

the Bible tells *me* so

NAME:



# the *big* story

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”  
- Genesis 1:1

## Introduction

The Bible is magnificent.

Written by 40 authors written approximately over a 1500 year period, it is written in three languages and reflects changing times and culture. Within this single volume sit many ‘books’ and numerous genres, showing the manifold wisdom of God through poetry, history, prophecy, law, wisdom literature and stories.

Reading it in the 21st Century we face challenges such as the passage of time, cultural dissonance, geographical ignorance and literary change, all of which floods our task with difficulty and has caused its message at times to be misunderstood and misrepresented to its audience.

Teaching and coaching people how to read the Bible is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

## Challenge: Individualism and Opportunity

**Remember**, the original audience of this great text probably heard it in community before they read it as individuals. Hearing it as ‘we’ not primarily ‘me’. Study of the bible would have been therefore a largely corporate experience, not left to the individual alone, thus granting the sharing of wisdom and resources.

For 21st century followers of Jesus, this has radically changed, and thus impacted the way we engage with the Bible.

**We often read it and don’t hear it.**

**We mostly read and study it alone... not together.**

We may need to recover how the original audience heard and engaged with the Bible, but at the same time, we need to adapt and train in a world saturated with resources available to the individual.

The goal of this series is to put some tools in our hands that will help us dig and mine the riches contained within this sacred text.

As we approach the Book... let us consider;

## Attitude to the Scriptures

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man/woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” - 2 Timothy 3:16-17

We cannot hear that term and how Paul is using it and not be drawn to Genesis, when the Lord God breathed into the man and he became a living being.

- Divine Origin
- Divine Life
- Divine Purpose

“Cultivate a hermeneutics of adoration - see how large, how splendid, how magnificent life is.”<sup>1</sup>

## Awareness of Self

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.” (Ps.139:23)

**We often see as we are... not as it is**

**We see from where we are**

We bring our nature, nurture, culture, history, context and traditions to the text. We must take care not to impose ourselves onto the text, but rather allow it to shape us.

“If our cultural blindspots keep us from reading the Bible correctly, then they can also keep us from applying the Bible correctly.”<sup>2</sup>

What might help us?

- Honesty
- Humility
- Heroism

# Appreciation for/of the Story

“In the beginning God...”

Elohim is the third word in the text and He’s mentioned 34 times in the first 34 verses of the bible. This is His story, yet it becomes our story.

The way we read the bible generally has the danger of disconnecting us from the big story of the bible. Though many stories, it is one. A grasp of the **BIG** story will help us to understand the ‘little stories’ and even help us interpret it into our story.

“The unity of the Bible is not confined to individual books or isolated passages; rather, it extends throughout the entire canon. Each book contributes to the broader narrative, revealing God’s redemptive plan for humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

Simply learn the big story.

Identify the themes of the big story.

## Why is this important?

- All stories are part of a bigger story and must be seen as such.
- It allows us to place books and their characters within an important timeline.
- It helps us to identify design themes and repeat ideas that recycle over and over again.
- We are drawn into a dynamic progressive story of unfolding revelation.
- It enables us to properly and dynamically understand Jesus and the role of the Church.

“This is God’s story, the story of his unfathomable love and grace, mercy and forgiveness - and that is also how it becomes our story.”<sup>4</sup>

“Open my eyes that I may see, wonderful things in Your Torah/Law.” - Psalm 119:18









# the library *of* wonder

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” - 2 Timothy 2:15

“Texts are not toddlers; they cannot wander around as they like, do as they like, rant and rave as they like; no, texts have a parent in their author and guardians in their readers.”<sup>5</sup>

## How can we become good guardians?

By reading these texts well, and as all guardians know, this is a learning process.

As we begin...

- We have to adapt to the text.
- The Bible is written for us, but it wasn't written to us or about us.
- We must take the Scriptures seriously, but not always literally.
- Our quest should be primarily 'what does it say?' not, 'what does it say to me?'
- Embrace ambiguity
- Manage paradox

“This is the literary genius of the bible, it forces you to keep reading and interpret each part in light of the others.”<sup>6</sup>

## Genres - the way the Bible is written

Imagine walking into a library or bookshop.

A book is a book... but they are not all the same.

Each section will speak, but in a different way, that demands from us a different skill or approach.

Within the books of the Bible we see narrative, history, law, prophecy, wisdom, prayers, poetry, parables, letters and apocalyptic.' All of these are speaking, but to hear them, we must recognise how they speak and thus adapt the way we hear. Unawareness of this then causes us to read everything the same, thus potentially hindering our understanding of what is being said.

**“If you don’t pay attention to the style it is written in you will miss out on the brilliance of each book.”<sup>7</sup>**

So what are the main genres (styles of writing) within the Bible?

- Narrative
- Poetry
- Prose-discourse

## Narrative

An account of connected events with stories that often help us make sense of events... help us to see meaning and purpose for them and us.

### **Some tips:**

- Know the whole story
- Pay attention to the setting
- Who are the main characters and what are we told?
- Does this story connect to other stories

# Poetry

1 out of every 3 chapters in the bible are poetry.

The majority of God's speech in the bible is 'poetry'.

"The poem ignites your imagination through the experience of verbal art." <sup>8</sup>

## What is the purpose of Poetry?

to slow us down, so we can contemplate, reflect and then act.

What to watch out for.

- **Free verse... they don't use rhyme like ours - Exodus 15:1-18**
- **Couplets (especially in the wisdom books)**
  - Couplets that Complete the thought - Proverbs 13:14
  - Couplets that deepen the thought - Proverbs 12:9
  - Couplets that contrast the thought - Proverbs 10:12
  - Groups of couplets can come together to reinforce a key idea - Proverbs 18:10-11 and 18:20-21

## **A Word about Proverbs**

Think principles and probabilities rather than commands and promises.

“Understanding the genre helps us see this as a general guideline, not a 100% guarantee.”<sup>9</sup>

## **A Word about the Psalms**

The largest collection of poetry.

They retell the entire biblical story and invite us into a literary temple. They are designed for a life-time of slow reading and reflection.

Look out for...

## **Refrain**

A key line repeated multiple times.

**Psalm 136 is a great example.**

## **Inclusio**

They open and close with the same line or idea.

**Psalm 8 is a great example.**

## **Chiasm**

A reversed or mirrored sequence, sometimes with a central idea.

**Psalm 23 is a stunning example of this.**

## **Poetic Metaphor**

This can be a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to people, an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.

**Ezekiel 23:20 is an eye-opening example of this.**

## **Hyperbole**

These are exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally, but help us get a point. Jesus employed this on numerous occasions.

**Check out Matthew 5:29-30.**

## Prose - Discourse

This would include speeches, law, sections of the wisdom books and letters. The focus is building a sequence of ideas or thoughts to a linear argument that requires a logical response.

### **Follow the argument and keep it connected**

“... how parts of the Bible seek to persuade, not merely to impart information to someone, but to move them toward a certain point of view.”<sup>10</sup>

**Philemon is a great example of this.**

One more genre, style, that sits within these yet needs a little extra attention;

## Apocalyptic literature:

“The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.” - Revelation 1:1-2

Apocalyptic literature is books or passages that describe apocalyptic dreams and visions. Individuals such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and John (Revelation) would fit within this category.

Sections of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel & Revelation.

### What is our approach?

- Where symbols are explained... accept with confidence
- Where symbols are not explained... be careful
- Where specifics are not clear, lean into the bigger picture

Apocalyptic literature can give us “... a heavenly perspective on our earthly circumstances, so that every generation of God’s people can be challenged, comforted and given hope for the future.”<sup>11</sup>

**So, enter and enjoy the library of wonder.**







# *time* travellers

“Oh, how I love Your Torah! I meditate on it all day long.” - Psalm 119:97

**We must understand the Scriptures in the context in which they were written if we are to understand and apply them into the context in which they are read.**

“A fundamental principle in the interpretation of texts, including the Bible, is that every text carries a singular meaning — the one that the author intended when writing it.”<sup>12</sup>

But how can we know the ‘intended meaning’ of the author or speaker when we are so far away from them?

**Context - context - context!**

“Texts do not yield interpretative fruit when plucked from the native soil in which they were rooted.”<sup>13</sup>

To help us understand the original intention or meaning, we’ll consider in this session ‘circles of context’.

However, as Shillington adds;

“‘Making sense’ **does not mean arriving inevitably at certainty**. It means, rather, that more light is shed on the issues to the end that higher probability may be reached.”<sup>14</sup>

## Cultural Context

Luke 9:59-60 'let the dead bury the dead.'

Maps... sometimes it is so useful to have one of these to hand when reading certain bits of the bible, especially the Gospels and Acts.

## Passage Context

Remember, chapters and verses (and headings) were not in the original text, so to help us the translators have inserted them in.

Train yourself to read what went before and what follows to discern whether this alters the way the verse or statement is understood.

Luke 15:11-32 'the prodigal son'

## Book Context

An awareness of the purpose or trajectory of the book in general, can inform how you read it. Does the book itself give us a clue as to what to expect and how then we might read it?

### Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

Ask some questions when approaching any book of the Bible... sometimes these are helpful and sometimes not so much, but it's a good habit to develop.

- Who is writing?
- To whom are they writing?
- Why are they writing?
- When are they writing? (Meta history or personal)

## Bible Context

One of the best ways to interpret the Bible is by using the Bible. This is a principle known as **‘Scripture interpreting Scripture.’**

One part of the bible helps us to understand another part of the bible.

“To truly understand and interpret the Bible accurately, it is essential to consider each verse, chapter, and book within the context of the entire scripture.”<sup>15</sup>

“If anyone comes to me and does not **hate** father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” - Luke 14:26-27

### **What is Jesus saying? What can Jesus not be saying?**

- Torah
- Tradition
- Language

In trying to discern the meaning of any given text or statement, context must always be part of the process. To ignore context opens the door for us to make the Bible say whatever we want it to say, a world where eisegesis rules over exegesis.







he said, *she said*

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord my Rock and my Redeemer.” - Psalm 19:14

Many times in the Bible we are confronted with statements made by various people, and one of the great challenges for us as readers is discerning whether the true record of their words is actually Truth we can or should live by.

### **Their words are true... but are they Truth?**

““Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”” - Ruth 1:20-21

### **These words of Naomi are true... but are they Truth?**

Some guidance;

- All statements made by a member of the God-head are Truth.
- Angels and humans speaking by inspiration of the Spirit can be trusted as Truth.
- Some statements are intended only for a particular individual or group.
- Some statements are clearly applicable to all.
- Human opinions should be carefully tested.

## Book of Job

This is a great example of how tricky this can be.

Within this story eight persons speak;

God, satan, Job's wife, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar (his 3 friends) and Elihu.

### **The Adversary;**

We can only 'trust' his words in the light of divine responses.

We do not take our doctrine or lead from demonic.

### **Job**

"May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!'" - Job 3:3

"May those who curse days curse that day..." - Job 3:8

"As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made my life bitter..." - Job 27:7

### **Can we trust his words?**

Responding to the Lord's loving rebuke;

"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." - Job 42:5-6

## Friends... 3 cycles of speech

Job chapters 3-14, 15-21 and 22-28.

### Eliphaz

“Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?  
Where were the upright ever destroyed?

As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.” - Job 4:7-8

### Zophar

“A flood will carry off his house, rushing waters on the day of God’s wrath.

Such is the fate God allots the wicked, the heritage appointed for them by God.” - Job 20:28-29

### Bildad

“How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure?

If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less a mortal, who is but a maggot— a son of man, who is only a worm!” - Job 25:16

### Elihu

“... Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong.

He repays everyone for what they have done; He brings on them what their conduct deserves.

It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice.” - Job 34:10-12

## Can we trust their words?

“I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right...” (Job 42:7)

So when he said or she said, how should we read their words?

### Read carefully

- Who is speaking?
- Why are they speaking?
- What are they speaking?

### Read contextually

Apply to any human speaker the same principles of context that allow us to discern what is being said and with a measure of humble confidence, come to a conclusion on what they said.

## Imprecatory Psalms

Psalms 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, and 140

They take their name from the verb ‘to imprecate’, which carries the idea of invoking a curse. These are Psalms that call upon God to destroy, curse, or judge the wicked and they are not for the faint hearted.

The fundamental objection is that these Psalms don’t sound like Jesus and seem to contradict His call for us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

### How should we read them and are we allowed to pray them?

We’ll use **Psalm 69** as an example:

The first section in **verses 1-21** is simply David describing his condition and circumstances and asking the Lord to help him.

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck...”  
- Psalm 69:1

“Answer me, LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me.” - Psalm 69:16

The third section in **verses 29-36** is David generally affirming his confidence in the Lord to do what is right.

“Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them, for God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah.” - Psalm 69:34-35

All of us could identify with this... and would have very little difficulty aligning with this language.

However, right in the middle we have some troublesome language, contained in seven verses, namely, **Psalm 69:22-28**. This section culminates with Psalm 69:28;

**“May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.”**

Interestingly the New Testament references this Psalm on a number of key occasions in connection with the life of Jesus;

- Psalm 69:9 - John 2:17
- Psalm 69:4 - John 15:25
- Psalm 69:21 - John 19:28-29
- Psalm 69:25 - Acts 1:20

## So how should we read them?

- The New Testament writers, rather than rejecting them, reference and use them with care.
- These Psalms affirm the presence of conflict and struggle for the righteous.
- They are not a licence for vengeance but a place to plead our case.
- They teach us ultimately to surrender our desires to His wisdom.
- They remind us that there is someone and something bigger and greater than the moment we are in.

What are we praying when we pray “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?









# *the* references

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