

What the Bible Is

I. What the Bible Is

In order to how to study the Bible, we must know what the Bible is. Determining the right methods of study depends on knowing the nature of the object of our study.

- The word of God is a form of divine revelation: the triune God presenting himself in a free act of love to call and enable humanity to know, honor, and love him above all things and to establish a saving relationship with human beings.
 - God’s word is an active agent accomplishing God’s will with God’s power (Isa. 55:10-11) in creation (e.g., Gen. 1:3, 9, 11), in sustaining the world (Ps. 29; 147:15; 148:8; Isa. 55:10-11), and in redemption (see every “word of the Lord” that came to Adam & Eve and to every prophet; the “sword of the Spirit” for defense in spiritual war: Eph. 6:17).
 - God made human beings in his image with the ability to understand and communicate in thought expressed in language.
 - God speaks through human words to reveal himself and establish communion in covenant with his people.
- Divine revelation in and through the word of God is the work of the Triune God.
 - The Father is the source of the word revealed through the Son and the Spirit. The Son is the Word of the Father (John 1:1), and the Son speaks only what he receives from the Father (John 5:19, 30-47; 7:16-18; 12:44-50; 17:6-8), and the Holy Spirit speaks only what he receives from the Son (John 14:26; 16:13-15).
 - The Son is the Word made flesh (John 1:14), the ultimate embodiment of divine Truth (John 14:6) who speaks what he receives from the Father to his people in history.
 - The Holy Spirit directly communicates God’s word to human recipients and influences and guides human authors to produce inspired words and texts (2 Pet. 1:21). The Spirit also brings spiritually dead readers to spiritual life (Ezek. 36:26-27; John 3:5-8; Eph. 2:1-7; Tit. 3:5) and lifts the veil of ignorance clouding sinful human minds (2 Cor. 3:12-18) to illuminate the word of God to those who hear and read so that they understand it rightly and receive it as the word of God (John 14:26; 1 Cor. 2:6-16) with humble repentance and trust (John 16:8-15).
- The Bible is a set of divinely inspired texts: God led human authors to write the ideas and words that he sought to communicate without violating their own freedom or agency but rather by working through their created intellects, personalities, and histories. Thus, the Bible has two-fold authorship: divine and human. Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), and thus what Scripture says, God says.
 - God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, gave the revelation of the Torah/Pentateuch to him, and publicly confirmed his role as a true prophet in the miracles of the Exodus and the events at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 3-24). Many later biblical writers from all eras acknowledged the revelation received through Moses as God’s word

(e.g., Josh. 22:5; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs. 14:6; Psalm 119; Ezra 3:2, 9:9-12; Dan. 9:11-13; Neh. 8:1-9:38; Matt. 19:7-8; Luke 24:27, 44; John 1:17, 45; Acts 7; 1 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 8:5; 9:19).

– The Torah establishes criteria for recognizing future special revelation after Moses:

(1) orthodoxy, i.e., consistency with prior special revelation (Deut. 13:1-5);

(2) publicly observable/testable evidence of short-term predictions about the future

fulfilled (Deut. 18:15-22). Many later OT writings record people receiving special revelation and identify OT writings as God's revealed word (former prophets: 1 Kgs. 16:34; Zech. 7:12; latter prophets: all describe their work as the "word of the Lord" or "vision" from God). Writings recognized as inspired revelation were stored in the Tabernacle & Temple (Exod. 25:16; 1 Sam. 10:25; 2 Kgs. 22:8).

– Jesus and the early Christians all accepted the OT canon as Scripture (e.g., Matt. 5:17-20; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

– Jesus claimed to be a prophet and was recognized as a prophet (Matt. 13:57; John 4:19-26; 6:14; Acts 3:22-23; Heb. 1:1-3). He is the incarnate Word and Truth of God (John 1:1-18; 14:6) and a skilled teacher (his title "rabbi"). Jesus laid the foundation and direction for a NT canon by commissioning his disciples as official representatives (e.g., Matt. 10:5-42; John 20:21; Acts 1:8; 10:41). His teaching had a memorable form (pithy, repeated, filled with practical images), and his disciples included literate men capable of taking notes and writing an account of his life and teaching (e.g., Matthew the tax collector, Luke the doctor, Paul the trained scholar; cf. Luke 1:1-4).

– The NT writers demonstrate an awareness that the apostles are commissioned to teach and pass on a divinely revealed tradition of revelation (1 Cor. 15:1-11) and received special revelation from God (2 Peter 1:16-21). They also quote other NT writings as Scripture (1 Tim. 5:18: Paul quotes Luke; Peter calls Paul's writings Scripture: 2 Peter 3:15-16).

- The Bible emerges from sanctified human processes of revelation.

The different books of the Bible contain a diversity of language and authorial styles, and it refers to many different means and processes by which God reveals himself and calls for his people to hear, receive, test, and live according to his word. This diversity and attention to human processes implies that God works through human authors and readers at every stage of revelation and its subsequent description, interpretation, and preservation in written form in order to make those human means into servants of his presence and saving purposes for his people. These processes include:

- The historical revelatory events and words to which Scripture bears witness
- The production of the text: oral re-telling and writing
- The editing and compiling of the text
- The church's recognition of the text as Scripture (canon)
- The church's understanding and interpreting of the text

In summary, "the Father speaks a Word (the Son) who in turn commissions human agents to speak words on his behalf through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit." (Kevin Vanhoozer)

II. Some Attributes of Scripture and How They Guide Interpretation

- Infallible and truthful

- The Bible is infallible, which means that it cannot fail to accomplish its purpose (John 10:35). The word of God stands forever (Isa. 40:8; Ps. 119:160; 1 Pet. 1:25) because it is the word of God, who is the sovereign Lord over all things whose ultimate purposes cannot be thwarted (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11).
- The Bible is completely truthful in all that it affirms (Ps. 119:160; John 17:17) because it is the word of God, who is the source of all truth and completely faithful and trustworthy (Exod. 34:6) and who cannot err.

→ Therefore, if the Bible seems to affirm anything that is not true, we should first investigate its truth-claims with patience, seeking various perspectives from others who have addressed the topic or passage in question. We will probably discover that the apparent problem may be our wrong interpretation rather than the Bible's actual claims, or we might realize that we do not have sufficient information to be certain that the Bible's truth-claim is truly mistaken.

- Unified

Despite its diversity of human authors, the Bible has one, consistent, truthful divine author, and thus the Bible presents a unified, internally consistent story of God, his world, and his work and not different, mutually contradictory affirmations about God and his works.

→ Therefore, we should interpret Scripture with Scripture to investigate how other texts may shed further light on texts that are difficult to understand. Where there seem to be apparent tensions or contradictions, we should investigate explanations that show how the apparent tensions might be understood as consistent, harmonious, and mutually complementary. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9: "The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, (which is not manifold, but one,) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."

- Authoritative (*sola scriptura*)

- The Bible is supremely authoritative because it is the word of God, who is the sovereign King who rules over all and the source of all authority on heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18; John 19:11; Rom. 13:1; Eph. 1:21; Col. 2:20).
- The Protestant doctrine of Scripture is that the Bible is the only infallible authority that God has given to the church as a means of grace and guidance. The church's traditions of creeds/confessions, other theological writings, institutional structures, and spiritual practices have a genuine but lesser authority derived from and governed by Scripture. The church's traditions have authority only insofar as they rightly reflect God's revelation in Scripture and help the church understand and live according to Scripture.

→ Therefore, we must hear and study Scripture with active, reverent care and heed it with humble, joyful submission in belief and obedient life conformed to Christ.
→ Therefore, because we are not infallible, we must interpret and apply Scripture with the whole church, learning from humbly pastors and elders ordained by Christ to teach the word of God, from fellow believers from all over the world, and from the history of the church's tradition handed down by spiritual fathers and mothers in the faith to learn from their wisdom insofar as they were guided by the Holy Spirit.

- Covenantal and spiritual formative

The Bible is covenantal, which means that its purpose is not merely conveying true information about God but also serving as a means of personal communion with God (1 John 1:1-4). God gives his word not only for teaching but also “for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” so that we may be “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). God intends that his word dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16) so that we walk in the way of God's covenant by having our minds transformed by the mind of Christ (Rom. 12:1-2) and our lives transformed more fully into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 John 1:1-4).

→ Therefore, we must hear, read, and study the Bible not as an impersonal object but rather as the personal word of the living God with prayer for the Holy Spirit's illumination; with an active mind ready to understand; with an open heart ready to respond with love, thanks, confession, lament, and trusting petition; and with a will ready to obey all that God asks and commands.

Westminster Larger Catechism, Q 157:

Q. How is the Word of God to be read?

A. The holy Scriptures are to be read with an high and reverent esteem of them; with a firm persuasion that they are the very Word of God; and that he only can enable us to understand them; with desire to know, believe, and obey, the will of God revealed in them; with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer.

Book of Common Prayer (1662), Collect for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.