

1 Approaching the Bible

Welcome to this series as we explore why this ancient book is as popular as ever, and how to handle it well.

The Bible raises lots of questions for us. You may be asking, “Where do I start?” Or if you’ve been reading it for years, you’ll have questions like “What do I do when I don’t understand something, when people disagree about what it means?”

Over the next seven weeks, we’ll take you on a journey that will give you a framework to make sense of what you’re reading in the Bible. Each evening, we start at 7 pm sharp, take a coffee break around 8 pm, and be finished by 9 pm. Feel free to ask questions. If you prefer not to ask in front of everyone, come and chat in the coffee break, or send an email to: allen.browne@riverview.church.

There’ll be notes to download each week. Bring them on your device, or print them if you prefer. (We’ll provide a few copies for those who can’t.) We also record the audio, and make a podcast available after the event. You can access the notes and podcasts through the *Church Centre* app, or this link:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/exploring-the-bible>

How are you feeling? If you’re comfortable, let’s begin with what the Bible is.

1.1 What is the Bible?

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. With an estimated 6 billion in print now, and another 100 million printed each year, no other book comes close.

The word *bible* means “books.” It’s printed as one volume, but consists of 66 books. Open to the *Table of Contents* and you’ll see the names of the books.



Photo: Allen Browne, 2025.

It’s divided into two sections: the Old Testament and the New. The 39 books of the Old Testament describe how people encountered God before Jesus was born. The 27 books of the New Testament introduce Jesus and his followers. Together, the Old and New Testaments make up *The Holy Bible*—a phrase that means “the sacred books.”

The Bible provides a record of people who encountered God. That’s what makes it special. **The Bible is a revelation of God.** The “sacred books” describe God revealing himself to people across the centuries of human history. In its pages, we discover **who God is**, and **who we are** in relation to God.

The 2023 movie *Barbie* concludes with Billie Eilish asking a poignant question: “*What was I made for?*”

The Bible addresses that question: you are a child in the family of the sovereign of the universe. Our heavenly Father gives us our identity and our purpose.

So, who is this God? What is God doing? How do we discover the meaning of existence? That’s the story of the Bible. It’s in relation to the majestic God of the universe that we discover a significance greater than the self. We find our value as children of the one Jesus called *our Father in the heavens*.



“What was I made for?” from *Barbie* (Vevo, 2023)

Where did the Bible come from?

The Bible did not just drop out of the sky one day. It was not dictated by God. More than 40 authors recorded encounters with God in the Middle East, western Asia, and eastern Europe. Their books were copied by hand and widely read.

Eventually, 66 of these books were recognized as a trustworthy revelation of God. Christians treat these books as inspired by the Holy Spirit, guided and preserved by the Spirit of God in partnership with the human authors.

That makes these books definitive for the Christian faith, the reliable revelation of who God is and what God is doing in partnership with us humans in his world. We derive our identity and purpose from God, so hearing what God says in the Bible forms us into the mature human community God always intended us to be.

The character at the heart of this revelation is Jesus. God had been working in partnership with us for thousands of years (the Old Testament). Then we suddenly see a clear picture of God in the person of Jesus. The New Testament describes it like this:

Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV)

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

In Jesus we discover what it looks like for God and humans to live in unity together. God’s Holy Spirit is remaking us into the image of God revealed in Christ. That’s what the Scriptures are all about. That’s why the Bible is so life-transforming.

What is the Bible’s message?

Humans have a long history of being tribal: our group versus yours. We divide into nations that fight each other for resources, wealth and power. Our rulers sometimes use religion to support their claims to power and encourage people to fight for them.

In ancient times, many believed that each nation had a god (or gods) looking after them. If they did right, the gods give them prosperity. If not, the gods would be angry, and their nation would suffer disasters like drought, disease, or defeat.

Around 2000 BC, in the region we know as Iraq, there lived a man named Abram (or Abraham). His people worshipped many gods, but Abraham received a revelation that there was one God for all the peoples of the earth.

It's hard to overstate how radical and countercultural that idea was. It threatened the identity of the Sumerian kingdom where Abraham lived. But instead of pressuring people into following his beliefs, Abraham heard God calling him to leave his city and his nation, to lay the foundation for a different kind of nation so the nations could discover what they were missing—the leadership of this God:

Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)

¹ The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and **all peoples on earth** will be blessed through you.”

Abraham and Sarah left the culture and religion they knew, setting out to establish a family that would be the revelation of God to all the peoples of the earth. In time, their descendants grew into a nation led directly by God. But as the Old Testament tells us, this nation—called Israel—had difficulty living as God intended, and they struggled to survive among the warring nations of the region.

God sent prophets to correct his people, calling them back to following his ways. But Israel couldn't even get along as a nation. They split in two, and both those nations eventually fell to other powers. So, by the end of the Old Testament, there was no longer any nation to demonstrate God's leadership to the nations.

In this vacuum, Jesus was born to save his people and restore the nations to our heavenly Father. This is the story of the New Testament. The rescue of the planet is back on in Christ (God's anointed leader), so what God planned in the beginning is fulfilled in the end. That's the overarching message of the Bible, the story we live in.

That's the unfolding story within the Bible. But before we dive into that story, let's clarify how the Bible came to be the collection of books it is today.

How did the Bible come together?

How did Christians decide which books to include in the New Testament?

Only books from the first century were included, and only books that were recognized right across the churches. The list was formalized into a *canon* (the standard by which things are measured) in the fourth century. To be included, a book needed to be:

- connected to the apostles Jesus appointed (*apostolic*)
- from the first century (*antiquity*)
- consistent with the faith (*orthodox*), and
- recognized and used widely across the churches (*usage*).

This was a no-brainer for most books: the Gospels, Acts, and the letters from Paul and the other apostles. It was less clear for Hebrews, Revelation, and Jude. Some popular books did not make the cut: The Shepherd of Hermes and The Epistle of Barnabas.

For the Old Testament books, Protestant Christians simply accept the ones Jewish Rabbis regard as Scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures (called the *Tanakh*) contain the same books as our Old Testament, though the order is different.

Some churches (e.g. Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox) have additional books in their Old Testament. Here’s how that came to be.

A couple of hundred years before Christ, Alexander the Great captured the whole world from Greece to Persia, including Palestine, so the Jewish people translated the Hebrew texts into Greek. We call this translation the **Septuagint** meaning 70 in Latin. It’s sometimes abbreviated to LXX (70 in Roman numerals) because it was said to have been translated by 70 scholars in 70 days.¹

The New Testament was written in Greek, and most early Christians spoke Greek, so they used the Septuagint as their Bible. But the Septuagint included some books that were not eventually regarded as Scripture by the Jewish Rabbis. That’s why some of the oldest Christian groups still use the Septuagint as Deuterocanonical (a second level of canon), while others regard them as apocryphal (not part of Scripture).

While I do not regard these books as a revelation of God (Scripture), they do provide useful insights on how people were practicing their faith in the time before Jesus came.

Your questions

What questions do you have about the Bible? We’ll cover much more over coming weeks, but are there things you need to know now to make sense of where we’re going or why the Bible books matters?

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¹ The ancient *Letter to Aristeas* explains. See <https://www.pseudepigrapha.com/pseudepigrapha/aristeas.htm>.

1.2 Hearing what God says

Why are there different versions?

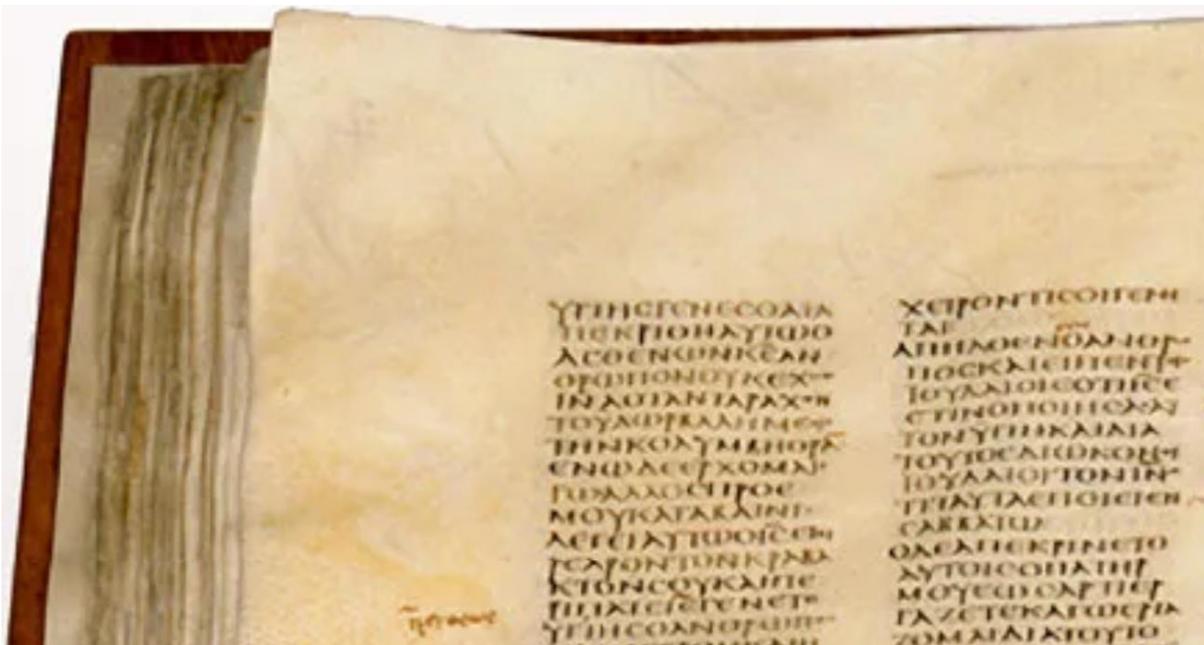
The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, a language read from right to left:



This copy of Isaiah was hand-written around 125 BC. It's one of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran in 1947.

Source: <http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/isaiah>

The New Testament was written in Greek, usually in all capitals like this:



Codex Sinaiticus is the oldest known copy of the complete Bible, copied out by hand in the AD 300s.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Codex-Sinaiticus>

You don't need to know Hebrew and Greek to read the Bible. It's been translated into more languages than any other book, and there are many translations in English.

If you speak more than one language, you'll be aware of the problems translators face. Some words are ambiguous: is *lead* about leadership or metallurgy? If someone offers you a *shot*, are they pouring you a drink or lending you a gun?

There's no exact match between words from different languages. The Inuit (Eskimos) have seven words for snow, where we have one. Greek has several words that translate to *love* in English. A Greek writer may choose one of those words for a reason, but not necessarily: they're synonyms (words with overlapping semantic domains).

Combining words introduces further ambiguities. What does *the love of God* mean? Is it God's love for us, or our love for God?

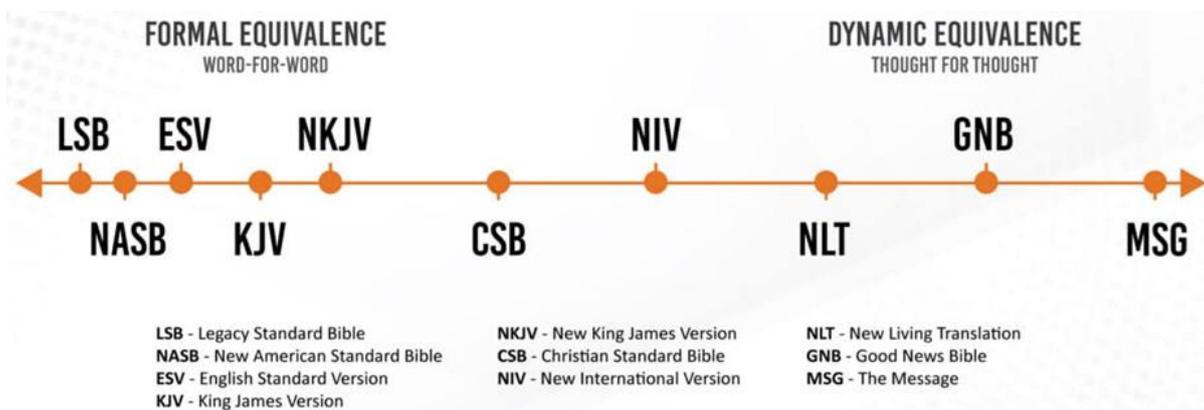
The grammar and word order are also different in different languages. In Hebrew, the verb (action) normally comes first, followed by the subject (actor), with a word that indicates the object in the sentence. So the Hebrew words in Genesis 1:1 are:

Hebrew words	English translation
b-eresit	In the beginning
bara	created
elohim	God
et	[next word is the object of the sentence]
ha-samayim	the heavens
wet	and [with next word as object of the sentence]
ha-erets	the earth

As you can see, translators don't just substitute English words for Hebrew ones. They must build a sentence that makes sense in language. So, which is better?

- A **literal** translation, sticking as closely as possible to the words, phrases, and sentence structure of the Hebrew? Or
- A **dynamic equivalent** translation, giving the clearest sense in English?

That's a sliding scale, and different translations make different choices:



Source: <https://reasonabletheology.org/why-we-have-different-bible-translations/>

The diagram illustrates how ten popular English translations handle this issue:

- The *English Standard Version* (ESV) tries to maintain a formal equivalence.
- *The Message* (MSG) provides a dynamic equivalent, using English idioms.
- The *New International Version* (NIV) tries for a balance between the two.

Which one is best? Use them all! By combining different approaches, we can hear the nuances of what's being said in a language we don't know.

You still need one as your default, for everyday use. That's a personal choice, but my preference is the NIV. It was translated by a team of scholars from different nations and denominations, so it's not biased by one person's ideas, one denomination's theology, or one country's values.²

When I want something more literal, I turn to the *ESV*. When I want a good turn of phrase in English, I reach for *The Message*.

What are your thoughts? What translations do you use?

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Where do I begin?

To read on your phone or tablet, download an app like [YouVersion](#).

To buy a printed Bible, visit a store like [Koorong](#) or an online retailer like [Amazon](#). It comes in different translations, with hard or soft covers, and various print sizes. It may have maps, indexes, and study notes.

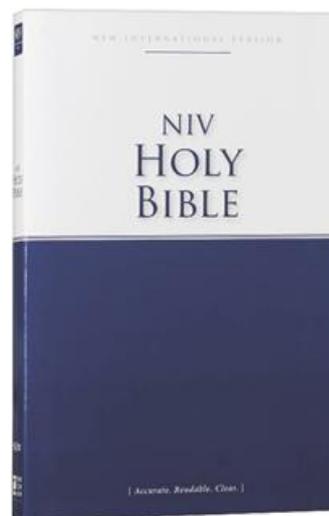
If you're not a reader, listen to the Bible as an audio book. While reading gives you time to pause and meditate on the text, listening helps you piece the story together.

Where do you start? Start with the New Testament. The first four books are accounts of Jesus' life, by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They'll introduce you to Jesus, the ideal place to start.

Each book has been divided into **chapters**, and each chapter has verse numbers for when we want to refer to specific bits of the book. For example, if someone refers you to *John 3:16*, open the Gospel of John (fourth book of the New Testament), turn to chapter 3, and within that chapter you'll find verse 16.

There are many resources to help make sense of what you're reading. Examples:

- [The Bible Project](#) has free videos, including an overview of each Bible book.
- **Commentaries** discuss how others have understood the Bible, book by book.
- **Bible Dictionaries** provide an A-Z listing of things you might want to look up: background information on people, events, kingdoms, and places.



² For details, see the Preface at the beginning of the New International Version (Zondervan, 2011).

- A **Concordance** is a printed index to all the words in a translation of the Bible. Today it has largely been replaced by Bible software.
- **Bible software** lets you search for words and phrases in the Bible and other books such as commentaries and dictionaries, and maps.

Your brothers and sisters in Christ are also an important resource. The Bible was never a private book. We encounter God in the community of faith, in the people who live with allegiance to Jesus Christ and follow his leadership.

What questions or suggestions do you have?

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How do we hear what the Bible is saying to us?

Context is crucial for understanding the Bible, as it is with any communication.

Words don't have meanings; meanings have words.

We know this in everyday life. Take a statement like, "*It'll never work.*" A dictionary can help if you don't know a word, but it cannot tell you the meaning of the sentence. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary gives 16 possible meanings for *work*, many that aren't relevant to this sentence (like the *works* of a clock, *working* the land).

Imagine you're in a meeting and the boss says: "We're betting the whole company on this invention we're developing. If you're not with me, speak up now." And you say, "It'll never work." What does that mean? It means you don't have a job anymore. It means uncertainty about how you'll pay your mortgage.

Imagine you're out for a drink with friends. One of them says, "Do you think we could ever time travel?" and you say, "It'll never work." What does that mean? It might mean you missed the cues about how they're feeling, how much they're missing their Mum who died suddenly about this time last year. It doesn't mean you've lost your job. The meaning is not just in the words; it's in the relationship.

Read the Bible **relationally**:

- In the *Old Testament*, the context is God's relationship with Israel, based on the Sinai Covenant. Understand what God was saying to them, and you'll be better equipped to understand what God is saying to us.
- In the *New Testament*, the context is God's relationship with everyone (Israel and the nations) in the person of Jesus the Messiah. In him, we're called into restored relationship between heaven and earth. We're living in his story.

If I don't hear the Bible as our relationship with God, I make it all about me. I end up hunting for verses that give me personal affirmation instead of participating in what God is doing to restore all things.

Some examples:

- “*I can do all things,*” says Philippians 4:13. But it’s not saying I have super-powers. What Paul means by “all things” is clear if you read the context.
- “*You will be prosperous and successful,*” says Joshua 1:8. But it’s not about me and my business venture. It was about the project God entrusted to Joshua.
- “*I know the plans I have for you,*” declares the LORD, “*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,*” says Jeremiah 29:11. But the “you” is not me in the twenty-first century. It’s plural—the nation that had just fallen apart and gone into exile.

A text without a context is a pretext ... for whatever you want to say. When you recognize the relationship between God and who he was speaking to, you won’t put your individual self as the centre of the universe. Remember:

A text cannot mean what it never meant.

— Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart,
How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth
(MI: Zondervan, 1993), 30.

In the coming weeks, we’ll focus on understanding the Bible in relationship with God.

1.3 Conclusion

What questions remain for you?

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We’ve talked about what the Bible is, how its books were assembled, and the message at its core. We’ve discussed the translations available in English, where to start, and reading the Bible in relationship with the God who speaks.

Have we whet your appetite *to taste and see that the LORD is good* (Psalm 34:8)?

Have we sparked your desire for the wisdom of God’s word—*a lamp for my feet, a light for my path* (Psalm 119:105)?

It's the word of God because it reveals God. But it's not just a guidebook that God sent down from heaven:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. — John 1:14

It's in relationship with God that we understand what the pages of Scripture are all about: the living relationship with God we have through Christ Jesus.

That's the reason no new Scriptures are being added to the Bible today. As the Holy Spirit births us into the leadership and life of the resurrected Messiah, we're living in God's story. The Word is coming to life in the peoples of the world.

Your questions?

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