



The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. Proverbs 18:15

## Why is the Bible interpreted in so many ways?

**General question:** Is the message of Christianity true?

**Also asked as:**

Don't people just read what they want to into the Bible?

How can I believe the Bible when there are so many interpretations?

How can I understand the Bible?

Which Bible is a good one?

**Similar questions answered separately:**

Is the Bible reliable?

How did we get the Bible?

**A caution:**

This question is asked in different ways ... varying from a casual rejection of the Bible to a serious investigation of its meaning. If the Bible is what it states it is, i.e., the Word of God, then this is a very important question.

**Note:**

The eSeeker answer to this question is presented differently than most of the others. This answer explains how to understand the Bible through the use of some basic guidelines that produce accurate and consistent interpretation.

### The short answer:

Varied and inaccurate interpretations of the Bible happen when people do not follow basic principles of good interpretation ... often forcing their opinions into the Bible. Clear and accurate interpretation of the Bible comes from an honest and studious analysis of its text. The goal of good interpretation is the discovery of what the text actually states ... not the discovery of what someone says it states. A good translation of the Bible combined with honest study leads people to a clear and consistent understanding of God's message to us. The principles of interpretation on the following pages are guidelines for clear, accurate, and consistent interpretation of God's Word.

## The longer answer: How to understand the Bible

**Guidelines for correct interpretation.** It does not require an advanced degree in theology or hermeneutics (the study of Biblical interpretation) to understand the primary truths of the Bible. That does not mean that a cursory, fragmented reading of a few paragraphs or pages will produce an accurate interpretation. Superficial readings of the Bible produce superficial, inaccurate interpretations. However, following some basic guidelines for interpretation brings us to the consistent truths of God's Word. People from all cultures and religious backgrounds can agree on the interpretation of the Bible when they follow these following guidelines.

**Common meaning.** Interpret the Bible as much as is possible as *what it says it says*. Interpret it plainly, honestly, and in a straightforward manner. Allow for the intricacies of language ... but seek the common meaning of what is written.

**Context.** One of the most important aspects of correct interpretation is context. Do not rip a phrase or sentence out of its context to rationalize a personal opinion. Context includes the sentence, paragraph, book, and whole Bible. For example, Hebrews 11 is a record of great men and women of Biblical history. These men and women are witnesses of lives of great faith. Hebrews 12 begins with the word "*therefore*." That *therefore* ties chapter 11 to chapter 12. "*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us,*" let us live lives following the directions of verses that follow. If you do not find out what the *therefore* is there for, you could misinterpret Hebrews 12:1 to mean that the inhabitants of Heaven are looking down on us as from the seats of a stadium. The context of literary flow as seen in the stated or developed purpose of a paragraph, chapter, and book is also very important.

**Definitions.** If you are unsure of a word in the Bible, look it up in an English dictionary. The King James Bible uses a form of the word *constrain* in 2 Corinthians 5:14, "*For the love of Christ constraineth us.*" It is an excellent expressive word ... but many people confuse it with the more common word *restrain*. The word *constrain* (meaning to push forward) is very different from the word *restrain* (meaning to hold back). A dictionary can be a great help.

**Doctrinal consistency.** Many misinterpret the Bible by selecting a few verses that seem to support their particular doctrine. They select a few apparently supportive texts while ignoring many that contradict their view. Proper interpretation incorporates all verses. If our own understanding (A) of a doctrine is consistent with our interpretation (B) of a Biblical text, but inconsistent with our interpretation (C) of another passage, then at least one of A, B, and C is wrong. Proper interpretation incorporates consistency among all relevant passages.

**Experience.** Do not let your spiritual experience invade your interpretation of the Bible. Let the Bible invade your spiritual experience. Your spiritual environment or upbringing may include some experiences that are not found in the Bible, or found there very seldom, or are even forbidden in the Bible. Let the Bible dictate your experience.

**Grammar and syntax.** Good interpretation is based on a proper understanding of the use of the language in the verses being studied. How is the sentence structured? What is the noun? What is the verb? What are the adverbs, adjectives, and conjunctions?

**Historical context.** An understanding of history is important. Farming in first century Israel was vastly different from that of a remote rice paddy in rural China and vastly different from that of a modern mega-farm on the plains of America. Interpreting some of the parables of Jesus correctly requires understanding something of the history of first century farming. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is well known, beginning with "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*" However, most of us know little of sheep or shepherding. Understanding rural sheep herding in the time of King David (~1000 BC) would help us interpret Psalm 23 correctly. What were the rod and the staff of verse 4 used for in David's day? The "*valley of the shadow of death*" was a steep and dangerous climb (not the place of death) for the sheep as they were herded to the high mesas (tablelands) of summer pasture. Moreover, the *table* (mesa) of verse 5 was in the presence of enemies ... and therefore does not represent Heaven. Understanding historical context fosters good interpretation.

**Historical relevance.** The Bible describes itself as independent of time. It does not become outdated or fade in relevance. "*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever,*" Isaiah 40:8. God has not been surprised by any changes in our societies and cultures. His Word is as relevant today as it was when first written. Do not disregard the relevance of some passage because you think we have outgrown the Bible ... we have not.

**Historical setting.** The entire Bible is relevant to every generation in every part of the world. However, it must be understood that there were and are different audiences for different parts of the Bible. Some of the Bible was given specifically to the Church ... other parts to Israel. Some parts are for those who believe ... some parts for those who do not believe in God. For example, the legal system of civil and criminal justice was given to the nation of Israel in the Mosaic Law. The principles of that law are very meaningful today. However, it must be understood that the implementation and execution of that law were given specifically to Israel. Moreover, the promises of God given to Israel were given to Israel and not to the Church or to you personally. The principles in those promises may be universally applicable to all who follow God, but literally, they apply specifically only to those to whom they were given.

**Priority of authority.** The highest authority on interpreting the Bible is actually the Bible itself. God inspired the men who wrote the Bible. "*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work,*" 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Jesus prayed that we would be sanctified (set apart to holiness) in truth ... defining that truth to be God's Word, John 17:17. In addition, the Holy Spirit teaches us, John 14:26, and guides us into truth, John 16:13. The Bible is the ultimate authority ... the ultimate commentary on itself. The Holy Spirit will not guide us into some truth that contradicts the truth of the Bible ... that would make God a liar. The Holy Spirit will not guide our Christian leaders into some truth that is superior to,

contradictory to, or equivalent to the Bible, Matthew 15:8-9. Any man, woman, or so-called Christian leader who claims to have exclusive truth should not be trusted ... especially those who come into our homes via the front door or via the digital-doors of television, radio, or the Internet, 2 Timothy 3:6. Be wary of those whose teaching adds to or takes away from the Bible, Revelation 22:18-19.

**Simplicity.** Be studious in reading the Bible, but interpret its' passages with simplicity. Interpreting parables is a good example of this. Do not read more into a parable than that which can be taken from it simply. Parables illustrate truth. They do not generate truth. The meaning of a parable is usually singular and simple. The parable of the lost sheep is the first parable in Luke 15 ... followed by the parables of the lost coin and the prodigal son. Do not try to find complex multiple layers of meaning in these parables. Some people teach that the shepherd of the first parable is Jesus, the woman of the second is the Holy Spirit, and the father of the third is God the Father. The text and context of Luke 15 do not support such a secondary interpretation. The primary interpretation of these parables is understood by the context in verses 1-3 as that of the importance of spending time with lost people. Luke 15 shows that the Pharisees and Scribes were separatists ... and shows that Jesus was not.

**Study.** Understanding the Bible requires more than a simple approach. It requires time, effort, and study. "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth,*" 2 Timothy 2:15. Do not think that you can understand and correctly interpret the Bible without study. Dropping your Bible onto a table so that it falls open to an unplanned location for you to blindly point to a verse for the moment will probably not give you a proper understanding.

**Style.** Understanding the particular style of a section of the Bible is important for its proper interpretation. For example, the book of Proverbs is wisdom literature. It is not a portfolio of legal contracts. A proverb is a statement of wise counsel telling the general consequence of following its principle. There is wisdom in, "*Hear, my son, and accept my sayings and the years of your life will be many,*" Proverbs 4:10. In general, the people who live according to the wisdom of the sayings of Proverbs live longer than if they did not. However, such proverbial statements are not contractual promises to each person guaranteeing a century or more of life.

**Theology.** Let the Bible define your theology. Do not let your personal theology define your interpretation of the Bible. The best book on theology is not some commentary or set of historic volumes on theology ... although I have several of each on bookshelves and hard-drives. The very best book on the theology of the Bible is the Bible.

**Unprejudiced examination.** We are a product of our experiences, family histories, cultural heritage, and religious upbringing. It is difficult to see the Bible without prejudicially looking at it through our personal grids. However, proper interpretation of the Bible requires that we examine it without those prejudices. If you had never been exposed to your church's traditions and beliefs (as if you just arrived from Mars), would you interpret the Bible the same way that you do today? You should ... but maybe you would not. For example, most

people's weekly church experience in the Western world involves attending a building whose central priority is obvious from its large meeting hall. A typical church gathering includes a few songs, prayer led by a professional, a lecture from the same man each Sunday, and a collection of money ... in a predictable order of service carefully synchronized to the clock. This has gone on for years unquestioned by most attendees. I am not asserting that this is wrong. However, can you find this format in the Bible? Moreover, why have you never looked?

**The intricacies of language.** The Bible was not written in our native languages unless ours are Greek and Hebrew. Our Bibles are translations from the original into our modern languages. Language is more than literal words and sentences. The intricacies of figures of speech add expressive flare to language. Although difficult to translate, their use is normal. Word-for-word translation of figures of speech is more consistent with the original text but more difficult to understand than thought-for-thought translations and paraphrases. Figures of speech need to be studied to be understood. The following intricacies of language are found in the original writings of the Bible ... and carried literally or figuratively into our modern translations.

**Euphemism:** a softer, less-offensive word or phrase substituted for a harsher, literal word or phrase such as using *sleep* rather than *death*, John 11:11-15.

**Language of phenomena:** a common expression of accepted speech, although scientifically incorrect, that describes a common phenomena such as a sunrise. "*From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised,*" Psalm 113:3.

**Hyperbole:** a figurative exaggeration for emphasis such as "*the whole city had gathered at the door,*" Mark 1:33.

**Idiom:** a figure of speech that is peculiar to its own language, people, geography, or historical setting such as "*you men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did,*" Acts 7:51.

**Metaphor:** a figure of speech using an implicit comparison such as "*you who have drunk from the Lord's hand the cup of His anger,*" Isaiah 51:17, and "*the Lord is my rock and my fortress,*" Psalm 18:2.

**Simile:** a figure of speech explicitly comparing two things that are different such as, "*he will be like a tree planted by streams of water,*" Psalm 1:3.

**Multiple translations.** There are many translations of the Bible available today ... especially in English. Word-for-word translations can be the most accurate. Dynamic equivalents lean more toward thought-for-thought translation than word-for-word translation ... seeking to convey the ideas more than the words. A third type, paraphrases, conveys ideas on a free thought-for-thought basis. In accuracy of text, the word-for-word translations are best ... followed by dynamic equivalents and then, paraphrases. In ease of reading, the order is reversed ... first paraphrases, then dynamic equivalents, and then word-for-word translations. For easier reading choose a dynamic equivalent even though it will be less consistent with the original text and less valuable

for study. Paraphrases are good for light and occasional reading ... but not good for study. You should have one primary Bible ... preferably a word-for-word translation. If possible, you should have several other versions including some from each of the three types described above. Multiple translations may help you gain the right interpretation of the Bible especially when faced with an idiom. Newer versions of the Bible can be more accurate because of the discovery of additional manuscripts, the development of linguistics, and the controlled effort and technology applied to translation. However, new does not guarantee accuracy. Reading grade level (based on the US school grades of 1 through 12) is important. A Bible above your reading level will be difficult to understand ... or will not be read at all. However, the words of an infinite God may not be adequately communicated in a translation at a low reading level achieved by a more limited vocabulary and shortened sentences. Gender inclusive (also called gender sensitive) versions translate male, but gender-inclusive, words such as *man*, *mankind*, and *men* into gender-neutral words such as *person*, *they*, or *people*. Some of this may be justified by the text ... however much of it seems unnecessary. The following classifies and describes some popular English Bibles.

**Greek and Hebrew Interlinear Bibles.** These are Greek (New Testament) and Hebrew (Old Testament) versions of the Bible with the English (or other language) translation of the text given line-by-line, in the word order of the original languages. These can be the most literal ... but require a reasonable knowledge of Greek and Hebrew to be of any value.

**Word-for-word translations.** These are called *literal translations*, *form-equivalents*, and *formal equivalents*. These are very close to the original text and are more translation than interpretation. No translation can be completely word-for-word and readable ... translation just does not allow that. Word-for-word translation of idioms makes them more difficult to understand ... and the language may not flow as smoothly. However, these translations are the best choice for your primary Bible for study and memorization. They more accurately represent the wording of the original Bible text. However, the price for this accuracy is a generally higher reading grade-level ... i.e., a Bible that is more difficult to understand. The translators' goal was to help you understand what the text says more than what it means.

*English Standard Version (ESV):* reading grade level = 8.

*Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB):* reading grade level = 8.

*King James Bible (called The Authorized Version):* reading grade level = 12.

*New American Standard Bible (NASB):* reading grade level = 11.

*New King James (NKJ):* reading grade level = 9.

**Note:** The NASB is the preferred translation of the author of eSeeker ... and is the recommended version for online use as well.

**Dynamic Equivalents.** These are also referred to as *functional equivalents*, *meaning-based translations*, and *idiomatic translations*. These are easier to read than the above but less like the original text. These are also more interpretative and idiomatic. Their translations of idioms often include none of the key words of the original idioms. These versions of the Bible are more readable with a generally lower reading grade-level and smoother language flow ... but the price for this readability is compromise in accurately representing the words of the original text. These are good secondary Bibles to help in understanding figures of speech or language that is somewhat antiquated. Their translators' goal was to help you understand what the text means more than what it says.

*New American Bible (NAB):* gender inclusive ... Catholic ... not the NASB.

*New Century Version (NCV):* reading grade level = 3.

*New International Version (NIV):* reading grade level = 7.

*New International Reader's Version (NIRV):* reading level = 2 ... gender inclusive.

*New Jerusalem Bible (NJB):* gender inclusive ... Catholic.

*New Revised Standard:* reading grade level = 10 ... somewhat gender inclusive.

*Today's New International Version (TNIV):* gender inclusive.

**Paraphrases.** These dynamic equivalents are less literal than those are above. They are often based on other translations rather than on the Greek and Hebrew texts. They are easiest to read, least like the original text, and very interpretive. These versions of the Bible are good for casual, light reading. They are not good for regular reading, study, or memorization. A paraphrase can be a useful 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, or 5<sup>th</sup> Bible. The safest use of a paraphrase is along side a word-for-word translation.

*New Living Bible (NLB):* reading grade level = 6 ... gender inclusive.

*Phillips Translation:* New Testament only ... insightful and impactful wording.

*Today's English Bible (TEB):* low reading level ... formerly the Good News Bible.

### **A quasi-paraphrase.**

*The Message:* reading grade level = 4 ... popular and useful but does not meet the lower expectations of a paraphrase. It is a discourse on the Bible that strays dramatically from the original text and meaning. It can be inspiring ... but should not be classified, or used, as a Bible. It is earthy and often inaccurate.



## Other helpful resources in addition to your primary Bible

**Cross-references in some Bibles.** These are lists of other useful verses that commentators believe are similar to the one being read.

**Study Bibles.** These are useful combinations of many of the resources listed in this section. These are particularly valuable in a word-for-word translation. The *Ryrie Study Bible* in the NASB is a very good choice.

**Multiple Bibles.** Using a variety of translations is somewhat useful in understanding a text.

**Concordances.** These are word and verse finders ... and can be excellent study tools. An exhaustive concordance (Strong's, Young's, or the NASB Concordance) lists every word in every verse. Hardcover versions are useful ... but software versions are much easier to use.

**Bible dictionaries.** These give definitions of words, names, and places.

**Bible encyclopedias.** These give more detail and background than a dictionary.

**Bible atlases.** These location-indexed maps of Bible times are very helpful.

**Greek and Hebrew lexicons.** These define the Greek or Hebrew words behind the English words. These are very cumbersome in hardcover books ... requiring Greek and Hebrew interlinear English translations. However, these are very easy with software that includes Strong's Numbers (numbers assigned to every word in the Bible by Dr. James Strong and first published in 1890).

**Commentaries.** These are best if they do not seek to present a particular theology. Comparing several commentaries is safer and more profitable. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown is a good commentary ... but quite detailed. Others like the Bible Knowledge Commentary are also good. Many commentaries on individual books of the Bible are more *preaching* through the book than actual commentary on the meaning.

**Learning Greek and Hebrew.** Unless you master these languages, this is probably not worth the effort. Resources that define Greek and Hebrew words, especially as Bible study software, can give you most of the benefit you really need.

**Computer Bible software.** Software is a *great* study resource combining all of the above with multiple versions of the Bible.

**Note:** Check out [www.EssentialBooks.org](http://www.EssentialBooks.org) for specific recommendations.

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