

Discipleship Training Course

This course contains 23 chapters and is released freely to the public domain for the purpose of discipling new believers and strengthening those older in the faith.

All Bible quotations are given in italics with their book, chapter and verse(s), followed by an abbreviation for their translation as follows:

AMP	The Amplified Bible © 2015 The Lockman Foundation
AMPC	The Amplified Bible (Classic Edition) © 1987 The Zondervan Corporation and the Lockman Foundation
ESVUK	English Standard Version Anglicised © 2001 Crossway Bibles
HCSB	The Holman Christian Standard Bible © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 Holman Bible Publishers
MSG	The Message © 1993, 2002, 2018 Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress.
NASB1995	The New American Standard Bible © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation
NHEB	New Heart English Bible, Edited by Wayne A. Mitchell 2008-2026, Public Domain
NIVUK	The New International Version® Anglicized © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica, Inc.®
NKJV	New King James Version® © 1982 Thomas Nelson
NLT	New Living Translation © 1996, 2004, 2015 Tyndale House Foundation
WEBPB	The World English Bible® Protestant British Edition, Public Domain

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The following systematic adjustments have also been made to Bible quotes:

- The Old Testament tetragrammation name of God (derived from the four Hebrew letters translated into English as YHWH) has been rendered LORD unless translated Jehovah or Yahweh
- Pronouns referring to the Trinity and some specific terms relating to the Trinity (such as Name and Word) have been capitalized
- Speech marks around entire quotes and at the beginning of new paragraphs have been omitted
- Anglicised spellings have been used
- All quotes begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop
- Some weights, measures and times have been replaced with easier to understand terms given in the footnotes using square brackets
- All verse numbers, footnote numbers and symbols have been removed
- Poetry has been indented and only new sentences start with a capital letter

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1. Origins of the Bible

1.1 The Bible in comparison with other types of revelation

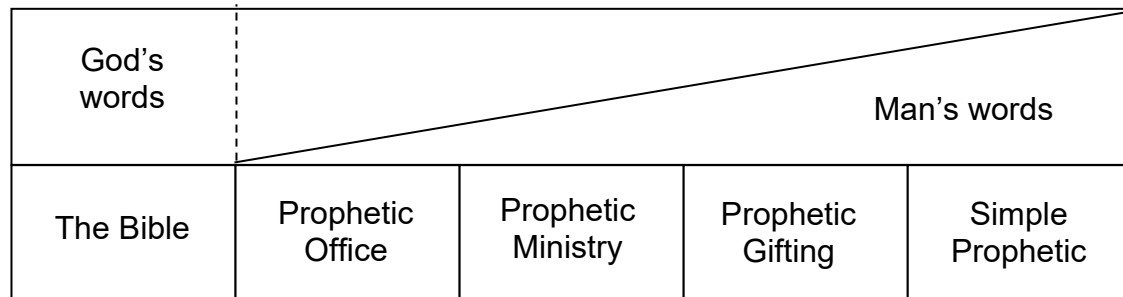
Like the woman who was loved by the lover in Song of Solomon, we need to develop a love for God's word:

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth;
for your love is better than wine.*

Song of Solomon 1:2 (WEBPB)

Chapter 6. Introduction to studying the Bible

The Bible is the purest form of revelation from God: it is fully God's words and not from man's thinking (2 Peter 1:20-21). It was written by men and women of God who were inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16). Prophecy can be thought of in four levels as indicated in the diagram below. The purpose of this teaching is to look at where the Bible came from and why we trust in it as God's revelation to us today.



1.2 The religious heritage of Jews and Christians

The original Jewish inheritance after the conquest of Canaan included Promised Land, the temple, the sacrifices, the annual feasts, the first five books of the Old Testament (OT), known as the Torah or Law, and their Hebrew language. Other books in the OT were recognised later. However, a change in the Jewish religious focus began under the 70 year Babylonian exile of Judah in 586 B.C., known as the First Diaspora (the dispersion of Jews to other countries). During this period they developed a faith based around personal piety, prayer and congregating in synagogues for the purpose of reading the OT (Luke 4:14-15).

After the destruction of the temple and their dispersion in A.D. 70 (Luke 19:41-44) they only retained their ethnic identity, the OT, which they read in synagogues, and their annual feasts. The modern revival of Judaism began in the 18th and 19th Centuries with the restoration of the Hebrew language, followed by their resettlement in Palestine which began in 1882. The state of Israel was re-established in 1948. Jews now worship at the temple site but they do not offer sacrifices.

Apart from the work of Christ for us upon the cross (the true meaning of which became obscured in the Dark Ages until it was restored to the Protestant Church in the Reformation), the Bible is a vital common heritage uniting all Christians together. Hebrews 6:1-2 also mentions the sacraments of baptism, communion and the laying on of hands. Christians also share a common heritage of congregating (Hebrews 10:25).

The Jewish cultural heritage also helped the early Christians to make their own transition in religious practices (compare Acts 2:42-47 with 3:1). Very early on Christians started to recognise the New Testament (NT) as carrying the same authority as the OT by referring to it as Scripture (e.g. see 2 Peter 3:15-16). The Church eventually divided into the three main blocks of Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox. It also started to celebrate annual feasts.

1.3 The canon of Scripture

1.3.1 Introduction

The word "canon" comes from a Greek word meaning "list", "rule" or "standard". The canon of Scripture refers to the collection of books that, over the ages, Christians have accepted as authoritative. How do we know that the 66 books that make up our Bible today are truly God's living Word to us? How and why did the historical Church accept these books, rather than others? The arguments for the New and Old Testaments are somewhat different so we shall look at them separately.

1.3.2 The canon of the Old Testament

The best modern historical scholarship asserts that, probably, the OT canon was established by the Jewish community at least by the middle of the first century A.D. The Jewish historian Josephus of this time writes of our current OT books as “containing the record of all time and justly accredited”. These were also the books recognised by Christ, the Jews of His time and the first apostles (see Luke 24:44). Jesus also quoted many OT books (e.g. Genesis in Matthew 19:4, Exodus in Matthew 19:18-19, Leviticus in Matthew 22:39, Deuteronomy in Matthew 4:4, Psalms in Matthew 21:16, Isaiah in Matthew 13:14-15, Jeremiah in Mark 11:17, Daniel in Mark 13:14, Hosea in Matthew 9:13, Micah in Matthew 10:35, Zechariah in Matthew 26:31, and Malachi in Matthew 11:10). He also summarised the OT in Matthew 23:34-35 and Luke 11:50-51.

1.3.3 The Apocrypha

However, there is still controversy today between Christian groups as to whether certain other books, known as the **Apocrypha** (derived from the Greek word meaning “hidden”) should be included in the OT. The origins of this dispute lie mainly in the acceptance of copies of the influential Greek translation of the OT developed between about 250 and 100 BC, known as the **Septuagint**. The NT reflects widespread use of this translation (e.g. Romans 3:10-18 and Hebrews 10:5-7). In the fourth Century AD the church father Augustine encouraged the inclusion of the Apocrypha in later copies of this translation which were widely distributed throughout the Church. Thus the Apocrypha became accepted as part of the OT canon as the Church was unaware at that time of the Jewish OT canon which did not include it.

The Apocrypha remained generally accepted by Christians until the Reformation when the Protestant Church rejected the Catholic Church’s formal decision to adopt it at the Council of Trent in 1546. The Eastern Orthodox Church also chose to keep the Apocrypha. However, the Apocrypha remained in common use even in the Protestant Church until the middle of the Nineteenth Century when it was no longer included in later copies of the Oxford edition of the King James Version (published in 1769, the version which is in common use today). In 1826 the British and Foreign Bible Society decided not to distribute the Apocrypha in any Bible for practical reasons (a decision they overturned in 1966 on ecumenical grounds).

1.3.4 Why do Protestants reject the Apocrypha?

1. It was not part of the original Jewish OT
2. It contains historical inaccuracies
3. Protestant scholars assert that it does not add to the OT in terms of any doctrine and often contradicts it

Therefore we do not believe it is part of God’s Holy Word to us today. It is not wrong to read it but it is advised that it should not be read in the same way as Scripture as we believe it was not written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

1.3.5 The canon of the New Testament

The NT canon was agreed in a much more straightforward way. The early Church gave special authority to the teachings of Christ and the first apostles along with Paul (the ‘untimely born’ apostle) and James (1 Corinthians 15:8). Certain truths were revealed especially to them (Ephesians 3:5, Hebrews 1:1-2).

There is some evidence that the gospels, Acts, the epistles and Revelation were accepted as the NT canon by the end of the first century AD. However, the main motivation for agreeing unilaterally on the NT canon came in middle of the second Century AD in reaction to the efforts of a heretic called Marcion to create a false NT canon and also increased persecution

of Christians. Most books were agreed upon but some doubts remained for a further 200 years.

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, first endorsed the 27 books of our modern NT in A.D. 367. His views were subsequently ratified by the wider Church at the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393 and the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397. There have been a few disagreements but since this time our current day NT canon has widely been accepted.

The NT sometimes quotes sources outside of the OT, such as in Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Titus 1:12 and Jude 9. The NIV Study Bible footnote to Jude 9 states that, “such usage in no way suggests that [these sources] are divinely inspired. It only means that the Biblical author found [them] to be a helpful confirmation, clarification or illustration.”

1.4 The process of translating the Bible

The process of translating the Bible can be summarised in five stages:

Stage 1: The original manuscripts written by the authors – these have all now been lost

Stage 2: Copies of the original manuscripts, known as **texts**. The number of these has greatly increased since the 19th century (e.g. the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947). The oldest example is the Silver Amulets discovered in Jerusalem in 1985 and dated to approximately 650 BC which contain a copy of the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:22-27.

Stage 3: Standardised texts in the original language, such as the Masoretic OT (which was developed approximately over the period 500 to 1000 AD) and the United Bible Society's Greek Text of the NT (with five editions published between 1966 and 2014).

Stage 4: Translations of texts into other languages, such as the Septuagint translation of the OT in Greek approximately over the period 250-100 BC, and the Latin Vulgate Bible which was completed by Jerome in 405 AD.

Stage 5: Secondary translations, such as the Wycliffe Bible which John Wycliffe translated from the Latin Vulgate in 1382.

2. Choosing an English Bible translation

2.1 Introduction

Now that we have established why Protestant Christians believe that the 66 books in the Bible do represent God's Word to us we need to look at how to interpret their message so that we may understand what they are saying to us.

The first step is to look at how to choose a good Bible translation. We shall look at why we read the Bible in English, the history of English Bible translations and how to choose between translations. Throughout this lesson we concentrate on Protestant Bibles.

2.2 Why read the Bible in English?

The original manuscripts of the Bible were written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. No original manuscripts have been preserved but there are many documents copied from these manuscripts in the original language, known as **texts**. For example there are about 5,400 NT Greek texts. These allow Bible translators to build a lot of evidence about the original manuscripts. This has been distilled into **standardised texts**. The most up to date are the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia OT text (Eißfeldt et al., 1977) (although many modern translations also refer to the Dead Sea Scrolls) and the Nestle-Aland and UBS NT texts (Aland et al., 2012; Newman, B. C., 2025), collectively referred to as NU. However, rather

than expecting every Christian to become an expert in ancient languages and a Bible translator, it is common wisdom to trust the work of experts.

This is very different to the approach of Islam that uses the original Arabic text of the Koran. This does not mean that the Koran is superior to the Bible. The vital differences between them are we believe the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the Bible to write it and it requires the indwelling Holy Spirit to give us the true meaning of a passage – see 1 Corinthians 2:12-13. However, a good translation and a basic understanding of how to interpret Scripture can help us greatly in this process.

2.3 The history of Bible translations

After the Council of Carthage in 397, a standard translation of the Bible into Latin was produced by Jerome in 405, known as the Latin Vulgate. For many centuries it was copied by hand from one Bible to another. Most people could not read, let alone Latin, so it was left up to the priests to explain the word of God to the people. During this period, known as the Dark Ages, the Church in the UK lost touch with reading the word of God for themselves, although there were a few translations of parts of the Bible into old English.

The first translation of the whole Bible into English was by John Wycliffe in 1382. This translation created a desire for literacy within the English-speaking Church which only used the Latin Vulgate which few people could read. It was severely condemned by the Catholic Church in 1415 at the Council of Constance which ordered Wycliffe's bones to be dug up, burned and scattered in the River Swift, by which it is said that he became the "morning star" of the Reformation.

The Reformation in 1518 coincided with the invention of the printing press. The first book to be produced was a translation of the NT into English by William Tyndale. This translation was extremely influential in the Reformation and opened the door for further translations of the whole Bible into English by Protestants. However, these all contained marginal notes critical of the Catholic Church which made them unacceptable as neutral translations. The Catholics felt forced to translate the Bible into English in c. 1610 but their version (Douay-Rheims) was not as scholarly as the Protestant ones.

In response to this the Authorized Version of the Bible (AV, also known as the King James Version, KJV) was produced in 1611 at the request of King James of England (although the version in common use today is the Oxford Revised Edition of 1769). It is a classic Bible translation, written in beautiful poetic English, but it was based on poor original manuscripts compared to those that are available to us today, and thus contains many inaccuracies. For example, its NT text was the Textus Receptus which differs from the NU in about 300 places. Its translation marked a turning point in Church history. Since this time much effort has been made to translate the Scriptures into the native languages of the world, especially by Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Whilst the love of many believers for the KJV is understandable, there is a mistaken belief amongst some Christians that the KJV is somehow a "perfect" translation and that all other translations are impure and written by "sinners" with evil motives, such as liberals and homosexuals. Adherents to this view quote passages such as 1 John 5:7-8, claiming that other translations, such as the New International Version (NIV) deliberately play down the Lordship of Christ. This is untrue as many other Scriptures in the NIV support the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ.

In criticism of the KJV, Lewis (1991: 41-42) states:

Of the five ... manuscripts now received as authority for the purity of the text of the NT, only Codex Bezae was then available, and there is no evidence that it was used... The KJ scholars could have known fewer than 25 late manuscripts of

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the NT and, and these were carelessly used. Today there are 5,358 known NT manuscripts and fragments...

The 1611 situation for the OT was even poorer. [Two parallel texts/translations] would have been the sources from which they would have known the OT... About 800 Hebrew manuscripts have now been studied.

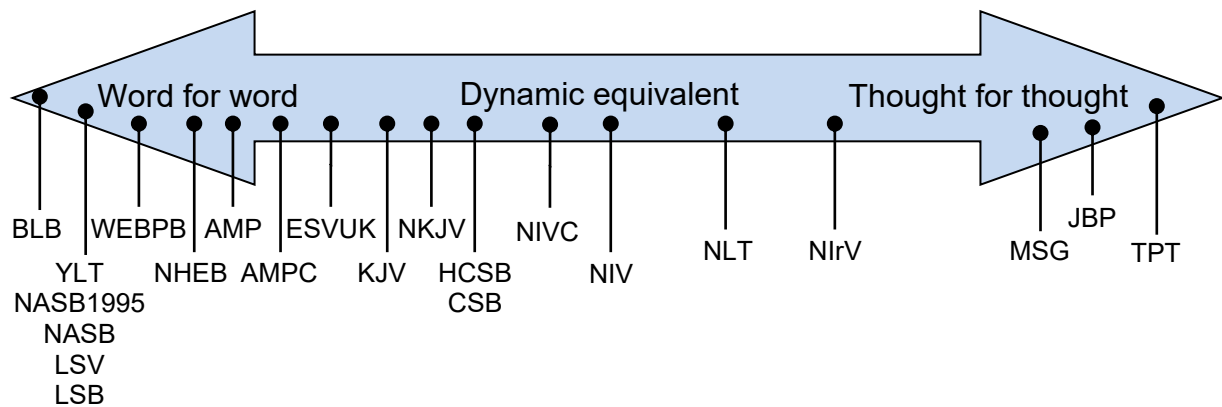
The discovery of many older (and thus more accurate) manuscripts of the Bible in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries led to the production of the Young's Literal Translation (YLT) in 1898, the American Standard Version (ASV) in 1901 and the Revised Standard Version (RSV) in 1951. These were similar in style to the Authorised Version. This style of translation is known as **literal** because it is a "word for word" translation of the original text. The KJV, ASV and RSV have all now been updated in terms of language and improvements in scholarship with the New King James Version (NKJV) of 1982 and the New American Standard Bible (NASB) of 1971 (which was revised in 1995, and again in 2020). More recent literal translations are: the English Standard Version (ESV) in 2001; the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) in 2004 (revised in 2009), now superseded by the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) of 2017; and the Legacy Standard Bible (LSB) of 2022. There are also two recent public domain literal translations: the New Heart English Bible (NHEB, <https://nheb.net/>) in 2010 and the World English Bible (WEB) a UK Protestant version (WEBPB) of which is available at <http://ebible.org/engwebpb/> and now fully edited.

Attempts to make the Bible more accessible to lay readers began in the 1950s with such translations as the J. B. Phillips New Testament (JBP) in 1958. Other notable translations of this type were the Living Bible (LB) in 1971, The Message (MSG) in 2002 and the recent controversial The Passion Translation (TPT) in 2016. These translations are known as **paraphrases** (or thought for thought) as they attempt to explain the meaning of whole phrases in more accessible language. Although this style of translation is criticised by some scholars (see Marlowe, 2012), like the original Wycliffe Bible, they have had a profound effect on biblical literacy in society.

Further improvements in original texts, translator scholarship and a desire to produce a Bible translation in a contemporary but accurate style led to the production of the New International Version (NIV) in 1978 (with a minor revision in 1984 and a controversial major revision in 2011). The NIV's style of translation is called **dynamic equivalent** (a balance between literal and paraphrase – see Nida, 1964). For example, the amount of money needed to buy enough bread to feed the multitude in Mark 6:37 is translated, "more than half a year's wages".

A revision of the Living Bible called the New Living Translation (NLT) produced in 1996 is in a dynamic equivalent style. The NIV was also retranslated into a limited vocabulary Bible called the New International reader's Version (NIrV) in 1998. Although the NIV is very popular, it is criticised over its overuse of **gender inclusive language** (Johns, 2003; Marlowe, 2005) in its 2011 revision for such a literal translation (Marlowe, 2011) and its publisher's policy to attempt to delete the 1984 version (referred to below as NIVC), although it is still available from <https://christunite.com/index.php/bible/niv-1984-bible-pdf>.

The styles of Bible translations are shown on the scale in the diagram below:



2.4 Choosing a translation

Most modern Bible translations are freely available online at websites such as <https://www.biblegateway.com/>, <https://biblehub.com/> and <https://www.bible.com/en-GB>. However, **not every version available at these websites is recommended**. When choosing a Bible translation, it is recommended that the following factors are taken into account:

- Is it a primary or secondary translation?
- Is it based on a single original text or multiple texts?
- What is the quality/age of original text(s)?
- What was the ability of translator(s)?
- How many translators were there?
- How much time did they take over the translation?
- Was there a bias behind the translation?
- How accessible is the language?
- Has it been revised? Is the revision better or worse?

Based on these criteria, the following thirteen translations are recommended:

- 1. The Christian Standard Bible (CSB):** A modern readable literal translation based on good quality texts and scholarship. It was funded by the Southern Baptist Church of the USA as an alternative to the NIV due to the non-availability of the 1984 version and high royalty costs. The CSB is generally regarded as an improvement to the HCSB as it takes a more balanced approach to the gender inclusive language issue (Strauss, 2019).
- 2. The King James Version (KJV), also known as the Authorised Version (AV):** Still the number two bestseller after over 400 years since its original publication. Based on the best texts available at the time it combines a literal translation style with beautiful poetic archaic English, something no other more recent translation has managed to do so well.
- 3. The English Standard Version (ESV) and UK edition (ESVUK):** Another modern readable literal translation based on the Revised Standard Version using the best texts currently available, high quality scholarship and without a discernible bias. However, its style is viewed as over-literal compared with the CSB (Strauss, 2019).
- 4. The New King James Version (NKJV):** A recent revised version of the KJV, written in modern English but attempting to retain the poetry of the KJV. It is sometimes a useful alternative to the ESVUK and the HCSB.

- 5. The New American Standard 1995 Version (NASB1995):** A modern language revision of the American Standard Version; a very literal translation which uses much better original texts and more systematic scholarship than the KJV. It also avoids the pitfall of over gender inclusiveness of some other modern KJV derivatives. On the downside, it is such a literal translation that it is not as readable, poetic or memorable as the KJV. The 2020 revision has some improvements on the 1995 version, but other passages appear to be a worse translation and, on the whole, it is seen as a disappointment (Oberto, 2020). It has also shifted its position on gender inclusive language (for example, the change from *bridegroom* to *groom* in Psalm 19:5 appears unnecessary and may indicate a hidden agenda). The 1995 version is still available and is therefore recommended ahead of the 2020 revision.
- 6. The Literal Standard Version (LSV):** Published in 2020, this is a modern update of the YLT and is a very literal translation (CT Creative Studio, 2021). It is recommended over the 2020 version of the NASB and the 2021 Legacy Standard Bible (LSB) due to its somewhat controversial translation of the Greek word *doulos* as slave rather than servant (Coombs, 2022).
- 7. The World English Bible, Protestant British edition (WEBPB,** <http://ebible.org/engwebpb/>): A public domain modern literal translation based on high quality texts and translated by a committee of scholars. A good choice for quotations in published materials, such as these notes.
- 8. The New Heart English Bible (NHEB,** <https://nheb.net/>): Another public domain modern literal translation based on high quality texts. Very similar to the WEBPB but possibly lacking the same level of scholarship. A useful alternative when quoting in publications.
- 9. The New Living Translation (NLT):** Probably currently the best choice for a dynamic equivalent translation, more readable than modern literal translations. It is a revision of the Living Bible but with much better translation scholarship.
- 10. The New International Version (NIV) and UK edition (NIVUK):** Although the 2011 version of the NIV is in many ways inferior to the 1984 translation (NIVC), it is still a useful dynamic equivalent, complementing the NLT. However, the NIVC and its UK equivalent (NIVUKC) are recommended if you can get hold of them, such as via <https://christunite.org/niv-bible-1984-text/>.
- 11. The New International Reader's Version (NIRV):** Probably currently the best choice for a limited vocabulary Bible. It is a secondary translation from the 1984 New International Version enabling it to combine high quality scholarship with a lower reading age than other limited vocabulary English Bibles currently available.
- 12. The Message (MSG):** Probably currently the best choice for a paraphrase translation, using vivid imagery to convey the idiomatic meaning of the original languages. However, like other paraphrases, it may lack accuracy in conveying the intended thoughts of the authors in some places and should only be used in conjunction with other recommended translations. The Message is recommended ahead of The Passion Translation, which is widely criticised for its lack of scholarship and poor choice of original texts (Hewitson, 2019; Pivec, 2018; Shead, 2018) and was recently removed by Bible Gateway (Shellnutt, 2022).
- 13. The Blue Letter Bible website (BLB,** <https://www.blueletterbible.org>): Probably the best free website currently available for studying the Bible. In particular, it has the facility of rendering the KJV and the NASB1995 back into the original languages with translations into the original words used in the texts with interpretations back into the original languages through several Bible concordances (a process known as **reverse interlinear**). If you are unable to access this website, we recommended you use the

2015 version of the **Amplified Bible (AMP)**. The original 1987 Amplified Bible (AMPC) is also an alternative. However, these versions' multiple interpretations of Scripture should be used cautiously.

3. Introduction to Biblical interpretation

3.1 Introduction – the interpreter

Now that we have built a foundation of the Protestant canon of Scripture and how to choose a good English translation, we can begin to look at the science of interpreting the Bible, known as **hermeneutics**. However, before we begin, it is helpful for us to state some vital assumptions that we are making about the interpreter as they will affect drastically the way we view Scripture. We assume the interpreter:

1. Has **Faith in God** – that He exists, inspired the writing of the Bible, and rewards those who seek Him through His Word (Hebrews 11:6, 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
2. Is **wilfully obedient** to God's word (James 1:22-25)
3. Believes in the **illumination of the Holy Spirit**, i.e. that interpretation is incomplete without the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:12-13)
4. Recognises the **Body of Christ**, the Church, and thus does not seek to interpret a Scripture or establish a doctrine without comparing their view with that of the Church as a whole (c.f. Jesus' statements in Matthew 5:21-22, see also Proverbs 23:10)
5. Has **other virtues** that will assist in Biblical interpretation, such as commitment, hard work and discipline (1 Timothy 4:15, 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 Peter 1:10-11)

3.2 The two tasks of hermeneutics

3.2.1 Task 1: Exegesis

This means to find the original, intended meaning of a Bible passage. The principle keys to good exegesis are:

1. Try to understand the **historical context** of a passage with the help of study aids, etc. Good questions to ask are: Who was the author? Who were the recipients? What was the main purpose of its writing? What other issues about life in the times that the book was written are relevant?
2. Try to understand the **literary context** of a passage by reading round it or other related passages
3. Try to understand the **main difficulties in interpreting a passage** by reading it in a variety of versions or with commentaries or study aids

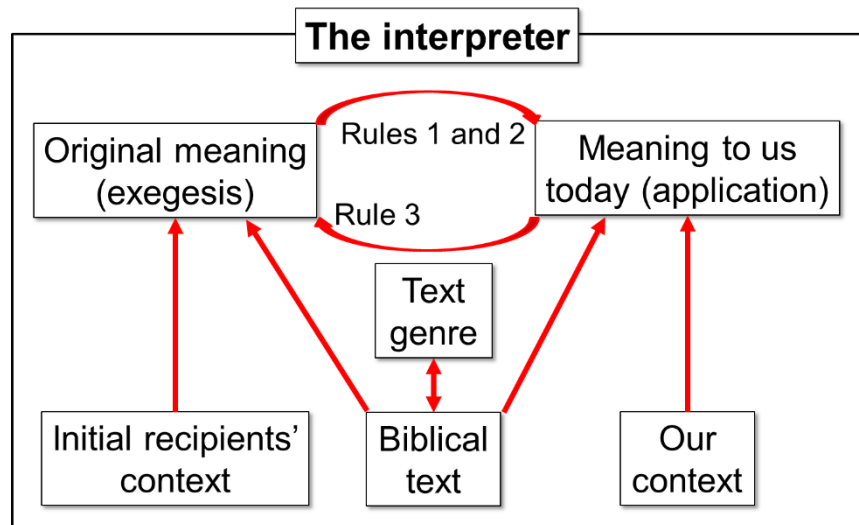
3.2.2 Task 2: Application

This means to understand how a passage **applies** to us today. *Knowing how a passage applies to us today must begin with good exegesis.* Application can be expanded in three rules:

Rule 1: Take the meaning of a passage to the original recipients and adjust it according to differences in context

Rule 2: Take into account the intended level of generalisation of the passage. Generalisation is especially important for the 'universal' teachings of Christ and the apostles on subjects such as salvation, grace, faith, love and righteousness.

Rule 3: With the exception of prophecy, do not interpret a text today in a way that does not agree with exegesis when we take into account the differences in context between ourselves and the recipients and an appropriate level of generalisation



These rules are illustrated in the diagram above.

One important example of this is the incorrect doctrine of the **cessation of spiritual gifts**, based on a poor exegesis of 1 Corinthians 13:10. This passage could never have referred to the forming of the canon of the New Testament to its original author or readers as they had little concept of a NT canon at that time, if any. The balance of scholarship finds that there are no grounds in this passage for believing that spiritual gifts are not for today (see Powell, 2004).

3.3 The genre of the Bible

An important concept in hermeneutics is knowing the type, or **genre**, of the passage or book that you are reading, as each genre requires a different method of interpretation.

From NT days, the Bible has been referred to as different genre. Luke 24:44 refers to “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms”. The Law of Moses is a name for the first five books of the OT, also called the Pentateuch. Some books contain more than one genre.

The full list of Bible genre is as follows:

Narrative – passages or books that are telling a story: parts of the Pentateuch; most of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther; parts of Isaiah, Daniel and Jonah; the Gospels and Acts

Legal – the parts of the Pentateuch that set out the details of the OT covenant, fulfilled and reinterpreted in Jesus’ **sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5:17-48)

Poetry – found in nearly all books of the Bible but comprising all of Psalms, Song of Solomon and Lamentations

Wisdom – wise sayings and discourses mainly found in Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

Prophecy – the 3 major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel; the 12 minor prophets at the end of the OT; and parts of Revelation

Epistles – the NT books written to individuals or churches, or general (open) letters

Apocalyptic – meaning: “revealing that which is soon to take place” (Revelation 1:1). It is a special type of prophecy relating to the End Times (rather than immediate events). It is

found in parts of Daniel and Zechariah; most of Revelation and certain passages in the Gospels (e.g. Matthew 24). It often involves a lot of symbolic language.

3.4 Key Principles to interpreting different Biblical genre

We shall look at the principles of interpreting each Biblical genre in turn.

3.4.1 Interpreting narrative

1. Narratives tend to make their points indirectly. Acts, for example, should not be taken as a theological book but its author did intend to teach its readers through the examples of the main characters and events (see interpretation of proverbs below)
2. Narratives are not necessarily written in chronological order
3. Always compare parallel passages of the same event, if they exist, in order to get another angle on the story
4. Some narratives, like 1 and 2 Chronicles, were written with a specific purpose in mind that has affected the way events have been narrated

3.4.2 Interpreting legal literature

1. OT legal literature can be sub-divided into five types: **criminal law** (offences against God and the whole community), **civil law** (offences against individuals), **family law**, **law of religious practices** and **charitable law**
2. A good place to start in applying OT law today is to look at the way Jesus applied it in His day. Examples: tattoos; clean and unclean food; food containing blood.

3.4.3 Interpreting poetry

1. Poems originated as complete units and should therefore be read right through before an interpretation is attempted
2. Some poems, like the songs of ascents from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, form a group and have a common interpretation
3. Other poems sharing a common literary form, setting or purpose can help to interpret each other
4. Contemporary application of poetry should conform to their original use, e.g. only use psalms of complaint in relating to times of extreme hardship

3.4.4 Interpreting wisdom literature

1. Proverbs (the wise sayings found in Proverbs 10-31) teach **probable truth**, not absolute truth
2. The wise instructions found in Proverbs 1-9, however, should be taken universally or absolutely, especially as they emphasise the importance of being heeded
3. The end statements in Job and Ecclesiastes give major clues as to the validity of the arguments (**disputes** and **rhetoric** respectively) found within the rest of these books

3.4.5 Interpreting prophecy

1. The basic principle of interpreting prophecy is that God had something important the he wished to communicate with the original recipients. It is therefore important to study the background of a prophetic writing to understand the purpose of the message. However, God may also wish to communicate something through the passage with us today.

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2. Most OT prophecy relates primarily to events that were to take place near the time of writing (sometimes called **forthtelling**) rather than events in the more distant future (**foretelling**)
3. The Jewish tradition of interpreting prophecy emphasises **recurring patterns** whilst the Greek tradition, which has largely affected the Western mindset, emphasises **prediction**.
4. However, prophecy can have several parallel interpretations, e.g. Hebrews 1:5 applies 2 Samuel 7:14 to Jesus although its original interpretation was to David
5. Many prophecies are conditional, not just predictive – see Daniel's prayer about Jeremiah's prophecy in Daniel 9:1-19
6. Prophecy comes in different types: **prophecy of disaster, prophecy of salvation, woe speech, prophetic dirge, prophetic hymn, prophetic liturgy, prophetic disputation, prophetic lawsuit, prophecy against foreign nations, prophetic vision** and **prophetic narrative**. Each has a different literary form.
7. The clarity of a text determines the degree of confidence we can have about its interpretation
8. Use the NT interpretation of OT prophecies as a guide to how to interpret them today

3.4.6 Interpreting epistles

1. Look at the recipients and occasion of writing the letter as it has a big influence on whether we can interpret it to mean the same thing to us today. Examples: women's head covering and permission to speak in church.
2. General letters are more generally applicable to us today than specific letters.
3. In NT days, letters were expected to have a **greeting, prayer, main body** (the main purpose for writing), **specific advice** and **closing remarks**.
4. There are different subgenres of NT letters, e.g. **exhortation** (1 Thessalonians), **diatribe** (dealing with hypothetical objections, as in Romans), **introduction/recommendation** (Philemon), **apologetic/self-defence** (2 Corinthians) and **family letter** (Philippians). Each has its own style.

3.4.7 Interpreting apocalyptic literature

1. Determine the major theological themes of the book and avoid getting bogged down in the details
2. Take symbolism and numerology seriously but not literally
3. Read OT apocalyptic literature in conjunction with NT apocalyptic literature
4. If all else fails, remember you can be blessed just by reading it, not by understanding it (see Revelation 1:3)

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