

# The Bottom-Line Guide to Reading the Bible

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## Part 1: Getting the Most out of Reading the Bible

Reading the Bible has been and continues to be a source of meaning, wisdom, purpose, and comfort for many millions of people. Through Scripture, believers draw close to God, are inspired to help others, and find direction and strength for their daily lives. Unfortunately, in our modern tech-driven society, reading books is becoming something of a dying art, and for various other reasons understanding the Bible has become especially challenging for many people. Its books were written two thousand and more years ago in the ancient Middle East and Mediterranean cultures. It deals with subjects that transcend ordinary human experience such as the nature of God. Modern readers often find parts of the Bible difficult to understand or accept. To make matters worse, some religions teach distorted views of the Bible that can alienate their members to its teachings.

In this series of articles, we will offer some help to those struggling to understand and benefit from the Bible. Our intent here is not to try to dictate what you should believe, but rather to offer some guidelines and recommend some good resources that you may find useful in your reading of Scripture. In this article, we will make some basic suggestions that may help you to get the most out of your reading of the Bible.

### Have a Plan

The adage that if you aim at nothing you will hit it every time applies to the reading of the Bible. Occasionally dipping into the Bible at random places is not always bad, but it isn't a reliable way of approaching the Bible. What we all need is a plan—a regular, structured way of reading the Bible. Many people have a daily “quiet time” in which they read the Bible for a few minutes. That's a good idea, but if you really want to understand the Bible and get the most out of it you also need to set aside more sizable periods of time to immerse yourself in your reading. It doesn't need to be every day, although that would be wonderful, but it does need to be a serious, sustained time of reading. (You can also listen to audio recordings of the Bible.) I recommend that you set aside *at least* an hour once a week, or half an hour twice a week—more if possible. Although some people are more successful in their reading if they observe a regular schedule, the important thing is to do it. Anything less than an hour a week just doesn't give the Bible a chance to become a significant part of your life. Frankly, some kinds of Bible reading and study simply cannot be done in short bursts of time.

In addition to devoting the necessary time to reading the Bible, you need to read the Bible in a structured way. Most of the Bible is not written as a collection of individual sayings (although most of the Book of Proverbs is just that!); the books of the Bible are generally meant to be read from beginning to end, or at least in larger sections than individual sentences or verses. People often complain about statements in the Bible being taken out of context; the only way to avoid this problem is to read whole passages and books of the Bible so that we can see how individual statements fit into their contexts. Try reading the whole Book of Jonah in one sitting, or all of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) in one sitting. You'll get the big picture and see things in a much clearer way.

### Memorize

Although I have emphasized the importance of reading longer passages and even whole books of the Bible, there is a place for short, individual sentences or verses. Most Christians have memorized some verses of the Bible and find this to be an extremely beneficial exercise. It is highly valuable to memorize verses that summarize key truths (such as John 3:16, perhaps the most memorized verse of the Bible) or that are important reminders of God’s promises and commands. It is also a good idea to pick out a line or verse from the passage or book you are reading and memorize it as an “anchor” for that part of your reading. For example, if you are reading the Book of Acts, you might memorize Acts 1:8, which functions nicely as a summary of the entire book and also is a reminder to us that we have a mission to reach the world for Christ. It’s also helpful to memorize the names of the books of the Bible in order, simply because that will help you find your way around and give you a good feel for the overall contents of the Bible.

If you have trouble with memorization, don’t feel badly and don’t worry about it. Reviewing the same material regularly will help you remember a lot of it even if you can’t recall the exact words or the chapter and verse references. If your daily quiet time only allows you a few minutes with the Bible, I suggest using that time to read over the key verse you have chosen (perhaps you will have one for the whole week) and to reflect on its meaning and importance. That is what the Bible calls *meditating* on God’s word. The Scripture will gradually become ingrained in your mind even if you haven’t technically memorized the whole verse and its reference.

### **Take Notes**

Another valuable exercise in reading the Bible is to take notes. Although very short notes and comments can be written in the margins of your Bible, you need to be able to write more extensive notes. These can be simply questions that come to your mind as you are reading (Who was this fellow “Theophilus?”), other biblical texts that seem related, or any information you want to remember. It is extremely helpful to outline the passage or book you are reading, since this will give you a bird’s-eye view of its contents and enable you to see how the parts fit into the whole. The old-fashioned way of keeping your notes is to have a Bible study notebook. This still works, but more and more of us will keep our notes digitally on our laptop or handheld device. There are many programs you can use to do this. There are even programs that give you the text of the Bible and places where you can write your own notes on the passages as you are reading them.

### **Get a Good Study Bible**

A study Bible is an edition of the Bible with extensive resources that help the reader in understanding what they are reading. These resources typically include introductions, notes, charts, illustrations, timelines, maps, and the like. There are several excellent study Bibles available today. Probably the best one is the *ESV Study Bible*, which was produced by a team of biblical scholars and has a wealth of study resources. You can get a hard print copy of it, but you can also use it online. The related *ESV Global Study Bible* is currently free and contains many of the resources of the regular version. The *ESV Online Study Bible* provides various reading plans and daily devotionals, and it allows you to add your own notes. There is also the ESV Bible app, which includes full access to the *ESV Global Study Bible*, available for use on various mobile devices such as the iPhone. These ESV Bible resources are an example of the wealth of Bible study tools that are available, many of them free, for the person who is serious about getting the most out of their reading of the Bible.

## Part 2: Reading the Bible in Context

Have you ever heard someone say, when disagreeing with someone else about the significance of a particular statement in the Bible, “You’re taking that out of context”? Perhaps you’ve said that yourself. Indeed, everyone seems to know that taking a verse in the Bible “out of context” is a bad thing, but apparently a lot of people do it any way. We need to understand what it means to take a statement out of context and how to avoid doing so. To put the matter positively, we need to learn how to take biblical statements *in context*.

There are several kinds of “context” in the Bible that need to be appreciated if we are to become proficient at reading what it says in context. This article will discuss the two most basic contexts.

### Words in Sentence Context

In human languages generally, a word can have different meanings. This is true of many words in the Bible. For example, the Hebrew word *kabôd* and the Greek word *doxa*, both commonly translated “glory” in Scripture, can mean wealth (Gen. 31:1), splendor (Esther 1:4; 5:11), greatness (Ps. 19:1), honor (Gen. 45:13; Num. 24:11; etc.), praise (Joshua 7:19; 1 Sam. 6:5), brightness or shining, especially manifesting God’s presence (Exod. 16:7, 10), or God’s full nature or essence that cannot be directly seen (Exod. 33:18, 22). Notice that the same word can have seemingly “contradictory” meanings depending on how and where it is used: Moses could see and had seen many times God’s “glory” in the sense of the bright light manifesting God’s presence, and so had the Israelites (from a distance). Yet Moses asked God to see his “glory,” meaning a full, unfiltered sight of God’s essential nature, something God told him he could not see and live (Exod. 33:19-23). This is not a real contradiction, just a different use of the word.

It may seem confusing that a word such as “glory” can have different meanings, but in most cases one simply needs to see how it is used in a sentence to know which meaning applies. For example:

“Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have *glory* from men” (Matt. 6:2 NKJV).

“And yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his *glory* was not arrayed like one of these” (Matt. 6:29 NKJV).

Here in Matthew 6, the word “glory” (Greek, *doxa*) has two different meanings, which are easily recognized by their sentence contexts: to “have glory from men” refers to honor, whereas Solomon’s “glory” clearly means his splendor.

Reading a whole sentence often clarifies a partial sentence that some religious group likes to quote by itself. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses often quote the words “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50); they argue that this statement proves that human beings cannot inherit God’s kingdom (which they interpret to mean living forever in heaven) as physical beings. But they are not even quoting the entire sentence, which reads, “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, ***nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable***” (1 Cor. 15:50 ESV). The second part of Paul’s sentence makes it clear that what is wrong with us is not that we are physical beings, but that we are “perishable”; our bodies age, die, and decay. What we need is for our bodies to be raised from the dead with immortality.

### **Sentences in Passage Context**

Just as we read words in the context of the sentences in which they appear, we read sentences in the context of the passages in which they appear. My favorite humorous (okay, silly) example involves the following three sentences from the Gospels, including two sayings of Jesus:

Then he went away and hanged himself (Matt. 27:5b NIV).

“Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37 NIV).

“What you are about to do, do quickly” (John 13:27 NIV).

The maxim “A text without a context is a pretext” is relevant whenever someone takes a statement and tries to apply it without regard for how that statement functions in the larger passage in which it appears. A more serious example is the Mormon use of Amos 8:11-12 to prove that Christianity became apostate after the death of the first-century apostles. Here is what Amos 8:11-12 says:

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it” (Amos 8:11-12 ESV).

Is God here warning of an apostasy in Christianity, roughly a thousand years after Amos’s prophecy? To answer this question, one only need read a bit further in the same passage:

“*In that day* the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst. Those who swear by the Guilt of Samaria, and say, ‘As your god lives, O Dan,’ and, ‘As the Way of Beersheba lives,’ they shall fall, and never rise again” (Amos 8:13-14 ESV, emphasis added).

Clearly, “that day” to which Amos referred was not an apostasy in Christianity in the second or third century AD. This spiritual famine was experienced by people worshiping false gods in the northern kingdom of Israel based in Samaria centuries before Christ came. They practiced idolatry that was infamous in Dan, a city in the far north of Israel, and Beersheba, a city in the south part of Judah.

### **Other Contexts**

There are other kinds of contexts to be considered, notably *book context* (the message of the book as a whole and where the passage fits into the book) and *covenant context* (whether a biblical text reflects the situation under God’s covenant with Abraham, the Law covenant that God made with Israel through Moses, or the new covenant in Christ). The more you read the Bible, the easier it will become to understand statements in these different contexts. Reading words and sentences in their immediate context will always be foundational to an accurate reading of the Bible.

### Part 3: Recognizing Figurative Language in the Bible

One of the most frequently asked questions about how to read the Bible is how to tell whether statements in the Bible are to be understood literally or figuratively. In part the question arises because the Bible is a large collection of ancient books written in other languages by people living in other cultures. Anyone who has ever visited another country knows that sometimes the language barrier is not just about decoding the words but recognizing how they are used. A visitor to England from Nepal might well be puzzled by hearing that someone had “lost his marbles,” even if he understood what the word *marbles* normally meant.

#### Avoiding Extremes

In part, however, the question about figurative language is made more pressing by extreme positions that many people take on the matter. On the one hand, some ultra-conservative readers of the Bible assume that everything in the Bible should be taken literally except where doing so appears to them to be impossible. On the other hand, liberal readers of the Bible commonly assume that nothing in the Bible should be taken literally except where not doing so appears to them to be impossible. While both of these extremes are faulty, the liberal extreme of denying the literal truth of most of the Bible is by far the more destructive error.

When evangelicals say that we should interpret the Bible “literally,” they usually mean that we should treat the whole Bible and every part of the Bible in its context as conveying truth. Such a definition allows for figurative language in Scripture. The question remains, though, how one can reliably recognize language as figurative.

#### Figurative Language: Factors to Consider

Broadly speaking, we need to be aware of three factors that are relevant to whether specific words, expressions, or narratives in the Bible are to be interpreted figuratively.

1. **Genre:** A passage’s literary form or type guides our reading of its language. For example, references to a “road” in an historical narrative would normally be taken as referring to a physical road; references to a “road” in poetry might be taken as referring to a way of life. Thus, some genres are more likely to contain figurative language than others. In the Bible, the laws in the Law of Moses are least likely to use figurative language (though even they do so occasionally, as we shall see), while poems and songs are most likely to use figurative language.

2. **Subject matter:** Knowing something about the subject of a passage may help us to know whether a statement is literal or figurative. For example, knowing that rocks are inanimate objects naturally leads us to interpret Jesus’ statement about the rocks crying out (Luke 19:40) as figurative, as a way of saying that the truth about Jesus will be made known no matter what. Similarly, knowing that God transcends the physical world because he made it leads us to interpret references to God’s “throne” as a figurative way of speaking about his rule over his creation.

3. **Usage:** Sometimes we can recognize that a particular expression is figurative because we have seen it used in the same way in other places. For example, Mary’s question to the angel Gabriel about how she could become pregnant, “seeing I know not a man” (Luke 1:34 KJV), can be easily recognized as using “know” in a figurative way to mean that she had not had sexual relations with a man. One reason we can be sure of this is that the word is used in the same way many other places in the Bible (e.g., Genesis 4:1, 17, 25; 1 Samuel 1:19; see also Matthew 1:25).

<b>Types of Figurative Language</b>	<b>Biblical Examples</b>
<p><b>Simile</b> A comparison with something that is actually very different, made using “as” or “like” (e.g., “like a rock” = sturdy, dependable).</p>	<p><i>Wise as serpents</i> = shrewd (Matt. 10:16) <i>As a hen gathers her chicks under her wings</i> = to protect them from harm (Matt. 23:37)</p>
<p><b>Metaphor</b> A comparison like a simile, but without “as” or “like” (e.g., “the dawn of a new day” = the start of a new era).</p>	<p><i>Leaven of the Pharisees</i> = permeating hypocrisy in their teaching (Matt. 16:5-12; Luke 12:1) <i>You serpents</i> = deceiving, hurtful creatures, like Satan (Matt. 23:33)</p>
<p><b>Idiom</b> A fixed expression with a distinctive sense typically not obvious from the words themselves, often rooted in a metaphor (e.g., “kick the bucket” = die).</p>	<p><i>Their hearts melted</i> = they lost courage (e.g., Josh. 5:1; cf. Ps. 22:14) <i>What to me and to you</i> = What business do you have with me? (Matt. 18:29; John 2:4)</p>
<p><b>Euphemism</b> Idiom used to refer indirectly, and so more politely or delicately, to someone or something (e.g., “visit the men’s room” = use the toilet).</p>	<p><i>Know</i> = have sexual relations with (e.g., Matt. 1:25; Luke 2:33; Gen. 19:5, 8) <i>Uncover the nakedness of</i> = have sexual relations with (Lev. 18:6-19)</p>
<p><b>Irony and Sarcasm</b> Language that says the opposite of what is meant, for effect; irony tends to be witty, while sarcasm tends to be more biting (e.g., “Yeah, right” = I don’t believe it).</p>	<p>Irony: <i>You have already become rich; you have become kings without us</i> (1 Cor. 4:8) Sarcasm: <i>How the king of Israel distinguished himself today!</i> (2 Sam. 6:20)</p>
<p><b>Hyperbole</b> Exaggerated or overstated language, often idiomatic (e.g., “tons of money” = lots of money).</p>	<p><i>The whole city</i> (Mark 1:33) = a large crowd <i>If your right eye trips you up, pluck it out</i> (Matt. 5:29) = don’t allow what you see to cause you to sin</p>
<p><b>Maxim</b> Non-metaphorical statement succinctly expressing a general truth or principle (e.g., “Honesty is the best policy”).</p>	<p><i>Pride before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall</i> (Prov. 16:18). <i>Better is open rebuke than concealed love</i> (Prov. 27:5).</p>
<p><b>Proverb</b> Typically metaphorical statement expressing in picturesque way a general truth (e.g., “The early bird gets the worm”).</p>	<p><i>Drink water from your own cistern, and fresh water from your own well</i> (Prov. 5:15). <i>A man reaps what he sows</i> (Gal. 6:7b) = what you get is a function of what you give</p>
<p><b>Parable</b> A story functioning as an extended simile, typically illustrating a central point.</p>	<p><i>The lost sheep and the lost coin</i> (Luke 15:3-10): parables illustrating God’s rejoicing over the lost who are found</p>
<p><b>Allegory</b> A story based on an extended metaphor in which various elements of a story correspond to various realities (e.g., Orwell’s <i>Animal Farm</i> in which the animals represent citizens in different positions in a state).</p>	<p><i>Song of the Vineyard</i> (Isa. 5:1-7): Owner’s vineyard = God’s people Israel <i>I am the true Vine</i> (John 15:1-6): branches united to vine = Christians united to Christ</p>
<p><b>Personification</b> Speaking of inanimate objects, animals, and abstractions as if they were persons (e.g., “Stop in the name of the law!”).</p>	<p><i>I, wisdom, dwell with prudence</i> (Prov. 8:12) = wisdom is a virtue associated with prudence <i>Death reigned from Adam to Moses</i> (Rom. 5:14) = death was universal in mankind</p>

## Types of Figurative Language

There are various types of figurative language in the Bible, and these types are found in modern English as well, although the specific examples usually are different. The table on the preceding page introduces a number of these kinds of figurative language with examples. We've already seen one type of figurative language in the example about "knowing"; this type of figure of speech, in which something is spoken of indirectly in order to be delicate or polite, is called a **euphemism**. Let's look at two other types and some examples.

A **simile** is a comparison with something that is actually very different, made using "as" or "like" or an equivalent. Similes are usually the easiest types of figurative language to recognize, although their meaning may sometimes not be immediately clear due to the culture gap between us and the people of the Bible. When Jesus told his disciples to be "wise as serpents" (Matthew 10:16), he meant that they should be shrewd and discerning, positive traits even if illustrated using serpents (which we normally think of as bad).

One simile that some readers have misunderstood is Luke's description of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. Luke says that "his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44 KJV). The words "as it were" mean that Jesus' sweat was *like* great drops of blood, not that Jesus was literally sweating blood. (Just to confirm the point, the words "as it were" translate the Greek word *hōsei*, which meant "as" or "like.") This misunderstanding led the Mormon religion to teach that Jesus was actually providing the Atonement in the Garden of Gethsemane, an idea found nowhere in the Bible. Luke's simile means that Jesus' sweat was falling in large, heavy beads, similar to the way drops of blood fall to the ground.

A **proverb** is a short statement that expresses in a picturesque way a general truth or principle of life. For example, "The early bird gets the worm" is a modern proverb that means that success *usually* requires doing the right thing at the right time, before most others would get started. We misunderstand proverbs if we treat them as immutable laws of the cosmos. For example, the statement, "*A man reaps what he sows*" (Galatians 6:7) means that what you get is normally a function of what you give, but it is not some sort of ironclad promise that if you give you will get the equivalent in return. Unfortunately, some preachers (especially many televangelists) teach that this verse means that if you give money to their ministry, God promises to bless you financially. Here again, this is an idea never taught in the Bible; it is an abuse of Scripture.

Understanding the figurative language of the Bible, then, is immensely practical. It can help us spot misinterpretations of the Bible that confuse, mislead, and even take advantage of people.

## **Part 4: Understanding the Different Parts of the Bible**

The Bible is not a single book, but a collection of books written throughout a period lasting more than a thousand years. There are also a variety of different kinds of books in the Bible—histories, a song book, biographies, letters, and more. Understanding the Bible can be difficult if one does not know why these different kinds of books are included and what we are supposed to do with them. This article will give a simple overview of the different parts of the Bible and explain briefly how to approach its different books.

### **Old and New Testaments**

Most people understand that the Bible is divided into two major parts, the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament actually takes up a bit more than three-fourths of the Bible. From a Christian standpoint, the Old Testament books, which were written over a period of many centuries ending roughly 400 years before the coming of Jesus Christ, lay the foundation for understanding him. The New Testament books, which were written within less than a hundred years after Christ's death and resurrection, preserve the apostles' memories of what Jesus did and taught, and they explain what it all means in the light of the Old Testament.

Most Christians find the Old Testament to be more difficult to read and appreciate. However, it is worth the effort, because there is a great deal in the New Testament that you will understand better if you have a basic understanding of the Old Testament. They are both the word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit so that we will know God in an authentic and life-giving way (see John 20:30-31; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

### **History**

There is a lot of historical narrative in the Bible. Genesis and much of Exodus and Numbers are history, as are the books from Joshua through Esther. The Book of Acts in the New Testament is also history. In general, you can tell that these books are meant to report history and are not myths or legends by the way the narratives are written. The authors usually refer to a lot of specific places, give the names of the kings or other important figures living at the time, and even date events, usually by stating in what year of a particular king an event took place (e.g., Luke 2:1-2). Scholars have verified a surprisingly large number of these details from sources outside the Bible, such as court records from neighboring nations, monuments, and all sorts of archaeological finds.

Admittedly, the status of Genesis 1-11 as history is highly controversial. It deals with events so long ago—before the invention of writing—that it is difficult to confirm its accounts of the distant past. Of course, there is a great deal of debate about how to compare the accounts of creation in Genesis 1-2 with the findings and theories of modern science. Without trying to resolve all of those questions here, we can focus our reading of Genesis 1-11 on the two main purposes of those chapters. First, Genesis 1-11 lays the foundational elements of the biblical worldview: God is one transcendent Creator who brought all things into existence; God created human beings to have a special relationship with him; by our own fault we have become alienated from God, morally corrupt, and mortal; and God has not abandoned the human race but is at work to restore us to our intended relationship with him. Second, Genesis 1-11 provides the backdrop for Abraham, the founding patriarch of the people of Israel, explaining where he originated and what the world was like when God revealed himself to Abraham.



With the biblical histories, the main point for the reader is to follow the storyline, the “action,” and grasp the overall flow of events that were important to Israel’s history and to the beginning of the Christian church. As you read through these books, you might slow down when it reports a speech by a prophet or apostle, because these will often have some meaty teaching. Also watch for “editorial comments” by the author in which he tells his readers why something happened or what it meant.

### **Biographies**

The four Gospels in the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are biographies, a special form of historical text written in the style of biographies in the ancient Greco-Roman world. As was typical of such ancient biographies, the Gospels say very little about Jesus’ childhood and focus on the most eventful period of his life. The purpose of an ancient biography was to tell the truth about an important person so that readers would know who he was, what he did, and what values or character he displayed. If that individual was a teacher, the biography would also include examples of his teaching. Here again, the claim commonly made by skeptics that the Gospels are myths simply does not hold up.

Since the Gospels are biographies, the main point of reading them is to get to know their subject—Jesus. As you read them, pay attention to the way Jesus interacts with people. Sometimes he is compassionate toward others, and sometimes, frankly, he gets angry with them. Try to put yourself into the narrative, perhaps imagining yourself in the crowd or as one of the disciples following Jesus from place to place. Feel free to “camp” on a particular passage, to wrestle with its meaning or to meditate on something profound Jesus says. Most Christians, for good reason, view the Gospels as the heart of the Bible. They are worth reading over and over again.

### **Covenants and Laws**

A large portion of the Pentateuch consists of laws that God gave to Israel to be the basis for their legal system (most of Exodus 20-40; Leviticus; Deuteronomy 14-26). These laws express the requirements that God placed on ancient Israel under what is later called the “old covenant” (which is the actual meaning of the term Old Testament). A covenant was essentially a contract, and the covenant that God made with Israel through Moses took the form of a treaty, like ancient treaties that a powerful king would make with a neighboring nation. We don’t live under that covenant, so we don’t have the same legal system. However, those laws reflect God’s moral law, so we can and should read them to gain an appreciation for what God considers right and wrong. The New Testament also gives some important guidance to Christians to understand what has changed, and what has not, now that Christ has come and inaugurated the “new covenant” (which is the meaning of the term New Testament).

If you run across something in those laws that seems strange or harsh, keep two things in mind. First, Israel was called to be a special nation in a culture swimming with child sacrifice, superstition, and gross immorality. The Canaanites and other peoples of the region three thousand years ago were a rough bunch. Second, some of the laws that seem odd to modern readers made good sense to the ancient Israelites, either because they kept them from getting sick or in trouble or because they had symbolic significance that was meaningful in that culture.

### **Songs**

The Bible does not contain any written music, but it contains a lot of songs. In fact, the longest book of the Bible is a collection of songs, called Psalms. There are songs or psalms (which could be spoken as well as literally sung) in many other parts of the Bible, including Luke 1 (most famously Mary’s “Magnificat”) and the Book of Revelation.

Songs may contain teaching, but they are primarily expressions of emotion. The psalmist sang songs to God crying out for help, thanking God for blessings, and lamenting his suffering or that of the people of Israel. They teach us not only by what they say but by showing us how to pray—to be transparent with God, trusting him to hear us, admitting even when we are finding it difficult to trust God. Millions of people have memorized the 23rd Psalm and have found themselves reciting it in times of darkness.

Ancient Hebrew poetry made heavy use of different kinds of parallelism, in which two (or three) lines might be saying something similar in different ways, expressing contrasts (for example, contrasting good with evil), or forming a progression of thought. As you read the poetic parts of the Bible, you'll get used to these literary devices. Be careful not to overanalyze them or take imagery too literally, because like all poetry the language is chosen at least partly for emotional effect and to create pictures in the mind.

### **Proverbs**

The Bible has a whole book called Proverbs, and there are individual proverbs or other kinds of short sayings in other parts of the Bible. Probably the most common mistake people make with proverbs is treating them as iron-clad cosmic laws: Do X, and Y will always be the result. That's not the point of a proverb. Proverbs are short, easily remembered expressions of *wisdom* that give generalized guidelines about the best way to live your life. By the way, Proverbs 1-9 is a lengthy poetic introduction to the proverbs, which actually start in Proverbs 10. Most of the biblical proverbs are written in the same kind of poetic style as the psalms.

### **Prophecy**

There is prophecy throughout the Bible, but the prophetic literature includes most of the books of the Old Testament from Isaiah through Malachi as well as the Book of Revelation. The Old Testament books of the prophets contain a mixture of prose (straightforward speech) and Hebrew poetry. The focus of these books is usually the need for the people in the northern kingdom of Israel or in Judah, the tribal region in the south around Jerusalem, to repent of their violations of the covenant that God had made with them through Moses. For that reason, you'll understand the issues in these books better if you are familiar with the history in Kings and Chronicles. They are warned of chastisement and even destruction if they do not stop worshiping idols, sacrificing children on altars of fire to false gods, or letting injustice in the land go unchecked. The prophets also let the people know that God would not let the other nations get away with evil against them, either. Through these warnings by the prophets of what was coming, the Lord gave the Jews further evidence that he was the true God. Some of these prophecies about the future also pointed forward to the coming of Jesus, authenticating him as the true Messiah.

Biblical prophetic literature contains two especially noteworthy kinds of material. *Oracles* are statements made by God through the prophet, typically introduced by the words "Thus says the LORD." *Visions* are symbolic images and stories, often introduced with expressions such as "And I saw" or "And I looked, and behold," that picture the spiritual activities of God, angels, or evil spirits going on behind the scenes or dream-like representations of what is going to happen in the near or distant future. The books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah are dominated by these last kinds of visions. Frequently the author explains to the reader what some of the symbolic elements of these visions represent, so look for those explanations.

### **Parables**

Parables are relatively short, simple stories told to illustrate a point or answer a question. They are not about real people or actual events. There is no book containing only parables; most of

the parables of the Bible are stories told by Jesus in the Gospels. Most of Jesus' parables are not allegories, in which many different elements are symbolic of specific things, but at least one is—the parable of the sower and the four soils. A parable is an indirect form of teaching: instead of telling someone what to think or how to act, the teacher tells a story that makes the point clear for those who are open to it.

### **Epistles**

The word *epistle* means a letter, often though not always a carefully composed one. There are just a few letters quoted in historical books in the Old Testament. At least 19 of the 27 books of the New Testament are epistles (Paul's 13 epistles from Romans to Philemon, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 2–3 John, and Jude). The Book of Revelation, though dominated by prophetic visions, begins and ends in the form of an epistle. Hebrews and 1 John do not identify their authors or their original readers, so they are not exactly epistles; perhaps we could call them literary sermons.

All of Paul's epistles are messages to churches or Christian leaders. In these epistles, Paul may be answering questions from a church, writing to address false doctrines or other issues he has learned have arisen in a church, encouraging a church to continue doing well, or giving young leaders instructions in how to handle some pastoral concerns. In several of his epistles to churches, he begins with doctrinal teaching and in the last part of the letter focuses on practical concerns. You can sometimes get some helpful background for these epistles from reading Acts, which tells about Paul founding churches and working with other leaders.

The other epistles are written for Christians over wider areas than just a city or a single church. Several of these epistles, particularly 2 Peter and Jude, were written as the apostolic era was gradually coming to an end. All of these “general epistles” urge Christians to be faithful to Christ in the way they live as pressures from ordinary life or even persecution challenge their confidence in the gospel. This is also the focus of Hebrews, which reads mostly like a sermon but with an epistle-like ending.

### **For Further Study**

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. How to interpret the different parts of the Bible, including OT history, poetry, and prophecy, and the NT Gospels, Acts, epistles, and Revelation.

Grudem, Wayne, C. John Collins, and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds. *Understanding the Big Picture of the Bible: A Guide to Reading the Bible Well*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.