

# Studying the Bible

(or if you want to call it something else 'Using the Bible')

A series on how to  
engage with your Bible  
and let the BOOK that reads us, read us.

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## Part 2

### The Bible: what is the secret of studying the Bible?



Here is a picture of a small wooden sculpture by an unknown Tanzanian artist. Look at it. See the tattooed face of this African woman. It seems that a big smile is just beginning to break through. Is she going to reveal a great secret which gives her deep joy?

The artist has captured the climax of a story told in East Africa. A village woman used to walk around always carrying her Bible.

"Why always the Bible?" her neighbours asked teasingly. "There are so many other books you could read."

The woman knelt down, held the Bible high above her head and said, "Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me."

"There is only one book which reads me". Please stop reading for a moment and contemplate a) what that means; b) what it could mean for you; c) and what it should mean for you.

***When you are ready, read on.***

The African woman perceived the mystery of Bible study. You can listen to biblical stories, read and study the biblical texts or look at great art based on biblical events and themes simply as works of human experience and inspiration. You should indeed do so in order to fully appreciate the poetry, the art of story-telling and the wisdom found in the biblical literature and its imagery. The library now called the Bible is shaped by human witness, communicates through human languages and has been marked by the cultures of the ancient Near East and the Roman empire. This human dimension of the Bible must never be disregarded, just as it would be wrong to ignore the human

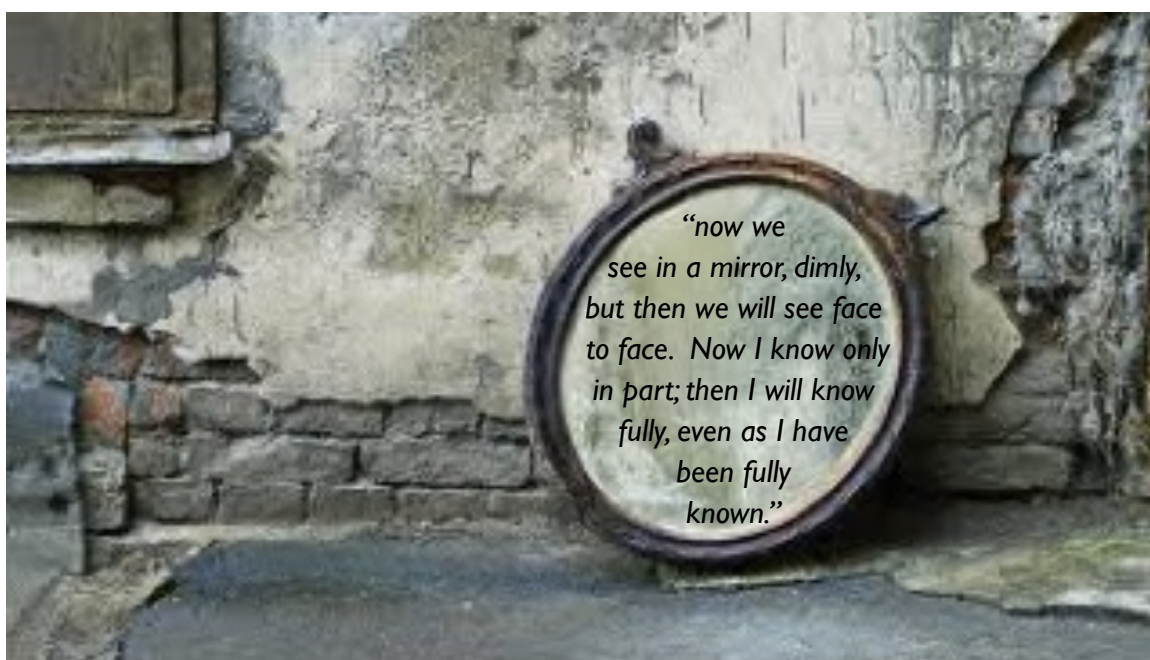
Christian interpreters through Bible study have the responsibility to interpret the Bible as an act of neighbourly love

nature of Jesus of Nazareth. Otherwise the Bible becomes an idol which you worship and the incarnation of Jesus is denied.

However, as you listen, read, study and try to see, a reversal of roles can take place. You start out being the subject. The biblical messages, in whatever form they reach you, are the object of your study. Then suddenly you may become aware that behind

and through the stories, texts and visualised messages stands someone who looks at you, speaks to you and gives you guidance. The object of your enquiry becomes the subject who addresses you and understands you better than you do yourself. You are confronted with the living God who acts in Creation and history, in your personal life and in the world of nations.

In Bible study you already may experience something of what the apostle Paul once wrote to the Christians in Corinth:



### **Can this reversal of roles be triggered by a particular method, way of doing it?**

No. It comes by the power of the Holy Spirit, the communicator and interpreter. You can and must pray that the mystery of Bible study may happen. "Come, Creator Spirit!"

And while you do so, you must use the best methods for letting biblical stories, texts and images speak to you. Therefore you have much to learn from the various ways in which the biblical witnesses themselves transmitted the messages they received and how they imprinted them on the memories and hearts of those whom they addressed.

# METHOD

## Let me talk about “method” for a moment.

The term “method” points to something very significant for the process of communication. Literally, it means *to follow a way together with others*. But there is a warning. In Christian Scripture the term method occurs only twice and both times in a pejorative sense, referring to the cunning of the devil who has method, that is, “trickery” and a “craftiness” to lead people astray (Ephesians 6.11; 4.14).

This is a necessary warning for those who want to learn Bible study methods. Methods can be of the devil. With methods you can be manipulated and people can distort the very messages they want to communicate.

Bible study  
is conversation  
with God

Nevertheless, you should not ignore methods that don’t suit you. If you do so, you are unconsciously using only one method - and not necessarily the best one. You may for example resort simply to listening to a lecture, which runs the risk of making the audience - you - completely passive. Yet it is possible to transform such one-way teaching into a common search for truth in which you and others participate. Methods are thus very important, because they can become either channels for or obstacles to the Holy Spirit. For the same reason methods are very unimportant, because only the Spirit has the power to cause a process of communication to succeed. No ideal Bible study method exists. For each biblical passage, theme or image, come to it open to a variety of methods that have been discerned for you to experience.

Remember too, if you are part of a Bible Study Group, much depends on the dynamics of the group: the number of participants, any special interests, what motivations there are; and also the time and place where you meet. Sometimes a “successful”, or “fascinating” or “personal” method cannot be used because it would overshadow or even betray the biblical message which the biblical authors want to convey.



## But there is a warning

One big warning for all of us who read the Bible is this: *when a Bible study tells us only what we already know or simply confirms our often biased beliefs, it may be an indication that we are approaching the Bible like a ventriloquist, hearing only what we in fact want to say, rather than letting God speak to us.*

## The goal of Bible Study

The overall goal of Bible study is for you to have an ongoing conversation with God, whose liberating and transforming love is revealed to you and through you in many ways.

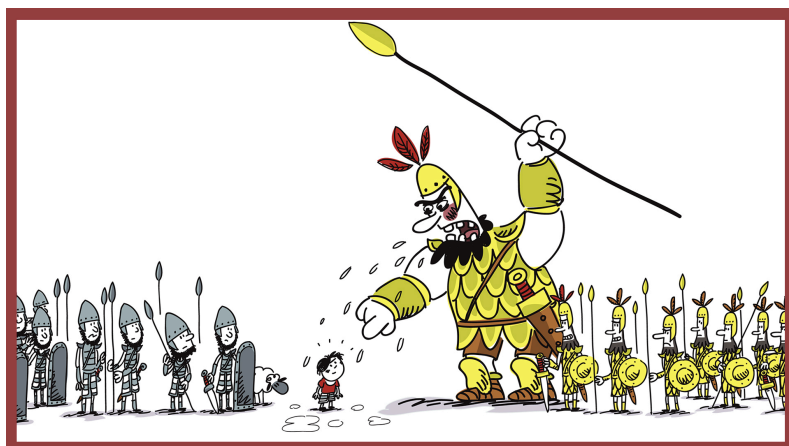
I assume that Bible study is an essential part of the ongoing conversation between God and humanity involving every aspect of life. This implies that people are always having conversations with God about particular things that matter to them and that Bible study is the way the Bible informs, enriches and directs those conversations.

When we open the Bible, we need to answer two quite practical questions at the outset:

- *What outcome do we desire, for ourselves and for others?*
- *And therefore, which passage(s) are we going to engage with?*

It is important to be able to give some provisional answer to these questions, rather than leaving them unexamined. The Bible is too powerful a text to approach aimlessly or carelessly. Our relationship with it is an ongoing and transforming one and over the course of our lives we interact with it on many different levels and for many different reasons.

## Let me give you an example: David and Goliath



I now want to illustrate our transforming relationship with the Bible using the story - familiar to some of us - of David's encounter with Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, which I hope you found time to read at the end of Part I of Studying the Bible.

I wonder if you were alert to how you engaged with this text here and now, at this stage in your life.

And I wonder what questions you have for this text today, and what questions does it have for you.

The story of David and Goliath is often included in abridged and illustrated collections of Bible stories for children, and when the title is mentioned we may find that our first memories are of such a version. But, an adult reading it afresh will find a host of questions coming to mind. Here are some of the questions that came to David's mind when doing this process.

### Historical questions:

- When did this happen?
- Why were the Israelites and the Philistines at loggerheads?

### Cultural questions:

- Was David following normal practice by cutting off the head of the dead Goliath?
- Why did the Israelites slaughter their defeated enemies as they fled?



A question about how this text might relate to Israel/Palestine between groups?

- Has this region always been particularly prone to conflict between groups?

Geographical questions:

- Where did this encounter take place?
- Where are Socoh and Azekah?

A question about the continuity of the I Samuel narrative:

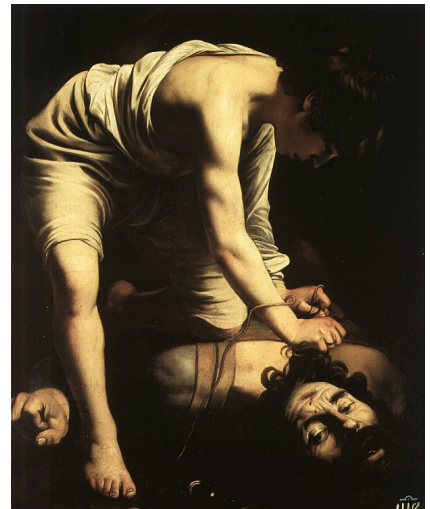
- If David is presented as a skilled musician and warrior in I Samuel 16, why is he described in v.42 as “only a youth”?

A psychological question from our perspective:

- Wasn’t David traumatised by having to carry his enemy’s head with him, e.g. holding it “in his hand” when he went into King Saul’s presence (v57)?

Each of these questions, or combination of them, could send us off in a different direction of enquiry, historical, geographical, military, psychological, dramatic, etc. To determine which direction you should be going in you need to consider your reason for reading this passage.

When you come to read the passage afresh, you are reminded of the strangeness of even the most familiar “Bible story”. Thinking of the story of David and Goliath you may be disturbed to notice how selectively you recall it. Perhaps it was told to us very selectively as children, or perhaps we heard a sermon/talk on the passage which held up David as an example of faith. Yet, if we read it against the background of news tells stories of death and dismemberment in the Middle East such interpretations may strike us as simplistic. They ignore the violence in the text and the violence in the present.



If we prefer to think that the Bible is not really about warfare, but spiritual and theological matters, then we only need to look back to the last ten verses of I Samuel 16.14-23. VI4 makes an awkward start, for it describes the Lord sending an evil spirit to torment (another translation says, “terrorise”) King Saul. In case we have missed this shocking statement, the next verse describes the king’s servants as saying to him, “See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you.”



We are already quite some way from the vision of the liberating and transforming love of God that we began with. Here the narrative describes God tormenting the king of his chosen people with evil. It might be possible to explain this away by saying that this is because God has rejected him. But, if we look back to I Samuel

15 to learn the reason for this, we find that God was angry with Saul for not carrying out a comprehensive and indiscriminate slaughter of all the Amalekites, “both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Samuel 16.3). Just two chapters back from a familiar and well-loved Bible story we find ourselves deep into interpretative and theological problems.



## So where does this leave us?

The way through the tangle of questions that arise when we first read a Bible passage is to remind ourselves of our goal and purpose.

*Our overall goal  
is to continue a conversation with the God  
whose liberating and transforming love  
is being revealed to us - you - in various ways.*

OUR immediate purpose in engaging in Bible study will be determined by our present situation. Everyday life requires you to Bible study for a variety of specific reasons in the life of the Church and the world, for example:

- You may need to prepare others and yourself who are going through a painful struggle.
- A crises might have erupted locally, nationally or internationally and people may be desperate for answers including answers from the Bible.
- You may be involved in discussions, through formal study or teaching, and have to provide a considered answer to a matter of interpretation.
- You, a friend or someone else you know may be facing a personal crises or moment of decision and be desperate for some form of outside input to help you decide, and be hoping that the Bible can offer you some direct guidance.
- You may have recently seen a play or film, read a book, bought a CD, heard a comment, listened to a radio broadcast, or visited a church building or an art-gallery and be struck by the way a biblical reference or them is reflected there.

## It's a risk

For such reasons, people all over the world may turn to the Bible, but there are risks each time we do so. You will find some things there that accord with your sense of “the way things should be” and others that do not. You will need to be alert to the many ways in which you seek to smooth over difficulties or surprises in the text, or suggest alternative interpretations that do not require you to transform your ways.



## What is your reason for a Bible study of this passage now?

Your reason for opening the Bible all usually also determine where we open it, and what passages we select for interpretation. It may be that you have been directed to a particular passage by the Church lectionary, Daily reading booklet, a friend, your priest, or at an Emmaus Course. At other times you will have chosen the passage yourself on the grounds that you think that it offers you answers to a question that you have. Every time you open the Bible, and look afresh at the passage before you, you discover that things are not quite as you thought they were. The text seems to be tilted away from the point you thought it was making. Sometimes the tilt is so steep that you find yourself obliged to follow a contour that takes us in quite a different direction.

Because of the propensity of the Bible to send us off somewhere else, it is necessary for us to plot where we are now and where we hope to get to at the outset, a bit like a sailor setting off on a course with many potential hazards and diversions.

If you know where you have started from and where you are aiming for, you can check your progress along the way. In Bible study this does not, or should not, guarantee that you will arrive at your intended destination; certainly not in the sense of arriving at the conclusions that you expected at the outset. But it will help you to place limits upon your enquiry and ask the right questions of the text.

If you find yourself “blown off-course” by the force of the passage, at least you will know this and be able to account for yourself to others. You may have to explain that the original questions you began with were not answered by the text - and that is okay - and that you got different answers to other questions that arose along the way. As in any conversation Bible study, involves negotiating the differences between two independent perspectives, yours and that of the text.

In later Parts of *Studying the Bible* you will explore and tackle the ways in which you select passages for Bible study, often at the cost of gravely neglecting others. You will consider the fires upon you that influence your choice of passages, and the ways you habitually interpret them. You will discover long histories of Bible use and interpretation which say, if you want to know such and such, go to this or that

passage, and you will find that this is the Bible’s answer to your question(s) - or as it is often couched, ‘your problem’. It is important that you are aware of the profound influences of such traditions of interpretation because if you are not aware of them,

you will be unable to resist them, when they seek to prevent you from reading the Scriptures for yourself to find out more about what God is saying and has said to others and

... avoid repeating  
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“There is only one book that reads me.”  
Remember this.

you: you *will* struggle, to *listen* to the book that reads you.

### **Provisional, responsible and loving Bible study**

*Does all this simply leave you with a logjam of conflicting Bible study interpretations?*

Not if you remember that in your conversation with God, you are never able to claim that you have arrived at the final, definitive interpretation of any biblical passage or group of passages. Time, energy and ability limits see to that. What you can legitimately aim for is a responsible interpretation for a particular purpose at a particular time, a stopping, or vantage-point on the way. You can also aim to arrive at this interpretation in a self-aware way, which makes evident both to yourself and others, that we know what is driving us, and we are aware that our other circumstances and convictions place limits on just how widely applicable our interpretation can be for others.

However, you should not feel left in a situation of absolute relativism (the doctrine that knowledge, truth and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute), without any overall governing principles. It is possible to identify and use perspectives and tools to work towards an interpretation, through Bible study,

which respects both the integrity of the biblical text and the integrity of your life questions.

Ultimately, Christian interpreters through Bible study have the responsibility to *interpret the Bible as an act of neighbourly love*. All your provisional acts of interpretation through Bible study need to be done with integrity as part of our commitment to love yourself, by seeking to be honest and true to yourself, and your neighbours, by resisting the temptation to shortchange them with simplistic and trite answers.

You will certainly want to avoid manipulating or deceiving others. You should also avoid repeating tired old platitudes that you have never tested for yourself, or that you do not believe.

**You are called  
to bring your deepest and  
truest questions and convictions to  
the conversation with God  
and to seek the best answers  
you can arrive at.**



## Let us try it out

Chose a short biblical passage that you are very, even overly, familiar with. Read it carefully and attentively. Stay alert to the new possibilities that the text offers to you at this moment.

What is the passage?

In what way does your present understanding of it need to be provisional?

As you look more closely at it, in what ways does this baggage resist your present understanding?

In what way does your interpretation not quite fit with what this passage is about, i.e. in what ways does it resist your present understanding of it?

Are there questions that are important to you that you have never dared to raise in relation to this passage? If so, name them now.

If you came to a new understanding of this passage, that you know would be unacceptable to other people you know, how might you affirm your commitment to love them?

What was this experience like for you and what have you learnt about your self?