It was written when John Mark was in Rome and is clearly aimed at gentiles.

The Gospel according to Luke – Gentiles and Kingdom

Luke's is the most comprehensive and even-handed of all the gospels. Luke was a companion of Paul's and, as he writes in his opening to both the gospel and Acts, he conducted a thorough investigation of the events surrounding Jesus' life and the early church. Luke was also a doctor, so he tends to be more thorough and objective than the other gospels, not tipping his hand to biases as readily. In spite of that, Luke is clearly written to gentile Christians who had converted to Christ but hadn't heard the full story. Luke sets out to give them all the background information they'd need to

see that Jesus was clearly the Messiah and that the Christian tradition they'd entered into was the natural result of Jewish history.

The Gospel according to John – Son and Spirit

John's gospel is the most unique of the four and not accidentally. Church father Clement of Alexandria described the gospel this way, "Last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain [in the other canonical Gospels] ... composed a spiritual gospel" (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7). John's approach is more contemplative than it is descriptive. Picture John sitting by himself, near the end of his life, taking time to reflect back on his life with Jesus. He is writing a memoir more than a report and, as a result, the gospel feels personal and intimate. He makes a priority of the theme of Jesus as the Son of God, juxtaposes light and dark, and talks a lot about the Spirit.

Acts – Mission and Church

The Acts of the Apostles, as the book has been often called, tells the story of the early church. Starting with the ascension of Jesus to heaven, it traces the missionary work of the apostles and the expansion of the church in its first two decades. The first half of the book follows Peter closely as he establishes the church in Jerusalem. It records his sermon at Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all in attendance and the immediate growth of the church. Starting in chapter 8, the focus shifts to Paul, his conversion, training and missionary journeys.

The Epistles

The epistles are letters written by early church leaders in order to instruct, encourage and correct Christians in their care. The majority of them (13 to be exact), were written by the apostle Paul and most of those were to churches he had planted. Peter, James, John and Jude author the remaining books, with the exception of Hebrews, which has uncertain authorship. The epistles provide Christians with the bulk of their theological, ecclesiological and ethical teaching, so they are critically important to read and understand. The genre of epistle is perhaps the most modern in the Bible. The argumentation and logic of Paul's writing, in particular, is thoroughly Greek, which should be familiar to our modern minds. This means that the epistles are especially accessible to the modern reader and shouldn't require as much special expertise. That being said, Paul's arguments can be lengthy and involved so it is not exactly light reading. A faithful reading still requires attention and humility in order to both understand and submit to its truth. As you read, challenge yourself to follow the logic of

the passage in order to understand not just the ethical teaching, but the deeper truth in which it is often rooted. This can bring the passage to life because in it we come to grasp that it's not just telling us what to do, but who we are.

Romans – Sovereignty and Salvation

The theme of Romans is the revelation of God's judgment and salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the cross of Christ, God judges sin and yet at the same time manifests his saving mercy. Paul begins at the root of man's problem, namely sin and its root. For most of the first three chapters, he describes the brokenness and depravity that plagues our world, not mincing words about the depth of our problem. He pivots in chapter four, addressing his Jewish audience members by establishing the fact that Abraham himself was justified by faith and not by works. This is the central argument of Paul's ministry but especially in Romans. He spends chapters five through nine describing God's sovereign grace to save those who are dead in sin. He pivots again in chapter 10 to describe the Christian life in light of God's sovereign grace, encouraging people to share the gospel, submit to authorities and follow Christ's example.

1 Corinthians – Correction and Unity

First Corinthians primarily addresses Paul's concerns about church unity and Christian practice. This is not to say that the book is not theologically heavy, it is. In fact, much of our Christology (beliefs about Christ), Pneumatology (Holy Spirit) and Eschatology (The End) come from this book. The occasion for Paul's writing, however, was a growing division in the church related to demographics and socio-economics, which was having seriously deleterious effects on the church's ability to function together in healthy ways. The sex scandals and drunken Eucharist get all the attention, but the divisions ran deep into arguments about spiritual gifts and the resurrection. Anyone who romanticizes the life of the early church should be reminded that the church has always been broken because it has always included people.

2 Corinthians – Suffering and Credibility

Second Corinthians is Paul's defense of his ministry against those questioning his apostolic credibility. His accusers try to use his suffering and generosity against him, but to no avail. Paul roundly defeats their arguments by showing how the collection for the saints in Jerusalem and all of his various personal setbacks were, in fact, evidence of God's grace in and through him. He argues that enduring suffering is not evidence of the absence of the Spirit of God in him but actually a demonstration of the same spirit by which Jesus himself suffered. Second Corinthians might be the most personal and

emotional of all Paul's letters, as he pours himself out on the pages the way he had poured out his life in ministry to his readers.

Galatians – Circumcision and Grace

After Paul planted the church in Galatia, he moved on to continue his ministry elsewhere, leaving the church to lead itself. It did not go well. Shortly after Paul left, false teachers infiltrated the church and began to teach a gospel that included adherence to Jewish laws, especially circumcision. Paul admonishes his friends in Galatia to remember that a return to Jewish ritual law is a return to slavery and a rejection of his ministry.

Ephesians – Election and Inclusion

The book begins by reminding the Ephesians that their salvation was completely by the sovereign grace of God. From this, Paul draws several conclusions about what it means to live as a Christian, but the primary theme is that of unity. He points out that most of them were gentiles before meeting Christ and disconnected from God's grace as a result. He calls them to racial unity in light of the universal grace they received from Christ. He draws similar conclusions for husbands and wives, children and parents and even slaves and their masters.

Philippians – Suffering and Joy

The big theme of Philippians is to find joy in the midst of suffering. For Paul, this came from firsthand knowledge. He had been shipwrecked, beaten and was imprisoned when he wrote this letter. He wants the Philippians to know that joy is not found in circumstances, but in the love of Christ. In light of this, he admonishes his readers to press on to ever-deepening holiness because it is only in Christ that we find the wholeness that we long to experience.

Colossians – Christ and the New Self

Paul is writing to the Colossians to refute some heresy that has infiltrated their church. Though the exact nature of the heresy is unclear from the text, it appears to be a form of Jewish mysticism. Paul's response is interesting in that instead of refuting the heresy directly, he simply calls his readers back to the preeminence of Christ. Whatever the false teachers were teaching, Paul knew that simply reminding the church that Christ was the "image of the invisible God" and "firstborn over all creation" and that through him God had chosen to "reconcile all things to himself", would anchor them to the truth and keep them from being led astray.

1 Thessalonians – Love and Warning

This book splits neatly into two distinct sections; the first a reminder of Paul's love for the church and the second a series of warnings about specific temptations. More than any other book, Paul goes to great lengths to communicate his love for the church in Thessalonica, telling them how often he thinks about and prays for them. This is likely done to set up the second half of the book, in which he confronts them very directly about their sin.

2 Thessalonians – Warning and the Man of Lawlessness

Apparently, the Thessalonians were stubborn. In many ways, Second Thessalonians is a restatement of the second half of Paul's first letter to them. The main difference is the time Paul takes to talk about an eschatological "man of lawlessness", who is the ultimate embodiment of Paul's warnings about sin.

1 Timothy – Elders and Deacons

First Timothy is the first of Paul's three "pastoral letters". In it, he addresses Timothy, his "child in the faith", a young man that Paul disciplined and left in Ephesus to lead the church. The book is the most practical of all the epistles, especially for pastors. In it, he outlines qualifications for elders and deacons, how to lead various groups in the church and how to watch out for false teachers.

2 Timothy – Encouragement and Steadfastness

Second Timothy is the kind of letter that every pastor needs to receive from their mentor. While Paul is still very practical, his instruction is aimed at Timothy's heart more than it is his leadership. He implores him to be a "good soldier" and an "approved workman", to watch out for godlessness in the last days and to continue to preach the word. One can infer that Timothy's ministry context was challenging and Paul knew he would need encouragement to keep the faith.

Titus – Elders and Doctrine

In many ways, Titus is a carbon copy of First Timothy, though written more succinctly. Both Timothy and Titus were left behind by Paul to lead their respective churches. He writes to encourage and help them lead, implicitly recognizing that one of the key functions of leadership is surrounding yourself with other good leaders.

Philemon – Slavery and Brotherhood

Onesimus was the runaway slave of Paul's friend Philemon, an offense that warranted the death penalty in Paul's time. In this short letter, Paul leans on the friendship and Christian convictions of Philemon to show grace to Onesimus when he returns home.

Hebrews – Jews and Jesus

Hebrews is the most unique book in the entire New Testament. Its uniqueness is born of the fact that no one is confident in the author, the date of its writing, its occasion or its specific audience. For these reasons, it has also been one of the NT's most contested books. Most scholars agree that the author is not Paul, but beyond that, there is no consensus. What is clear is that the book was written for Jewish Christians so that they would see clearly that Jesus supersedes, and in fact, completes each and every aspect of Judaism. Jesus is described as being greater than the angels, Moses, Sabbath, High Priest, Melchizedek, and as the one whom has established a better covenant by his better sacrifice.

James – Faith and Works

The epistle of James is the wisdom literature of the New Testament. The book is famous for its teaching about the relationship between faith and work, which seem to (but don't) disagree with Paul's. James simply makes the point that the kind of "faith" that doesn't result in any change of life is a waste of time, and not really Christian faith. This is an idea that Paul would certainly agree with, but the way James makes the point makes the reader have to pay close attention. The rest of the book is practical Christian wisdom about how the gospel applies to different life situations.

1 & 2 Peter – Persecution and Perseverance

These two letters, written by the Apostle Peter, bear resemblances to one another, and so will be discussed together. They are both written to a broad Jewish audience, spread out across the Roman empire and both deal with Christian living in light of persecution. Peter had dealt with persecution himself and so writes from a place of empathy. His advice to his readers is to cling to Christ, live empowered by the Holy Spirit and to hold out hope of the final restoration of all things.

1, 2 & 3 John – Love and Truth

All of the Johns are written by the Apostle John, the first is to an unnamed audience, while the second and third letters are written to specific people, namely the "elect lady and her children" and Gaius. First John goes into great depth about love as the fullest embodiment of Christian

Truth and its highest virtue. The second and third letter both applaud their readers for living out the message of the first letter.

Jude – Contend and Persevere

Like many of the epistles, Jude is written in the context of Roman and Jewish persecution. He implores his readers in this short letter to both “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” and to persevere in the midst of trial. He ends with a beautiful and quotable doxology that roots their hope in Christ’s power.

Revelation – The Churches and The End

Revelation is easily the most misunderstood book in the whole Bible. For centuries, otherwise intelligent and well-meaning Christians have sought to understand the cryptic messages of Revelation and decode an exact date of Christ’s return. By the end of the scriptures, Christians ought to know three things: first, that Christ is coming back to redeem his church and restore his creation to its perfect form, second, we have no idea when that will be, and finally, we must be ready at all times for his return. This is the clear teaching of scripture on the subject of end times.

In spite of its mystery, Revelation is a valuable resource for Christians in at least three ways. First, the opening chapters of the book are written instructions to seven different churches about sin that has crept into their communities and how to deal with it. We can read these as we would the epistles, as instruction for our moral and theological well-being. Second, we see a model of worship consistently outlined throughout Revelation. Time after time, Christ is revealed and is subsequently worshipped. We take this as a model for worship today that we ought to first come to Christ in humility and repentance as he is revealed through his scriptures and then we respond in worship. Lastly, we see portrayed an awesome, all-powerful and conquering GOD who reigns on high and is not defeated by evil. This gives us hope as adopted children of a sovereign GOD that he will not leave us nor be bound by anything to save us.