

# BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE

## **GOAL:**

To gain a working knowledge of the bible, its history, modern scholarships and its application for today's faith journey.

## **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

After completing this module, participants will be able to:

- a) identify tools and methods of biblical criticism
- b)
  - (i) demonstrate a wholistic approach to Scripture
  - (ii) demonstrate an integrated knowledge of biblical and church history and interpretation
- c) give evidence of the ability to use a variety of resources to provide meaningful biblical study for young people

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# WHAT TO DO

## Step One Discovering what is in the Bible

6 hours

### 1.1 *The Contents of the Bible:*

- a) Using the list of questions in Appendix 1 (pages 36-37) do the Bible Scavenger Hunt Quiz yourself. (This may be introductory for some people but is in preparation for a bible knowledge survey later)
- b) Write a paragraph describing your reactions to the quiz, noting three things you already knew, three new things you found out, and anything that surprised you or interested you.
- c) Present creatively, in another paragraph or two, or as a tape, story, art, collage, poem, or prayers, a reflection on what the bible has meant to you in your faith journey, and what the bible means to you now.
- d) Read - Resources Section, 'The Bible - an introduction' (pages 6-7)
- e) Using the Interview Forms in Appendix 2 (pages 38-41) find four people you can get to undertake the Bible Knowledge Survey. Compare their answers to your own from the Bible Scavenger Hunt Quiz.
- f) Write a paragraph, or two, noting the answers that surprised you, the things all, or most, got right, and the things all, or most, got wrong, any common misconceptions - where the same wrong answers were given.

### 1.2 *The Different Forms of Writing in the Bible:*

- a) Read - Resources Section, 'Different Forms of Writing in the Bible' (pages 8-9)
- b) List each of the eleven key forms described in the Resources Section and under each form note at least one book of the Bible, or major part of a book, that is primarily of this form of writing. Write a sentence about why you think it fits this form.

### 1.3 *The Sources of the Bible*

- a) Read - Resources Section, 'The Sources of the Bible' (pages 10-12)
- b) Draw a flow diagram of, or depict in another creative way, the process that begins with the original people and events behind the Bible stories and ends with the Bible as we know it today. Show how you understand the bible to have been written and the various people involved.
- c) Write a paragraph reflecting on your own feelings and thoughts about what you have read about forms and sources in the Bible. You could compare this with what you wrote in 1.1 b). Discuss this with your mentor.

<b>Step Two</b>	<b>Understanding the history of the Bible</b>	<b>4 hours</b>
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2.1 *The History of the Bible*

- a) Read - Resources Section, 'The History Of The Bible' (pages 13-18)
- b) Using the 'Historical Context' approach to Bible study in Method Five of the Resources Section, 'Bible Study Methods' (pages 29-31), do the Bible study from Luke 15:4-7 for yourself. Make notes under stage 2, about the key message, under stage 4, about being a Palestinian shepherd and a Pharisee, and under stage 7, about today's understanding.

Write a short reflection on what you learned from this study.

2.2 *History and Bible Study*

- a) Imagine you are part of a discussion on the topic: 'Understanding the Historical Context of the Bible is important for personal Bible Study today.'
  - Write a short speech (no more than one page), or make a list of several key points, or make a tape, arguing in favour of the statement.
  - Write a short speech (no more than one page), or make a list of several key points, or make a tape, arguing against the statement.

<b>Step Three: Identifying and understanding modern scholarship and biblical criticism</b>
<b>2 hours</b>

3.1 *Modern Biblical Scholarship*

- a) Read - Resources Section, 'About Modern Bible Scholarship'(pages 19-24)
- b) Pick one of the eight Modern Biblical Scholarship Approaches from the Resources Section you have just read, and note all the strengths and positive things you can think of about that approach. Then note all the weaknesses and negative things you can think of about that approach.
- c) Repeat the process in 3.1 b) for another of the eight Approaches.

<b>Step Four: Applying the bible to today's faith journey</b>	<b>6 hours</b>
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4.1 *Bible Study on your own*

- a) Read Resources Section, 'Studying The Bible - An Introduction, and Seven Bible Study Methods' (pages 25-35)
- b) Select at least two of these methods and use them for your own bible study. (ie.two other than the Historical Context Approach you have already used)
- c) Write a half page reflection on each of the methods you use, noting why you chose that method, what you found helpful and what you found unhelpful about that method, what learnings you gained about the Bible and about yourself.

#### 4.2 *Bible Study with a group*

- a) Use the same two methods as you used in 4.1 b) for your own bible study, but this time with a group of young people
- b) Write a half page reflection for each of the two group bible studies you use, comparing and contrasting them, by noting the ways in which it was different with a group from when you used it yourself, what you and the group found helpful and what you and the group found unhelpful about that method, what learnings you and the group gained about the Bible and about yourselves.

## RESOURCE MATERIAL

# THE BIBLE

### AN INTRODUCTION:

The Bible is the best selling book of all time and continues to head the annual best selling list today. It comes in a variety of versions, or translations, and it has a number of different titles, including: 'The Holy Bible', 'The Bible', 'The Holy Scriptures', 'The Word of God', 'The Paipera Tapu', and 'The Christian Scriptures'.

The range of translations available today are many and varied and include:

- **literal** translations based on a direct translation of old texts as accurately as possible;
  - eg. The King James Version, The Authorised Version, The Jerusalem Bible, The Revised Standard Version, The American Standard Version.
- **dynamic** translations which attempt to translate old texts into appropriate modern language and concepts;
  - eg. The New English Bible, The New American Standard Version, The New Revised Standard Version, The New International Version.
- and **paraphrases** which summarise and rephrase old texts in modern idioms.
  - eg. The Contemporary English Version, The Message, and The Way.

Many people think of the bible as one book, quite a long book, and quite hard to read and understand, especially in some parts. Yet the bible is actually more like a library of books, most of them relatively short, and many of them quite easy to read, and some of them even quite easy to understand! That's not to say there aren't a few very long books and some very confusing, and apparently irrelevant ones too! More on them later on.

Historically there has been some debate about exactly which books should be in the Bible and so there are some differences in which books make up different Bibles. The official list of books that make up the Bible is called the 'canon' and this differs for the Roman Catholic Church from the Protestant Churches. The Protestant Churches follow Judaism in recognising only those books written in Hebrew, while the Roman Catholic Church recognise at least an additional seven Old Testament books written in Greek, and call them 'Deutero-canonical', meaning 'of the second canon' or list. The Roman Catholic list was set by the Council of Trent in 1546 and includes these additional seven books. They are put into a separate book by the Protestant churches, called the 'Apocrypha'.

The New Testament is the same in all Bibles.

Depending on your denomination then, the Bible is made up of 66, or 73, books, divided into two parts. The first part containing 39, or 46, books, was written before Jesus lived on earth. It is known as the Old Testament (in relation to the 'New' Testament), or the First Testament (as it

came ‘first’ from the Jews before the New Testament came ‘secondly’ from the Christians), or the Hebrew Scriptures (in that it was the Scriptures of the Jews or Hebrews rather than the Scriptures of the Christians). The second part containing 27 books, was written after Jesus lived on earth, and is known as the New Testament, Second Testament, or Christian Scriptures as just explained.

### **THE OLD TESTAMENT:**

The 39, or 46 books of the Old Testament can be divided into four groups:

- The Torah, which means ‘law’, (called the Pentateuch) = the first 5 books - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy
- The Historical books - Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther
- The Wisdom books- Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon
- The Prophetic books - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT:**

The 27 books of the New Testament can also be divided into four groups:

- The Gospels, which means ‘Good News’ (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).
- Acts, which is connected to Luke as an interpretation of early Christian life.
- The Epistles, which means ‘letters’, many ascribed to the Apostle Paul.
- Revelation, which is special type of book called apocalyptic (more on that later)

### **THE APOCRYPHA:**

This is the collection of Old Testament books, mentioned above that the Roman Catholic Church includes in the Bible as ‘Deutero-canonical’ and which the Protestant Churches put into a separate collection, appended to the end of some Bibles, called ‘the apocrypha’, which means ‘that which is kept secret, or hidden’. This includes the books of Tobit, Judith, I and II Maccabees, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, and Baruch.

## **DIFFERENT FORMS OF WRITING IN THE BIBLE:**

### **INTRODUCTION TO FORMS**

There are many different types of writing in the Bible that scholars refer to as ‘forms’. Different forms have different purposes, for example, we would use a different ‘form’ of writing today to write a letter than to write a poem. We use a slightly different ‘form’ of writing for a letter to a friend than for a letter applying for a job. Different forms of writing are used for different purposes and suit different situations.

The Bible contains a number of different forms of writing. Some forms are very obvious like the forms of 'poetry' and 'hymns' in the Psalms, or the form of 'laws' that is used for much of the book Deuteronomy, which records the laws of the Israelites. Other forms include accounts of 'history', small sections of 'songs', sections of 'records' like the acts of the kings, 'prophesies' and 'wise sayings', 'stories' and 'legends', cultic books like the 'liturgies' for worship, 'short stories' and something very like a 'play'.

A wide range of different types of writing, or 'forms,' are used in the Bible. Some of these forms make up whole books, like the book of Psalms, which contains 'songs/ hymns/ poetry', or the book of Proverbs, which contains 'wise sayings'. Other forms are used in parts of various books, like the 'story' in Job chapter 1 and 2, which then changes to 'poetry' in chapters 3 to 42, and returns to 'story' at the end of chapter 42. The book of Romans begins as a 'letter' then changes into a 'sermon' and ends like a 'letter'.

### **SOME KEY FORMS**

- **Stories:**

These recall the past in order to give the people a common mind about their history. They would have been told orally at first and shaped and influenced by the tellers over time to be easily remembered.
- **Epics:**

These are also accounts of the past, but their aim is more than just to recall common history, it is to raise enthusiasm amongst the people for key figures, heroes and heroines of the past, and so can involve some exaggeration and some characterisation or stereotyping of figures and events
- **Apocalyptic Writings:**

These are particular writings that use a range of images that have to be interpreted or deciphered to understand the message. They are written in times of crisis, either personal or national, and usually are attributed by their writer to a famous historical figure so that they can remain anonymous. They are often pessimistic about the world, and set in the past so that they can accurately appear to predict history in order to warn about the present. They call for faith in God in troubled times and look forward with hope to God's saving action.
- **Epistles/ Letters:**

These are exactly what they sound like, personal letters from one person or group to another person or group, often with greetings, instructions, teaching and encouragement.
- **Gospels:**

Literally meaning 'good news', these are the four records of the life and teaching of Jesus, who was good news and who brought good news.
- **Laws:**

These are both religious and social and give a sense of organisation to the people to control their common life and religious practice

- **Liturgies:**  
These include various celebrations, rituals, even sacrifices, that express the common life of the people and link the people with God
- **Psalms/Poems:**  
These are poems and canticles that express the people's sentiments and faith
- **Prophetic Oracles:**  
These are solemn words of warning and advice from the prophets, understood to come from God to recall the people to true faith
- **Teaching:**  
These often come from the mouths of prophets or priests as instructions for life and faith, and may be in the form of stories or parables
- **Wisdom Writings:**  
These are wise reflections on the great questions and issues like those of life, death, love, faith, evil, and suffering

## THE SOURCES OF THE BIBLE

### **HOW SOURCES WORK:**

The Bible as we know it today is based on stories told by people one to another. These stories are about the early Hebrew people and their lives, experiences, beliefs, and relationship with God. These stories were most likely based on historical facts about real people. Over time, and through telling and re-telling, these stories have been stylised and refined into oral traditions. The results are memorable stories that tell as much about how the people who told and retold them understood who they were, where they came from, and how they related to God, as they do about the original characters and events.

These earliest components of the Bible included:

- short stories about people
- collections of common laws
- memorised speeches by famous leaders
- memorised liturgies, songs and psalms
- key meditations and reflections on special events in the life of the people.

Scholars have suggested that over time these various components were gathered together by groups of people, and eventually written down and edited. These narratives express an understanding of the Hebrews' history, worship, way of life, customs, faith, and view of the world.

This theory about sources of the Bible can be demonstrated by considering the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch, which means 'five volumes'. Scholars have analysed these books and noted the different forms, styles, and language used in different parts, and then assigned these differences to four key sources (see below). Each source reflects a different

strand of tradition and understanding, and was compiled over a different time frame, with eventually all four sources being collected and collated together.

This theory of four sources can be a bit to take in if you have not heard about it before. It is often assumed that the first five books were all written by one person (like Moses) and all at one time (like at the end of the Exodus). The people who collected it all together (probably between 400 and 500 BC, during and after the exile into Babylon) would be most pleased that we assumed that, because that is how they collected, arranged and edited the different sources to appear. As though they were one collection drawing the four sources and streams of tradition into one common pool of understanding. This was done in order to unite the people who were in danger of losing their unity during the exile and through the disruption of returning to their land and trying to resettle there.

### **THE PENTATEUCH AS AN EXAMPLE OF SOURCES AT WORK:**

To demonstrate how these sources work a brief description and examples of how they differ might help. The four sources identified in the Pentateuch are:

- The Yahwistic tradition source:

This is called ‘J’ because the writings from this source always call God ‘Yahweh’ (The sources theory was first developed by German scholars, and the letters refer to German spelling of words.). It is dated to c. 950 BC in the reign of King Solomon, and was passed on by the royal circles around the king in Jerusalem, so emphasises the role of the king in history and the faith.

- The Elohistic tradition source:

This is called ‘E’ because the writings from this source always call God ‘Elohim’. It is dated to c. 750 BC and from the northern kingdom, when the kingdoms were divided (see Biblical History below). The role and message of the prophets is central to this source, as was their role in the northern kingdom prior to its defeat by the Assyrians c. 721 BC. This ‘E’ source was probably merged with the ‘J’ source after 721 when some of the northern leaders and prophets escaped to Jerusalem, bringing the ‘E’ source to the home of the ‘J’ source.

- The Deuteronomistic tradition source:

This is called ‘D’ because it is contained mainly in the book of Deuteronomy, though it does appear in small sections in other books of the Pentateuch. Like ‘E’ it is also dated to the time of the divided kingdoms and began in the northern kingdom, amongst those with a concern for the law, though was also completed in Jerusalem after the fall of the north to Assyria.

- The Priestly tradition source:

This is called ‘P’ because it contains the traditions of the priests and their particular interests, which they sought to keep the people mindful of, especially during the exile in Babylon between 587 and 538 BC.

These four key sources of the first five books of the Bible were each developed and written separately over a period of time. Then they were further refined and connected to each other until they were all collected together and edited into the shape we now have them in, probably by c. 400 BC. This collection is attributed to the character Ezra, of the Ezra - Nehemiah books, who was a key figure in Israel in the restoration period after the exile. Ezra had a particular interest in trying to unite the people and restore the faith of the nation through a common understanding of their history and relationship with God.

## **KEY PLAYERS IN DEVELOPING SOURCES INTO THE BIBLE:**

There are quite a number of individuals and groups who played a part in writing the Bible. The Christian Church believes that these people were inspired by God and that God's Spirit worked through them and continues to work through the Bible as it is written and printed today.

Let us consider the different people involved in shaping the Bible:

- the original people, like the historical patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets, priests, teachers, disciples, kings, and Jesus himself.
- those who experienced and knew these people and their lives, their teachings, prophecies, worship, etc.
- those whom these things were told to, who heard and interpreted what they heard, and retold it to others.
- those who got together in groups, formally and informally, and shaped the telling to reflect common interests and understandings.
- those who first wrote some of these things down.
- those who rewrote these writings and edited them and formed them into collections.
- those who shaped and edited the collections, sometimes called 'redactors' for the way they reshaped the material to reflect their concerns.
- those who finally wrote the form of the books that we have today.

The process of writing the Bible has not been a straight forward one. It has been a long, drawn out process, over many years and centuries. It has involved many faithful believers, many different interests and concerns, and reflects many different situations. The miracle of it all is that what has resulted is, in many senses, a unity, a oneness, a reflection of the way we believe and understand our faith to have grown and our relationship with God to be expressed.

# **THE HISTORY OF THE BIBLE**

## **AN INTRODUCTION:**

The Bible tells in part the story of the people of God. The Old Testament tells the story of the Hebrew people, the people of Israel. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus Christ and the first Christian people. While the whole Bible is not 'history', it is historical and reflects historical events and people.

In reading and understanding the Bible it is helpful to appreciate its various books and sections within their historical time and place. There is ongoing debate amongst scholars about various aspects of biblical history, but we can lay out a widely accepted historical framework for the history of the people of God and where in that history various parts of the Bible fit, or the times they reflect.

Note that many dates in biblical history are approximate. The Latin term 'circa' (meaning 'around', or 'about') is used before the date to indicate an approximate date. You may see dates

written as ‘circa. 1250’ for example, or shortened to ‘c.1250’. Biblical history dates are written as either ‘BC’ meaning ‘before Christ’, or as ‘AD’, standing for the Latin ‘Anno Domini’, meaning literally ‘after Christ’. The birth of Christ is taken as being year zero and then time counting upwards to the present and also upwards into the past. Some scholars use ‘BCE’, meaning ‘before the common era’, in place of BC, and ‘CE’, meaning ‘of the common era’, in place of AD, and these dates mean the same as BC and AD.

## **OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY OVERVIEW:**

The Old Testament is the history of Israel from its beginnings to just before the birth of Jesus. It can be divided into eight historical periods, each typified by particular people, places and experiences.

### **1. The Patriarchs and the Matriarchs: c. 2000 - 1700 BC**

This is the time of the migration of a group of people from around the city of Ur in Mesopotamia near where the Euphrates and Tigris rivers joined (modern day Southern Iraq), up the Euphrates river to the city of Haran, and then southward into Canaan, later called Palestine.

The story of the forbears of Israel, Abraham and Sarah, depict this migration as God’s calling and people’s faithful response. These stories may or may not be actually true, as some take legendary forms, but they do tell how the people of Israel understood themselves and their history. Other key figures of this period are:

- Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac,
- Isaac and Rebekah’s son Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel,
- the twelve sons of Jacob who head the twelve tribes of the Israelites, some whose mother is Rachel and some whose mother is Leah.

### **2. The Sojourn in Egypt: 1700 - 1250 BC**

Joseph, the older of the two sons of Jacob and Rachel, is a key character in this next period. There is a famine and the people of Israel end up living in Egypt to survive, later becoming slaves to the Egyptians. They are called the Hebrews and their numbers increase until the Pharaoh, who is the Egyptian king, has all the baby boys killed to prevent their further increase. One boy is saved, his name is Moses.

### **3. The Exodus from Egypt: c. 1250 BC**

Moses lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and away from slavery, in the event called the Passover. They wander in the Sinai wilderness for 40 years. At Mount Sinai God makes a special covenant promise to be their God and accept them as God’s people. In return they agree to worship only God and obey God’s commandments. This journey is called the Exodus.

The events of the Passover, Exodus, and Covenant are foundational events in the history of the people of Israel. This period is pivotal to the history of the Old Testament.

#### **4. The Settlement of Canaan: 1230 - 926 BC**

Moses dies in the wilderness and the Israelites enter Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. They settle in the land, coming into conflict with the Canaanites and the Philistines who are already living there. The Israelite tribes settle in different areas and so became only loosely one people but without one leader or government.

In order to oppose the Philistines the tribes eventually unite under the leadership of Saul, who becomes king. Saul is succeeded by David, who establishes a single monarchy for all the tribes and makes Jerusalem the capital city.

#### **5. The Divided Kingdom: 926-587 BC**

David's son Solomon becomes king and builds a great temple in Jerusalem.

Here the people worship and offer sacrifices as required by their religious law. After David's death the kingdom splits into two, with the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah, after the largest tribe. The kingdom of Assyria in Mesopotamia expands at this time. Many prophets arise to warn the people about their falling away from God and about God's judgement in the form of the invading Assyrians. In 721 BC the northern kingdom of Israel falls to the invading Assyrian army, and the ten tribes who make up the northern kingdom are 'lost' by being deported and through intermarriage with the invaders.

After around 150 years the Assyrians have diminished and the Babylonian empire has grown and taken over the region. In 587 BC the Babylonians attack and conquer the southern kingdom of Judah, and take all its leaders away to exile and slavery in Babylon.

#### **6. The Babylonian Captivity: 587 - 538 BC**

The leaders of Judah living in exile in Babylon have to reconcile their defeat and loss with their covenant with God to protect them. This is understood as God's punishment for their unfaithfulness to the covenant. So they repent and begin to look forward to returning to their land and being restored as an example of faithful people. They seek to preserve their customs and religion while in Babylon and special laws are developed to keep them separate from those they live amongst.

They are without their temple in Jerusalem and so local 'gatherings' called synagogues develop for worship.

#### **7. The Restoration: 538 - 432 BC**

The Babylonians are defeated by the Persian army under their king Cyrus. He allows the exiles to return to their lands, and so the Israelites return to Jerusalem. There they find those left behind have fallen away from worship of God in the absence of their leaders. Ezra and Nehemiah are two key figures in the attempts to restore the people to faithfulness to God and the covenant. The temple is rebuilt having been destroyed by the Babylonians and the people pledge their allegiance to 'the law' and thus renew the covenant.

## **8. The Inter-testamental Period: 432 - 5 BC**

The Persians are defeated by the Greeks under Alexander the Great in 332 BC. The Greeks are defeated by the Syrians in 198 BC. The Syrians are thrown off in a revolt that brings about independence for the Israelites from 168 to 63 BC. This independence is lost when the Romans take control in 63 BC and they continued to rule until well after the time of Jesus.

## **NEW TESTAMENT HISTORY OVERVIEW:**

The story of Jesus, his disciples, and the first churches can be divided into three stages or historical periods:

### **1. Jesus of Nazareth: 6 BC - 30 AD**

The historical Jesus was born in the reign of Herod, lived in Nazareth, grew up a pious Jew, and practiced the Law in the spirit of the Pharisees. At about 27 or 28 years old he was baptised by John in the Jordan and began a 2-3 year itinerant ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem. He gathered around him a group of disciples and attracted crowds. He preached the coming of the kingdom of God by word and action. He never wrote anything that we know of today. He was condemned by religious authorities and crucified by the Romans around 30 AD

### **2. The Christian Jewish Communities: 30 - 70 AD**

The followers of Jesus remained Jews after the death and resurrection of Jesus, but became a distinctive break away group within the Jewish faith. They claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus and began to discover the mystery of his Holy Spirit. They preached the risen Jesus to other Jews and then to Gentiles. They celebrated Jesus in worship and in the Eucharist meal. They taught the recollected words and actions of Jesus, and they baptised those who believed in Jesus. This is the period of the disciples, Stephen, Paul, the churches of Asia Minor, and an increasing separation from mainline Judaism.

### **3. The Writing and Redaction (editing): 70 - 100 AD**

Paul's letters were probably mostly written before this period but were redacted and passed around the churches. Four theologians, or groups of theologians, brought together various traditions, stories, teachings, and memories of Jesus, to form the four gospel accounts. These had been told and retold, written down in sections and collected together in the intervening years.

- Mark came first, possibly in Rome and based on Peter's tradition about Jesus.
- Luke came next, probably out of communities of former Gentiles, and probably drawing on Mark as a source.
- Matthew came next, out of a community of former Jews, who by now had made a break with Judaism, and also probably drew on Mark as a source.
- John came last, as a reflection and meditation on Jesus as the Word of God.

## EARLY CHURCH HISTORY OVERVIEW:

Christianity did not begin with a new sacred Scripture, but rather with the person and preaching of Jesus. Stories about him and his teachings were remembered and handed on orally at first, only being written down some years later. Other writings of the early Christian communities also circulated around the churches at this time. Not until later in the second century AD did the Christian churches feel the need to begin to define which writings were 'true' and which were 'heretical'. This process was begun in response to various groups, or people, who questioned, misinterpreted, or out-rightly attacked the Christian teachings.

One of these movements focussed on a man called Marcion. He used Paul's teaching about ending the law to suggest that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as God the Father of Jesus Christ. He sought to rule out the Old Testament, and parts of the New Testament inspired by it, as not being Christian Scripture. Marcion proposed a 'Bible', or 'canon', of parts of Luke and ten of Paul's letters only. The majority of Christian leaders responded by affirming the Old Testament as part of the true Scriptures.

Another group were the Gnostics. They suggested that Jesus had taught the disciples 'secret knowledge' about humanity and God. They also rejected the Old Testament, and they interpreted parts of the Bible allegorically, that is as a kind of parable which had to be interpreted 'correctly' by their methods, to show its true meaning. They believed that only the disciples, and those they had shown the 'secrets' to, could interpret the Bible properly. The Christian leaders responded by affirming the Old Testament and declaring that there was no 'secret' knowledge or interpretations that were not available to all believers.

By c.180 AD Bishop Ireneus of Lyons had defended the existence of the four canonical gospels as we know them today as the only true gospels of Jesus. One test of true Scripture writings was that they had to have an 'apostolic' origin, that is be able to be traced back to the time of the apostles. Two other criteria were used to determine which writings were true and which were not. Firstly, that a writing had been used widely in the church. Secondly, that its teaching was in line with the agreed rule of faith of the church. As can be imagined there was quite some debate amongst church leaders about these points in relation to the various writings that existed. In the end an agreed list or 'canon' was fixed and noted in a letter by Athanasius c.367 AD.

## A BIBLE TIME-LINE:

c. 3100 BC	The skill of writing begins
c. 2000 BC	The oral stories of Patriarchs and Matriarchs are first told
c. 1700 BC	The Sojourn in Egypt begins
c. 1250 BC	The Exodus from Egypt
c. 1230 BC	The Settlement in Canaan
c. 1200 BC	Biblical writing begins - the first stories are written down and become the sources for later writings (the J source)

- c. 926 BC            The Kingdom divides - (I and II Samuel and I and II Kings begins to be written, some of Proverbs is written down, and some of Psalms)
- c. 750 BC            The prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah, and the first part of Isaiah are composed, the E and D sources begin to be written, the J source continues to be developed and more Proverbs are recorded
- c. 650 BC            The prophets Nahum, Zephaniah, some of Jeremiah, Habakkuk and later Ezekiel are composed. Joshua, Judges and more of Samuel and Kings are written down, as are more Proverbs
- c. 587 BC            The Babylonian Exile begins - the sources J, E and D are developed and P begins to be written, all to help preserve the faith in exile. Joshua and Judges are completed and Ezekiel and more of Isaiah are written, as is Lamentations.
- c. 538 BC            The Restoration begins - the four sources of the JED and P are worked on and added to, Judges is completed, the prophets Haggai, Malachi, Obadiah, Zecahriah, Joel, and the last parts of Isaiah are written, as are more Proverbs
- c. 432 BC            The Inter-testamental period begins - I and II Chronicles, the last parts of Zechariah, and Jonah, Job, Ruth, Tobit, Koheleth, and Song of Songs are written.
- c. 250 BC            Hebrew Scriptures translated into Greek (The Septuagint)
- c. 150 BC            Daniel, Esther, Judith, Ben-Sirach, Baruch, I and II Maccabees and the book of Wisdom are all completed
- c. 0                    Christ born - probably around 6 BC due to later miscalculation of the dates
- c. 28 AD             Jesus begins a public ministry of around three years
- c. 30 AD             Jesus is crucified and seen raised from the dead
- c. 36 AD             Paul is converted on the road to Damascus
- c. 50 AD             The 'Council' at Jerusalem decides Gentiles can enter the church without becoming Jews
- c. 51-63 AD         Paul writes his letters to the churches. James was probably written around this time
- c. 70 AD             The Romans destroy Jerusalem in response to an uprising
- c. 70 AD +          The gospel according to Mark is first written down
- c. 80-90 AD         The gospel according to Luke is first written down, followed by the book of Acts by the same author(s)
- c. 80-90 AD         The gospel according to Matthew was first written down. Hebrews and Revelation were probably written around here
- c. 95-100 AD        The gospel according to John was first written down

- c. 100-110 AD I and II Peter, Jude, I, II and II John probably written
- c. 135 AD After a rebellion the Romans expel the Jews from Jerusalem
- c. 400 AD Whole Bible translated into Latin by Jerome (the Vulgate)
- c. 1535 AD Whole Bible translated into English
- c. 1947-56 AD Discovery of Dead Sea Scrolls

## **THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS:**

In 1947, at Qumran, north west of the Dead Sea in Palestine in the Middle East, a shepherd boy discovered in some caves, some jars containing ancient scrolls. These turned out to be the writings of a religious community who lived there from around 300 BC to 70 AD. They probably hid the scrolls around the year 70 AD to protect them from the invading Romans. Between 1947 and 1956, 800 such documents were found in 11 caves, most of the documents being fragments only. Some 200 of these document fragments were of biblical writings that contained every book of the Hebrew Scriptures except the book of Esther. They now make up many of the oldest copies of biblical books that we have available today for study and translation.

Before this discovery the oldest Hebrew texts available today were about 1000 years younger than these fragments, so from around 800-900 AD. This meant that the younger texts, and consequently our modern translations, could be checked against much older versions. They were found to be very accurate, with few differences despite the many years of copying and transmission of the bible texts since the first century.

## **MODERN BIBLE SCHOLARSHIP**

### **AN INTRODUCTION:**

Modern Biblical scholarship involves ‘critical study’ of the Bible, its sources, forms, historical contexts, and the ways it is read and interpreted. Many aspects of the Bible have an impact on how it came to be written in the shape we have it today. Studying these aspects can aid our understanding of the Bible and the way we apply it to our life and faith. The more we study the Bible and apply our God given gifts of thinking and research to its’ content, sources, forms, historical contexts, and interpretation, the more we can understand its message to its original hearers and readers. We also gain insights into its message to those who have read and heard it through the ages, as well as its application to us today.

The use of the term ‘critical’ or ‘criticism’ to describe scholarly approaches does not mean that modern biblical scholarship approaches the Bible from a negative perspective. The term ‘critical’ is not used in the sense of ‘criticising, or complaining, or demeaning’. It is used in the sense of ‘critically important’ or ‘a critical decision’. ‘Biblical criticism’ does not imply negative and destructive approaches, but rather important and careful analytical study. It is also important to note that all modern biblical scholarship and critical approaches involve theories, hypotheses and informed intelligent presumptions. Little is hard fact and unquestionably provable, as is the nature of such study. By recognising and accepting that, we can be freed to explore various ideas and theories about the Bible, to see what we can learn from them about how God is speaking to us afresh through the Bible.

## **SOME KEY MODERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP APPROACHES:**

### **1. Source Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by carefully examining the text verse by verse, and even phrase by phrase. This is done to look closely for the underlying sources, both written and oral traditions, that the writers, editors, and redactors, might have used to compile their books. The above notes about ‘The Sources of the Bible’, and the theory of four sources for the Pentateuch of JED and P, show how this approach works.

It can also be applied to other books, and in the New Testament especially to the gospel writers. This shows where they might have used each others gospels, or at least parts of them, to base their own gospel on. This particular study has focussed on the first three gospels. They are called the ‘synoptic gospels’, because of the way in which they appear to have drawn on each other and on common sources in their writing. ‘Synoptic’ means ‘seeing together’, from which we get ‘synopsis’ which is a summary of common ideas.

Source criticism has shown that these three gospels have many parts in common and are often word for word the same. It shows minor changes that are consistent throughout a particular gospel, thus indicating that gospel writers’ individual style and interests.

The most commonly accepted theory about the sources of these gospels has Mark being written first. Luke draws on Mark as a source. Matthew also draws on Mark and a little on Luke as sources. Interestingly this theory has identified a whole body of material in the gospels, especially in Luke and Matthew that is not in common with Mark. This material shows another particular style and set of interests, which scholars have named the ‘Q’ source. They suggest it might have been another written source about Jesus that existed in the first century that the gospel writers had access to. It has not survived intact in its own right though (unless one day archaeologists uncover a copy somewhere!).

### **2. Form Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by identifying the various different forms in the Bible. These are described above in ‘Different Forms of Writing in the Bible’. It recognises and identifies which books, or sections of books, are prose, poetry, songs, wise sayings, prophecies, etc. Scholars can theorise about how and why those particular different forms were collected and put together.

One clear example of this is the book of Job. It begins with a story in ‘prose form’ in the first two chapters, then continues for chapters 3 to 42 in ‘poetry form’, returning to a ‘prose form’ in the last part of chapter 42. These two forms, how they relate, and the points of change between them at the start and end of Job have been examined and studied. Scholars have suggested that most of the two ‘prose form’ sections might have made up an old short story about a man called Job and his experiences. The long ‘poetry form’ sections have been written later and inserted into the middle of the short story.

These are a few adaptations to make them ‘fit’, in order to expand the overall story of Job and to make more detailed teaching available about the relationship between God and Job, and therefore God and humanity.

Another key example of ‘form criticism’ is found in applying the theory to the Psalms. The Psalms are in one sense all in the same form of ‘poetry/ hymns’, but there are clearly identifiable types of Psalms within them. Scholars have examined the Psalms in order to identify which ones are similar and to suggest a range of different ‘forms’ or types of Psalms. There are Psalms of thanksgiving, praise, pilgrimage, about the King, and about particular festivals. Some appear to be written for individual use and some for communal use.

This study has then led on to theories about what the different ‘forms’ of Psalms might have been composed for. And for whom, when, where and for what big festivals, they might have been used.

### **3. Historical Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by examining its historical context, or in some cases contexts. Some texts appear to have been written in one time period and then edited or redacted in another time period for a slightly different purpose. This involves studying the text for clues that link it to particular historical periods. This study draws on archaeology, and on non-biblical ancient writings from similar time periods that give clues to issues, people, places, language, words, styles, etc, that ‘fit’ a particular time.

Many parts of the Bible can be placed in particular historical contexts and so can be studied for what they tell us about that historical context. Then we can theorise about what they might have meant to the people in that particular context. It is this study in part that has led scholars to suggest that some parts of the Bible have been re-written or heavily redacted in later historical periods from when they were first written. This is because they show reference to, and characteristics of, more than one historical period.

One good example of this is in the book of Isaiah, which at one level looks like a very long book by one prophet called Isaiah. On careful study and consideration of historical criticism it reflects three quite clear historical periods. Scholars suggest that Isaiah 1 to 39, 40 to 55, 56 to 66 are in fact three separate books of prophesy by three separate prophets from three separate historical time periods. The first part of Isaiah was probably written by a prophet called Isaiah just before and around the time of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The second part of Isaiah was probably written by another prophet, maybe a follower of Isaiah or from the same prophetic group or school, late during the time of the exile in Babylon from 587 to 538 BC. The third part of Isaiah was probably written after the return to Jerusalem and during the early stages of the restoration of the nation and temple after 538 BC. Through such analysis we can gain a deeper understanding of how the people of Israel understood what was happening to

them in these different time periods and how their faith and relationship with God developed to reflect their experiences.

#### **4. Redaction Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by looking at the details of and differences in the language, style and vocabulary of a text. This is to identify the sections added or changed by someone who redacted and edited the text after it was first written. There can be more than one redactor as different people in different times have copied or rewritten the text. Each person makes various changes to reflect their own particular interests or the needs of the people of their times. This study can identify the various 'layers' of redaction by ascribing parts of texts to different writers, editors and redactors. Thus it gains insight into their life, faith, and the purposes that led them to make the changes they have to the text they received from past generations.

This is a process which could have continued with parts of the Bible from the time of Jesus until now. It did not because the church decided to fix the text of the Bible and not allow it to be changed any more after the 5th century AD. It reflects a different approach and attitude to sacred texts than we might have today. In pre-Christian times texts were not so sacrosanct as to be unchangeable as they are today. It was quite acceptable for the texts to be 'dynamic' and changing from one generation to another as they put their own mark on it and rephrased things to reflect the religious needs and purposes of their own times.

#### **5. Literary Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by looking at the complete book as it exists today, as a single literary work. It is less concerned about the internal issues of a book, like sources, forms, levels of redaction, and differences. It is more concerned with the overall form, if there is one, how it is shaped and arranged, what it is trying to convey as a whole, its overall message and purpose, and what makes it distinctive.

This approach has been very fruitfully applied to the gospels, as a contrast to the 'synoptic' issues of a source criticism approach. It looks for what the final version of a gospel is trying to say about Jesus and about the early Christian church. It asks what is distinctive about each gospel and what that might tell us about the person or people who compiled the final version. Their community, faith, religious practice, society, and historical period are the insights sought.

#### **6. Contextual Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by beginning not with the text of the Bible itself but with the modern day context of the reader. This approach asks questions about the readers' context first. Questions like, who are you, what is your life context, life experience, race, colour, ethnicity, gender, age, or place in society, the world, or the church? Once the readers' context is clarified and described then it asks

what difference this makes to how you read the Bible, interpret it and understand it. How does a particular book, or section, or story, or saying in the Bible relate to you and your context? What can God say, to you particularly, through reading that text from the specific context of your own life and experience.

Two ‘contextual’ approaches to the Bible that have had much written about them are those of how ‘poor people’ and how ‘women’ read and study the Bible from their particular contexts. These approaches ask what difference this makes from traditional Bible study and interpretation, which has predominantly been done by wealthier people, especially in western countries like Britain, Europe and North America, and by men, especially church leaders, ministers, priests, and theologians.

The ‘contextual criticism’ approach from the context of the poor has had a focus in South American countries and has been called ‘Liberation Criticism’. It seeks the liberation and freedom of the poor from their poverty. This approach began with the poor exploring together their particular life experience of being poor, and then studying the Bible from that context. One brief example is the parable of ‘The Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10:25-37). Traditionally people have identified with the Samaritan and heard Jesus teaching them about how they should be more like the Samaritan in how they respond to loving their neighbours. But from the context of being poor you might read that parable from the position of the person who was beaten and robbed and left to die. Because that might be similar to part of your own life experience, and might speak to your particular context. Thus you might hear Jesus reassuring you that you are still important to God and that you can have hope to be saved from your position of poverty and abandonment.

The ‘contextual criticism’ approach from the context of women has had a focus in North America and then in other western nations, though more latterly increasingly in third world countries too. This approach has been called ‘Feminist Criticism’ because it seeks to bring about equality for women and men. It is aligned with feminist models and approaches that work to overcome the sexism and patriarchy that allows men to dominate and control society and the church. Like the liberation approach above, it begins with women exploring what their particular context is like; being women in a male dominated society and church.

Women do not have equal access to jobs, education, power, decision making, and life choices, and are stereotyped into certain roles, occupations, characteristics and positions in life. The Bible is studied afresh from this perspective and context, which is different from the predominantly male context of much historical Bible study and interpretation.

An example of this approach is found in looking at the first witnesses to the resurrection ( Luke 24:11 and Mark 16:11). They were some of the women who followed Jesus. Traditionally they are depicted as the ones to whom Jesus first revealed himself so that they might let the male disciples know he had risen. The emphasis has been on those male disciples discovering the resurrection. We all know of Peter and John’s running to

see the empty tomb, Thomas doubting until he saw for himself, and Jesus appearing in the locked room and showing his wounds to them.

From the context of being a woman with a feminist perspective, the fact that Jesus chose to show himself to women as the first witnesses to the resurrection can be read as an empowering act for women to be key proclaimers of the good news. Especially since women were legally not recognised as witnesses in the courts of the day. Luke and Mark show the male disciples not believing them or thinking that they told 'idle tales'. This speaks loudly to women's context of not being heard in society and the church, not being involved in decision making, and not having a say in important matters. This story brings great consolation and hope about a new way of relating between men and women. It brings an endorsement, in the actions of Jesus, for women to have a central and equal role in Christian ministry.

## **7. Textual Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by examining and comparing the various versions of the text that are contained in ancient handwritten manuscripts. These manuscripts often differ slightly in the words or phrases used, or the order they put things in, for the same book of the Bible. The many different manuscripts are studied and dated to certain periods of history. The earliest or most accurate copies are used as the best sources for translating our modern Bibles. Because many of the texts used for modern translations are from around the 9th century the discovery of the 1st century writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls has revolutionised this approach to Bible study. The much later versions and manuscripts appear to be very accurate when checked against the Bible passages contained in the Dead Sea Scrolls which predate these manuscripts by almost 1000 years.

## **8. Linguistic Criticism**

This method of critical biblical study approaches the text by careful study of the original languages of Hebrew and Greek that the Bible was written in. The focus here is on trying to understand the right meaning the words and language had in the time the books were written. This involves study not only of biblical texts but of many other writings from similar times to see which words were used and how they were used, to gain from this a clearer understanding about their meaning.

# **STUDYING THE BIBLE**

## **AN INTRODUCTION**

The reasons for studying the Bible are many and varied, and some key reasons are:

- to be helped in our reading of the Bible
- to develop skills in analysing the Bible texts
- to understand and evaluate some of the claims made about the Bible
- to appreciate the historical contexts, literary aspects, and theological concerns of the Bible

The following Bible Study Methods seek to achieve some of these goals by using some of the scholarship explored above and applying it to individual and group Bible study situations.

## **SEVEN BIBLE STUDY METHODS -**

### **EXPLORING DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO STUDYING THE BIBLE**

**Method 1:** Reflection Group approach, based on Bill Sykes books

**Method 2** Creative Theological Reflection (CTR) approach, based on a development of the Education for Ministry (EFM) reflection process, beginning with a biblical story

**Method 3** Traditional Exegetical approach, based on reading a passage, then asking what struck you, what you agree with, disagree with, any questions or issues

**Method 4** Dramatic approach - based on getting into the characters of the bible story

**Method 5** Historical Context approach - exploring the historical meanings

**Method 6** Contextual approaches - eg, feminist and liberation perspectives

**Method 7** Personality types and approaches, based on Myers-Briggs personality profiles and preferred spiritualities

## **METHOD ONE**

### **'Reflection Group' approach to Bible study**

This approach requires access to a collection of quotations, comments, readings, poems, etc, on a particular theme. These can be collected together yourself or can be found in books of quotations, or in anthologies, like those produced by Bill Sykes. Bill Sykes has produced at least three anthologies for reflection groups called, "Visions of Faith", "Visions of Hope", and "Visions of Love".

1. In pairs: share a significant encounter with the Bible from your own faith journey.  
Feed this back to the whole group.
2. Select a theme or topic, eg "The Bible itself". Though this could be any topic you like.  
Hand out copies of a collection of quotations on the theme/ topic.  
(see page 31 of 'Visions of Faith' by Bill Sykes for quotations on 'The Bible')
3. Get everyone to read the quotations, either as a group or alone.
4. Then spend time reflecting alone on:
  - What did you find helpful, or what stood out?
  - What did you disagree with, find unhelpful?
  - What responses do you have to the quotations?
5. Facilitate a time of group discussion and sharing about the quotations, people's responses, thoughts, feelings, etc
7. Consider any biblical passages, stories, quotations, that come to mind from the readings, or group discussion.
6. Close with prayer.

### **RESOURCES:**

Sykes, W G.D.. Visions of Faith - an anthology of reflections. (1986) Eden Press Inc: Montreal

\_\_\_\_\_ Visions of Faith - an anthology of reflections. (1993) The Bible Reading Fellowship: Oxford

## METHOD TWO

### 'Creative Theological Reflection' (CTR) approach to Bible study and reflection

This approach is based on a development of the Education for Ministry (EFM) reflection process, beginning with a biblical story. It is best facilitated by someone who is familiar with (CTR) or with (EFM). You may be able to find someone in your church who has used these methods and could help lead a bible study group for you with this approach.

Failing that you could try it yourself after spending time familiarising yourself with the stages of the process and maybe practising on your own and making notes as you go.

1. Read a bible story - alone or in a group
2. (Optional step - could be used as well, or instead, at step 7 to explore the metaphor)  
Explore the story
  - what would it be like to be in the story?
  - what is positive in the story, what is negative?
  - what is unchangeable, or given about the story?
  - what could overcome the negative in the story?
- 3 Identify a 'slice of life', the key point of focus/ energy in the story, when things changed, the point the story hinges on, the climax of the story maybe. (There may be several so brainstorm and then come to a consensus on a key one)
- 4 Consider what feelings/ thoughts are evident at that point in the story. Brainstorm. (Agree on a group of at least four or five feelings/ thoughts)
- 5 Get everyone to recall an experience, some life action, when they felt/ thought the same group of things - share these memories briefly with the person next to you
- 6 Then brainstorm metaphors, symbols, images that 'sum up' that time. It might have been a 'sunrise' type of experience, or maybe a 'stormy night' type of experience. Get creative here about metaphors, symbols, or images for the experience summed up by the group of feelings and thoughts. (Get the group to agree on one image that all have energy for and find helpful)
- 7 Explore the world of the metaphor -what is it like being a -----? (See step 2 above)  
Explore the metaphor
  - what would it be like to be the metaphor?
  - what is positive in the metaphor, what is negative?
  - what is unchangeable, or given about the metaphor?
  - what could overcome the negative in the metaphor?
- 8 Where else in the Bible has the metaphor occurred? (Eg what other 'sunrise', or 'stormy night', type bible stories, events can you recall)
- 9 Where else in our tradition, in the history of the people of God, or world history, has the metaphor type experience occurred?

- 10 What would our society/ culture (friends/ peers) say or think about the metaphor?
- 11 What do you feel personally about the metaphor? Your reactions?
- 12 Compare and contrast the discussion and findings of the Personal(11), Cultural(10), Traditional(9), and Action(5) stages of the process. What similarities and differences were there between these stages? What was distinctive about each stage?
- 13 Summarise the learnings, new insights, issues, questions emerging from this study.
14. Close with prayer

## **METHOD THREE**

### **'Traditional Exegetical' approach to Bible study**

This approach requires everyone to have a photocopy of the bible story you are going to study that they can write on.

1. Read a bible story, and on your own reflect on the story -.
  - On your photocopy of the story note in the margin:
    - ! = something that struck you
    - / = something you agree with
    - X = something you disagree with
    - ? = anything you have questions about
    - \* = something you learnt
2. In pairs, or groups of three, share and discuss your notations
3. Share back to the larger group your key discussions and any learnings
4. Facilitate further whole group discussion about the different notations people made and why they made them. As a group, what things did people note in common? Did different people agree and disagree with the same thing in the story? What common learnings did the group have?
5. Close with prayer
6. After the group study you might like to reflect on your responses to: the things that other people found struck them, or the things they agreed or disagreed with, or the questions they raised.

## **METHOD FOUR**

### **A 'Dramatic Approach' to Bible study**

This approach can be used for any bible story, so long as there are sufficient characters in the story for people to identify with. Even a story involving two people would work.

Example:

1. Read the four gospel versions of 'The Cleansing of the Temple' - Luke 19: 45-46

- Matt 21: 12-13
- Mark 11: 15-17
- John 2: 13-22

2. Get everyone to choose to be in a group of 2 or 3 to consider the perspective of a character in the story:
  - - Jesus,
  - - the Disciples,
  - - the Sellers/ Money-changers,
  - - the Temple Priests,
  - - the Jewish Crowd
  
3. In small groups look over the readings again and clarify what part your character played in the events, and what you saw, heard, and did.
  
4. Consider these questions from the perspective of your character:
  - what are your key thoughts about the events
  - what are your key feelings about the events
  - how do you relate/ respond to each of the other character groups
  - what would you want to say to each of the other character groups
  
5. Get each character group to share with the whole group their key thoughts and feelings
  
6. Engage in a ‘managed exchange’ between the character groups - Jesus, Sellers, Disciples, Priests, Crowd. Ask one group what they would want to say to any other group. Then ask that group to respond, and so on. Get people to act, speak, respond ‘in character’. You may find that at this point you leave the ‘script’ of the story and develop a different direction or outcome from that recorded in the bible story. That is OK and to be encouraged, as we are acting only, and exploring our own reactions in the characters place.
  
7. After sufficient interaction get people to de-role from the character groups. Maybe get everyone to stand up, walk around, and sit down in a different place. Or get them to say to the group ‘I am (their real name), and I have stopped acting as (their character in the story)’
  
8. Then ask the group to share what reflections we can make about the event, the characters, and the exchange, that might impact on our own lives today.
  
- 9 Close with prayer.

## **METHOD FIVE**

### **The ‘Historical Context’ approach to Bible study**

1. Read the parable from Luke 15: 4-7, “The Parable of the Lost Sheep”

2. In pairs discuss how you understand the parable, what do you think is the key message behind it, is there anything you find odd about it? Share back with the group.

3. Hand out or read out the following material:

The bible was originally written for particular people, who belonged to particular groups, and who lived in a particular places and times. That is not to say that it is not also relevant for us today and for every person in every age, but rather that one way of studying and reading the bible involves trying to gain something of the perspective of the original readers.

So our reading and studying of the bible can be helped by considering what it might have meant to, and for, the people to whom it was first told, or who first read it. Such an approach to bible study for the gospels requires some attempt to reconstruct the historical context of first century rural Palestine, and the life of the first disciples and followers.

The difficulty of this approach is the lack of sufficient evidence about the historical context which leads to much speculation and assumption about what life was like then. Never-the-less scholars are able to agree on and clarify some aspects of the Palestinian life of the gospel period.

4. Get people to imagine themselves as a first century Palestinian shepherd.

In pairs consider the following:

- what is the country around you like?, what is the weather like?
- what do you eat, drink, wear?
- what work do you do?, by what means do you do it?, with what tools?
- what animals are around?, how many might you own?
- what is your family like?, who lives with you?
- what is your religion?, what does it involve?

Read the parable from Luke again from your imagined perspective of a first century Palestinian farmer: in pairs consider the following:

- what does the story tell you?
- how does it relate to your everyday experience, life, work?
- what is normal?, what is surprising?
- what would you agree with?, what would you find hard to accept?

The parable was first told to some Pharisees (Luke 15: 1-3), so now imagine yourself as a first century Jewish Pharisee: in pairs consider the following:

- what do you think about this teacher Jesus of Nazareth?
- what is your reaction to the parable he has told you?
- how might you understand it?
- what do you find odd about it?

5. Feedback to group

6. Hand out or read out the following input on historical context:

As a Pharisee the telling of a parable about a shepherd would connect with your understanding of Moses as a shepherd, with the Kings of Israel being called shepherds (Ezra 34), and with God being thought of as a shepherd (Ps 23).

Yet actual shepherds in the flesh are considered ‘unclean’ and sinners, because they engage in a proscribed trade. That is, something that your law says makes you ritually unclean and thus unable to enter the temple without a period of cleansing and the appropriate sacrifice offering. So a parable that suggests you might be a shepherd is a shock and an insult! It is an attack on your legal proscription against shepherds. So any Pharisee who actually owned sheep would never care for them themselves but would hire a shepherd to do it for them.

In first century Palestine anyone, Pharisee or farmer, who owned 100 sheep would be wealthy enough to hire a shepherd, or at least would have a less affluent family member look after them. The average family only owned about 5-15 sheep, though several families might herd them together and have a shepherd look after them, but one shepherd would not care for more than about 40 sheep on their own. So the shepherd of the parable would not be on his own, but with 100 sheep there would probably be at least three shepherds. The ‘having’ 100 sheep means ‘being responsible’ for 100 sheep, but not solely responsible. You wouldn’t own them all.

The ‘leaving of the 99 in the wilderness’ would not mean abandoning them to their own fate, as the other shepherds would later take them home. Note that the shepherd carries the found sheep ‘home’, not back to the wilderness location, because the flock would have been returned by the others after a days grazing.

If the shepherd was a family member, as would usually be the case, they would probably own some of the flock themselves and would feel responsible to the wider family concerned for any lost sheep, and would share in the loss. This helps explain the joy of the whole community in finding the lost sheep, as they all stood to lose something if one of the combined flock is lost. There might also be some element of rejoicing that the one shepherd family member got home safely from their search, as several dangers lurked in the wilderness for a shepherd on their own.

There are two lots of rejoicing in the parable, with the first rejoicing, by the shepherd on finding the sheep, more remarkable. There would be joy at avoiding the loss, but the shepherd still has at that point to carry the sheep home, which is no easy task. A lost sheep will lie down and not budge so would be required to be carried, as it would not be herded on its own. Most shepherds would have mixed feelings here, joy at finding the sheep mixed with annoyance at having to carry it. The story does not stop with the finding, but includes the act of restoration to the fold, and that act is what is rejoiced about. The parable might better be titled ‘the parable of the restored sheep’ rather than ‘the parable of the lost sheep’ as the joy over the restoration is the climax of the parable.

7. Discuss how the parable might be differently understood today in light of the input on historical context?

8. Close with prayer.

## **RESOURCES:**

Bailey, K.E. *Poet & Peasant*. (1976) Eerdmans:Michigan

\_\_\_\_\_. *Through Peasant Eyes* 1976, Eerdmans, Michigan

## **METHOD SIX**

### **The ‘Contextual Approach’ to Bible study (Contemporary Liberation Context)**

1. Read or hand out this Introduction to ‘Contextual Approach’:

One way into understanding the bible is to begin with your own context and life experience. This means that one person’s interpretation differs from other people’s interpretations, because of factors like, the specific time, place, culture, socio-economic status, and human groupings each person belongs to in history. This is also sometimes known as ‘historical’ reading, and the interpretation given by any one person is not assumed to be static and universal for everyone, but quite the opposite, as it results in an understanding which is particular to a person’s own specific context, and so is provisional, conditional, dynamic and often reactive.

This approach is a more inductive process that begins with the concrete, particular, and incarnational experience of people and works towards the more abstract and universal in ideas about God and faith. Many of the more modern approaches to reading the bible are of this type and you may have heard of some of the following perspectives, or movements, and the resulting contextual interpretations:

- ‘liberation’ perspective, which comes out of the experience and context of being poor, oppressed and dis-empowered, especially in reaction to a wealth and power dominated society, church and faith understanding. Liberation theology seeks equality, and the freedom and emancipation of the poor and oppressed. It understands God as the one who sides with the poor and marginalised, against the powerful and oppressors, as liberator and revolutionary. It emerged in the 1960’s in Latin America and especially within the Roman Catholic Church, though now has different forms in many different places throughout the world.
- ‘feminist’ perspective, which comes out of the experience and context of being woman, especially in reaction to a male dominated society, church and faith understanding. Feminist theology seeks equality, and the freedom and emancipation of women in the Christian faith and the churches. It understands God in more inclusive or female terms, like as Mother, Lover and Friend. It is a form of critical liberation theology, about liberation from sexism and patriarchy, and has emerged in the late twentieth century.
- ‘black’ perspective, which comes out of the experience and context of being black, especially in reaction to a white dominated society, church and faith understanding. Black theology seeks equality, and the freedom and emancipation of black communities in predominantly white societies. It understands God in more indigenous terms, and as creating all people equal. It is also a form of critical liberation theology, about liberation from racism and bigotry, and emerged in the USA from the 1960’s.

2. Read Luke 16: 19-31 (Dives and Lazarus) out of the context of being poor. Imagine you were very poor, in need of food, powerless and oppressed.

- who do you identify with?
- what are your feelings/ thoughts?
- how would you react?
- what would you want to say to the other characters?
- what would you want to say to, or about, God?

(Refer to *Liberating Exegesis*, Rowland, p 26-31)

3. Share with the whole group and identify common thoughts.

4. Read Luke 10: 38-42 (Mary and Martha) from a feminist perspective.

If you are male imagine you were a woman, often powerless and voiceless in your own society.

- who do you identify with?
- what are your feelings/ thoughts?
- how would you react?
- what would you want to say to the other characters?
- what would you want to say to, or about, God?

(Refer to 'Searching the Scriptures', Fiorenza, p 745-752.)

5. Share with the whole group and identify common thoughts.

6. Discuss this approach. How have you found it? What was easy/ difficult about it?

Is there a particular contemporary contextual approach to the Biblical tradition that you might identify with? Maybe a 'St Mary's Parish' approach, or a 'St John's Youth Group' approach, that reflects your own parish or group experience and context. How would that be different from other people's contexts and approaches? What difference might that make to how you read and study the bible?

7. Close with prayer.

## **RESOURCES:**

Rowland, C. & M Corner. *Liberating Exegesis*. (1991) SPCK: London, 26-31

Fiorenza, E. *Searching the Scriptures*. (1994) SCM Press: London, 745-752.

## **METHOD SEVEN**

### **'Personality types' and approaches to Bible study**

This method includes four different approaches to bible study based on different personality profiles as determined by the 'Myers-Briggs' personality indicator profiles. There are 16 of these profiles and they are expressed in terms of four letters, which stand for certain personality preferences. If you know your 'Myers-Briggs' personality indicator profile then you could try the approach first that is said to suit you best. Then you could try the approach that would be your 'shadow' personality indicator (ie. try

whichever approach does not include any letters of your indicator, so if you tried SJ and are an STJ then try NF. If you are an SFJ then try NT). If you do not know your profile, then you could try all four approaches, two on your own and two with a group, and see which you feel suits you best. There might be some surprises in store! After all personality indicators are only that - 'indicators'!

1. **Ignatian** (SJ) - (Imaginative/meditative - on story/event as written)

Luke: 10:25-35 (Good Samaritan)

a. Read the story

b. Imagine yourself as

- the person that is injured.  
What do you think as you see people passing by ignoring your cries for help?
- the Good Samaritan  
Try to envision some situations today where you could act as a 'Good Samaritan' to others in trouble.

2. **Augustinian** (NF) - (How does it apply to my life? Transposing the Bible into today's practice/situation)

Luke 6: 27-36

a. Read the story

b. What do those words of Jesus mean if they were spoken to you now?

c. Who do you need to forgive?

d. How might Jesus be asking you today to turn the other cheek?

3. **Franciscan** (SP) - (Creative/Open/Unconfined approach)

Luke 1: 46-55 (Mary's song of praise to God)

a. Read the story

b. Spend a few moments thinking of God's blessings to you

- in creation
- life/friends/family
- faith/church

c. Compose your own canticle of praise (Words/phrases you would use)

4. **Thomistic** (NT) - (Rational/Thinking approach)

Luke 1: 26-38

a. Read the story

b. List qualities of Mary's faith in this reading

c. What changes do you need to make in order to make your faith more like Mary's

6. After you have tried two approaches write a reflection that compares the similarities and contrasts the differences between the two approaches. Note any learnings you gained about the Bible or yourself. Do the same after you have tried two approaches with a group. (These reflections can be used as input for Step Four, 1. c) and Step Four, 2. b.)

## **APPENDIX 1:A BIBLE SCAVENGER HUNT/ QUIZ**

(you will need access to a bible, or bibles, to do this)

1. What is your bible called? (Look at the front cover or first few inside pages)
2. What other names/ titles/ descriptions do you know of for the bible?
3. What translation/ version is your bible? (Look at the cover or inside front pages)
4. What other translations/ versions do you know of? (More on different translations later)
5. How many books are there in your bible? (Check the index, or count them!)
6. How many books in the Old Testament?
7. How many books in the New Testament?
8. What else is the Old Testament sometimes called?
9. What else is the New Testament sometimes called?
10. What is the first book, and what is the last book of your bible?

First book:

Last book:

11. What is the last book of the Old Testament?, and the first book of the New Testament?

12. The books of the bible have abbreviations (ie Genesis = Gen), so what are the abbreviations for the following books? (Check the index or contents pages)

- Deuteronomy
- Micah
- John
- Obadiah
- 2nd Chronicles
- Titus
- Jonah
- Philemon

13. What is the seventeenth book of the Old Testament?

- How many chapters does it have?

14. Which people is chapter 49 of Jeremiah written concerning? (Jer 49:1)

15. What does verse 105 of Psalm 119 say about God's word? (Ps 119:105)

16. Who are the two kings in verse 1 of Daniel chapter 1? (Dan 1:1)

17. Who is the Pharisee in John 3:1? (Jn 3:1)

18. Who gets killed in verses 59 and 60 of Acts 7? (Acts 7:59-60) and who looks after the coats? (Acts 7:58 and 8:1)

19. What is the vision of in Revelation chapter 21, verse 1? (Rev 21:1)

20. What are the first three words of the bible?, and the last verse of the bible?

## **APPENDIX 2:INTERVIEW FORM FOR BIBLE KNOWLEDGE SURVEY:**

### **INTERVIEW ONE**

1. What names/ titles/ descriptions do you know of for the bible?
2. What translations/ versions of the bible do you know of?
3. How many books are there in the bible? (Guesses are fine)
4. How many in the Old Testament?
5. How many in the New Testament?
6. What else is the Old Testament sometimes called?
7. What else is the New Testament sometimes called?
8. What is the first book, and what is the last book of the bible?
9. What is the last book of the Old Testament?, and the first book of the New Testament?
10. The books of the bible have abbreviations (ie Genesis = Gen), so what are the abbreviations for the following books?
  - Deuteronomy
  - Micah
  - John
  - Obadiah
  - 2nd Chronicles
  - Titus
  - Jonah
  - Philemon
11. What are the first three words of the bible?
12. What is the last word of the bible?

Finally, comment on what the bible has meant to you in your faith journey, and what the bible means to you now.

## INTERVIEW TWO

1. What names/ titles/ descriptions do you know of for the bible?
2. What translations/ versions of the bible do you know of?
3. How many books are there in the bible? (Guesses are fine)
4. How many in the Old Testament?
5. How many in the New Testament?
6. What else is the Old Testament sometimes called?
7. What else is the New Testament sometimes called?
8. What is the first book, and what is the last book of the bible?
9. What is the last book of the Old Testament?, and the first book of the New Testament?
10. The books of the bible have abbreviations (ie Genesis = Gen), so what are the abbreviations for the following books?
  - Deuteronomy
  - Micah
  - John
  - Obadiah
  - 2nd Chronicles
  - Titus
  - Jonah
  - Philemon
11. What are the first three words of the bible?
12. What is the last word of the bible?

Finally, comment on what the bible has meant to you in your faith journey, and what the bible means to you now.

## **INTERVIEW THREE**

1. What names/ titles/ descriptions do you know of for the bible?
2. What translations/ versions of the bible do you know of?
3. How many books are there in the bible? (Guesses are fine)
4. How many in the Old Testament?
5. How many in the New Testament?
6. What else is the Old Testament sometimes called?
7. What else is the New Testament sometimes called?
8. What is the first book, and what is the last book of the bible?
9. What is the last book of the Old Testament?, and the first book of the New Testament?
10. The books of the bible have abbreviations (ie Genesis = Gen), so what are the abbreviations for the following books?
  - Deuteronomy
  - Micah
  - John
  - Obadiah
  - 2nd Chronicles
  - Titus
  - Jonah
  - Philemon
11. What are the first three words of the bible?
12. What is the last word of the bible?

Finally, comment on what the bible has meant to you in your faith journey, and what the bible means to you now.

## INTERVIEW FOUR

1. What names/ titles/ descriptions do you know of for the bible?
2. What translations/ versions of the bible do you know of?
3. How many books are there in the bible? (Guesses are fine)
4. How many in the Old Testament?
5. How many in the New Testament?
6. What else is the Old Testament sometimes called?
7. What else is the New Testament sometimes called?
8. What is the first book, and what is the last book of the bible?
9. What is the last book of the Old Testament?, and the first book of the New Testament?
10. The books of the bible have abbreviations (ie Genesis = Gen), so what are the abbreviations for the following books?
  - Deuteronomy
  - Micah
  - John
  - Obadiah
  - 2nd Chronicles
  - Titus
  - Jonah
  - Philemon
11. What are the first three words of the bible?
12. What is the last word of the bible?

Finally, comment on what the bible has meant to you in your faith journey, and what the bible means to you now.

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