

How to Read the Bible, Part II

NCCT CityBuild

Jacques Boulet

Dec 3, 2017

Christ-Centered Interpretation

A lot of people read the Bible; many of them come up with interpretations different from ours. How do we adjudicate between interpretations? The starting point must be Jesus.

As committed Christians we believe that the Bible is, from beginning to end, the self-revelation of the one true God who was made manifest once and for all in the man Jesus. It is in and through Jesus the Christ¹ that the story beginning in Genesis 1 and ending in Revelation 22 makes sense and offers hope.

Consider what Jesus Himself said to the two men on the road to Emmaus after he had risen from the tomb (Luke 24:25-32, 44-47 ESV):

Luke 24:25 And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! **26** Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” **27** And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. **28** So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, **29** but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. **30** When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. **31** And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. **32** They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”...

Luke 24:44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” **45** Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, **46** and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, **47** and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

A true Christian reading of the Bible, therefore, must be Christ-centered. This is not the same as what you find elsewhere, that people want to impose a foreign framework (e.g.

1. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. Both words mean ‘anointed one’ and therefore communicate the fact that Jesus is the one chosen by God to bring salvation.

Marxism) on the text and use it to pull out whatever they are looking for.¹ Rather, we believe that the Bible actually is, in a big picture sense, about Jesus (and not, for example, about class struggle).

It is therefore appropriate to consider how any particular passage might be pointing you to Jesus. This may be the case in any number of ways. Consider these examples:

- Reading all the books from Judges through 2 Kings together one may conclude that 1) the period before there was a king was bad for the people, that 2) the period when there was a king was equally bad, and that 3) the text leaves suggestive hints that the best case scenario would be a perfect king, somewhat like David, but much more. Jesus, a distant descendant of David, fulfills the longing expressed in these Old Testament texts, which also reflect the painful state of a world in the hands of mere capricious mortals.
- Proverbs 11:18 reads as follows: “The wicked earns deceptive wages; but he who sows righteousness gets a true reward.” Passages like Psalm 37 and Job suggest that people were well aware of the fact that in this life the wicked sometimes live comfortably, while the godly suffer. Yet, in light of Jesus, Prov 11:18 is ultimately true, no matter how smug the wicked may be. Jesus promises that unbelievers and wicked people will receive the eternal punishment they have deserved when He returns to judge the world. At that time those who believed in Him and who upheld righteousness in their lives will receive the eternal reward He has reserved for us.

Resources

- **A Good Translation of the Bible:** The first and most important resource is the Bible itself. There are many translations out there. Make sure you understand the translation philosophy of the Bible you are reading and know why you have chosen to use that particular translation.
- **Study Bibles:** Nowadays there are several high quality study Bibles. A good study Bible can serve as a summary resource of all those that follow in this list. There will often be introductions to each book of the Bible (including answers to questions of authorship, date, context, and overall message), helpful maps, and selected commentary on the text to explain the more complicated issues. Keep two things in mind:
 - 1) It is a good idea to read a passage through on your own without any study aids at least one time before going to any secondary sources. This helps you to practice

1. Consider the difference between the terms ‘exegesis’ (literally ‘to lead out’) and ‘eisegesis’ (literally ‘to bring or lead in’). What we want to do is ‘exegesis,’ that is, to understand what is already in the text and needs to be brought out. What we don’t want is ‘eisegesis’ which is to come to a text looking only to validate our own presuppositions and to impose our thoughts on the text and claim those as the authoritative meaning of the text.

forming your own interpretations and identifying the specific questions that you have about the text.

2) Not all study Bibles are good. If you are interested in getting one for yourself and don't know how to identify a good resource, I recommend asking an elder for advice.

- **The Bible Project:** Check out <https://thebibleproject.com> for a number of accessible video summaries of individual books of the Bible and of various Bible themes.
- **Commentaries:** A good commentary can be very useful. Commentaries are generally book length studies written by professional Bible scholars on a single biblical book (or several if the books are short ones) with the purpose of presenting a comprehensive analysis of the book as a whole as well as verse by verse. You can go to a commentary to answer very specific questions about the wording of a particular sentence, or you can read it for more big picture information, whether that is historical background to a Bible passage, theological implications of the text, or practical application. Again, there are many kinds of commentaries and not all of them are good. If you are looking for a good commentary I recommend asking for advice.
- **Dictionaries / Encyclopedias:** If you come across a person, place, building, ritual, etc. in the Bible that you want to know more about, a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia might be the best place to go. Good dictionaries will help you figure out what is known about the land of Uz (where Job is from), what kind of beliefs were associated with the worship of the Canaanite god Molech, whether people named James in the New Testament are the same person, etc. As always, some dictionaries are better than others.
- **Atlases:** Maps are so useful. If you want to know where something was or what the route was to get from one place to another, you want a good map. There are really fantastic Bible atlases out there with comprehensive maps. Note that nowadays many Bibles come with several quite useful maps at the end of the book and often these are sufficient.
- **Biblical / Systematic theologies:** Understanding a particular verse is one thing. Tying it into the big picture is something else. If you are interested in knowing more about how the image of water is used in the gospel of John to symbolize the life-giving Holy Spirit, or if you want to know what the implications of the word 'atonement' used in your English translation are, then a work of biblical or systematic theology may be the most helpful resource. If you come across a subject that you really want to dig into, then have a conversation with someone who can point you to a good theological work on the right subject.
- **Biblical / contextual background histories** (e.g. ancient Near Eastern history; Greco-Roman world): In part 1 I talked a lot about context. Sometimes a passage only becomes clear when you understand what the world of ancient Israel was like, including beliefs, practices, culture, and political power. A book dedicated to the history of the Near East or to the Roman empire might help you understand the backdrop for the Bible.

- **Cross-references:** Many Bibles come with cross-references printed alongside the biblical text. Cross-references can be useful for finding more related Scriptures somehow related to the one you are reading. Note that cross-references are limited by what the editors thought was most relevant and by what they could fit onto the page. Examples of what you might find with cross-references are: 1) Old Testament mentions of a term, story, or prophecy raised in a New Testament text; 2) parallel accounts in the other gospels of the same event; 3) other places where a similar argument, image, or term is used.
- **Concordances:** Remember that what you are reading is a translation and sometimes English words don't bring out exactly what an ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word meant. The best way to really understand a word is to see it in all the contexts in which it is attested. Bible concordances are matched to particular translations and help you look up all the occurrences of particular words. For example, you could look up all the occurrences of 'propitiation' in the ESV to try to determine what the original Greek word is and whether there are any other ways that it is translated. Today there is less need for concordances than there used to be. If you have access to a digital version of the Bible, then you should be able to perform word searches directly on the text to achieve the same result.
- **Bible software:** There are many free and paid for apps and websites that can be useful to Bible study. These generally allow you to display different translations side by side. You may be able to add commentaries or other resources in the same window. The ability to perform searches on the text can be very useful.
- **The Internet:** As you know, the internet gives you access to all kinds of things. I recommend extreme caution. If it is available for free on the internet, then you have no guarantee that it is any good (unless someone you trust has specifically recommended something to you). Anything free could be flat out wrong and written by someone without training or it could be very old and out of date. In general, good stuff costs money.¹ That said, several Christian organizations (including well known seminaries) are starting to put quality resources online for free. If you have any questions or doubts, talk to one of the elders.

1. It might be worth checking the library for something you'd like to access.

Learn by Doing: The Epistle of Jude

1. Read through the whole book.

a) Identify one or more verses that provide the interpretive key to the message of the book.

b) In one sentence, summarize the main message of the book of Jude.

c) Identify any questions you have about the text. Make a note of what kind of resources you could use to find answers to your questions.

2. Intended audience:

a) Who is the intended audience and how do you know? Try to estimate the relative date of composition for this book.

b) Now that you know the intended audience, what implications does this have for the application of Jude's message to our own lives?

3. Intertextual knowledge:

a) Jude assumes that his audience knows certain things (how do you know?). What biblical and extra-biblical texts does Jude expect his audience to be familiar with?

b) What levels of Jude's meaning are illuminated by knowing well those other texts?

4. Christ-centered reading:

a) What does Jude have to say about Jesus Christ?

b) Is there anything else that you could say about the book of Jude in relation to our Lord? If so, what other passages of Scripture could you connect to the point you are making?

5. Imagine you are preparing a series of Bible studies. Read through the book again and determine whether you would prefer to break up the text into 2, 3, or 4 portions (or any number above 1). Identify the boundaries for your sections and for each one provide a one sentence summary for the message of that section.