

How to Read the Bible

Martin Ward martin@gkc.org.uk

The Bible is inspired: *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness* 2 Tim 3:16

So it is first hand knowledge rather than second hand knowledge. An inspired Bible provides direct communication from God to the reader.

Is the Bible inerrant or infallible? — Every argument for an inerrant or infallible Bible also applies to the transmission and translation of the text. But there are differences between the surviving copies of the texts (about 0.5% of NT verses are uncertain) and translations have differences.

If the Bible is inspired, then it has a single, consistent message. Every part should fit together. Any part of the Bible needs to be interpreted in the light of the rest, and we should never “so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another” (39 Articles).

The Hermeneutic Circle: Each part of a text must be understood in the context of the whole. The whole text must be understood by understanding each part.

Note: This is not a “vicious circle”: each movement from parts to whole and back again should improve our understanding and take us to a new place (so it is more like a spiral).

But where do we start? Start with the whole: a broad overview of the message of the whole Bible (the “metanarrative”) which forms the initial context for the analysis of each passage.

Some general principles:

- Jesus is “the image of the invisible God”, the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”. Jesus says “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”. In other words, if you want to know what God is *really* like, then look at Jesus
- “Love God” and “Love your neighbour” are the two greatest commandments: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:40, Rom 13:8–10)
- Use the parts that are easy to understand to interpret the parts that are harder to understand
- If you find something puzzling, don’t worry: “leave it on the side of the plate for later”
- Don’t deduce any teaching from a single verse alone
- Pray: When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth Jn 16:13
- Put into practice what you learn: *Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments* 1 Jn 2:3

Scaffolding supports a building while it is being constructed or modified. It can be very useful, but it is not part of the building.

The “building” is our knowledge and relationship with God. “Scaffolding” is anything which helps the building to grow: reading notes, commentaries, sermons, books on theology, philosophy, history, teaching, other Christians (parents, teachers, friends,) tradition.

Building	Scaffolding
Knowing God	Knowing about God
Direct communication	Indirect communication
First hand information	Second hand information
Understanding	Background knowledge
Permanent	Temporary

Scaffolding is not a substitute for a personal encounter with God (Don’t camp out on the scaffolding forever!)

The Problem with Scaffolding — when the Hermeneutic Circle becomes vicious:

- A non-Biblical source suggests an interpretation
- Every passage on the issue gets interpreted on this basis: sometimes with much ingenuity
- No other interpretation is even considered

Solution: we need to be prepared to “break out” of our circle and into a different one. A new idea may first need to be evaluated in the context of its own circle, then the two circles compared to find out which makes the best sense of everything else. Examples: the Reformation (Justification by Faith), the Abolition of Slavery movement, women in ministry.