

St. Joseph Guide to the Bible

Becoming Comfortable with the Bible in Four Simple
Steps

What You Need to Know to Read the Bible
Confidently and Competently ***NOW!***

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Introduction

My Beginning with the Bible

When I became interested in the Bible as a college freshman, I didn't look around for books on the Bible. I wanted to go direct to the source, and discover what it had to say. Much of it was familiar from my attendance at Mass, Catholic grade school, and CCD (Sunday school), but there was also much I had missed or forgotten.

I benefited enormously from getting right into the Bible. Ignorance was bliss, and I went a long way on sincerity and enthusiasm.

The experience of first encountering the Bible, like a conversion or new love, can be euphoric at first. However, it is how we respond after the honeymoon period is over, when the inevitable, dryness, discouragement, and confusion set in, that determines the long term efficacy of our endeavor.

I was blessed to have the support of a Protestant friend who was well-versed in the Bible. I had the correct instincts to stay mostly in the New Testament while dabbling periodically in familiar sections of the Old Testament. I read Paul's letters and the other epistles because I wasn't as familiar with them as I was with the Gospels. I soon found out that St. Peter was right: St. Paul can be difficult to understand (cf. 2 Pt 3:15-16). I'm still trying to understand him. He speaks to me like few others can, and I continually rediscover how worthy his writings are of my attention and energies.

After several months of reading the Bible daily, my hunger for the Bible expanded, particularly during the summer when I had more time on my hands. The questions and confusion that arose during my reading sessions multiplied, and I felt

drawn to learn more about the Bible. Like the Ethiopian eunuch pondering the prophecies of Isaiah (cf. Acts 8:26-40), I needed help in understanding what I was reading so that I could interpret and pray with it more effectively.

Reading two classic introductions to the Bible, *Reading Scripture as the Word of God* by George Martin and *Background to the Bible* by Richard T.A. Murphy, O.P., further whetted my appetite.

The university library had a copy of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, which was and in its revised version remains the standard Catholic commentary on the Bible in English. I periodically took breaks from studying to read it. I have discovered much about the Bible through piecemeal readings. A little can go a long way when we work with God.

Because I started at a relatively young age (during childhood or adolescence would have been better, but alas I was excessively preoccupied with my basketball career), I had plenty of time to get directly acquainted with the Bible, to concentrate on the Bible rather than on books on the Bible. For this I am thankful. Only after I graduated from college did I get heavily into Bible study and background reading.

Finding Your Path

Each of us has our own path to the Bible and to the Lord. I can offer pointers and directions, but not a precise roadmap. I am still fine-tuning the approach that works for me, and I've written eleven books on the subject!

Life and providence are not static. As circumstances change, so must we. When we think we've arrived we can be sure that we haven't.

Why All the Fuss?

Perhaps you are wondering, why write a book at all? Why not let you work through your introduction to the Bible without a potentially meddling or overbearing presence? It worked for me, at least to some extent, so why shouldn't it for you?

A little preparation can go a long way. In an analogy that you will soon become familiar with, it is like the dating process. You have to be yourself and learn as you go along, but it helps to receive guidance. The Bible and life, like the opposite sex, are a mystery, and we can use all the competent counsel and direction we can get.

In looking back I recognize that I would have benefited considerably from a short and sweet introduction to the Bible. This would have shown me how and where to begin, and how to proceed, while providing a foundation for further inquiry. A basic map can point out directions, markers, terrain, roadblocks, and blind alleys.

Exploring the Bible without any kind of aid has its adventurous element. It forces us to use logic and intuition, and fosters confidence in our reading and interpretive abilities. However, we are better off with basic guidance from competent authorities. Better to build on the wisdom and experience of others than to reinvent the wheel. Of course, the other extreme --- relying passively on others for instruction and initiative --- has its own pitfalls. To paraphrase Einstein, the process must be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Grass-roots Participation

It was not only reflection on my own experience that led me to write this book. Feedback from my previous books on the Bible convinced me that I needed to offer a more basic level of instruction.

I have always tried to make my books relevant to persons at all levels of Bible familiarity. In the process, I necessarily included information of an advanced nature. This benefits the reader significantly, as it trains them to approach the Bible competently and confidently, but it also requires more time and effort. I wanted my books to be accessible, enjoyable, and manageable, but also challenging.

A wonderful thing about the Bible is that it is written for everyone. Persons learned in the Bible can communicate to novices the fundamentals necessary for a competent understanding and a fulfilling experience. With guidance, preparation, attentiveness, and perseverance, sincere readers can make significant strides in their relationship with the Bible in a relatively short time.

Few other disciplines allow novices to progress so rapidly. Morally and spiritually, we're all on equal footing with God and the Bible, and the Holy Spirit and Church are here to help us, so there is a relatively short indoctrination period. Of course, the learning process never ends, and the Bible never ceases to be challenging, and at times, perplexing.

I was and remain of the opinion that overly simplified and passive education does a disservice to the learner. We can see the damage it does to society. We allow mediocre and worse politicians to govern us, mindless and sometimes deviant entertainment and marketing programming to condition us, and one-dimensional and often dysfunctional personalities (e.g., athletes, entertainers, celebrities) to fascinate us.

As a former athlete (a brief basketball career at the University of Michigan), I know that no one improves without being stretched out of their comfort zone. At the same time, limits and boundaries are necessary. I will try to walk this fine line in this book. You will be the judge of the degree to which I have succeeded.

New Wine for New Wineskins

As the subtitle indicates, I have endeavored to provide you with what you need to know to begin reading, praying, and interpreting the Bible in a competent and confident manner. I have sought suggestions and feedback from numerous readers who are new to the Bible. A few were familiar with my other books so they could point out areas where the material bordered on duplication. There is no substitute for listening to those in the trenches. Many of their concerns have been addressed and their insights and comments incorporated in this book.

I began leading Bible sharing groups in 1983, almost 25 years ago. I have led them in diverse environments and encountered a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. I have had an ongoing stream of input and feedback from participants that has significantly shaped my perspective on the Bible and how to teach it to beginners. I am still learning.

The more I know the humbler I get. Being reminded of all that you don't know helps you maintain a balanced perspective. This book contains some of the riper fruits of my education and formation process. Your response and feedback will be the seed of my future efforts.

I made a conscious effort to avoid duplicating material contained in my introductions to the Bible (*The How-To Book of the Bible*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, 2004),

and to *lectio divina* (*How to Pray with the Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2007). These books make excellent follow-ups and companions to this book, but they are not a replacement.

Let's Get to It!

Every book I have ever written has exceeded the intended page count - except this one. I resisted every temptation to include unnecessary information. To quench any lingering thirst for information and guidance on particular subjects, I will refer you to the appropriate sources. My intention with this book is to keep you focused on the Bible.

I have endeavored to make this book succinct, simple, and straightforward. In this spirit, I shall end this introduction so that you can get through the book and back to the Bible as soon as possible.

Translation Used and Biblical Abbreviations

I reference biblical passages throughout the book not only as a basis and justification for my comments, but also to familiarize you with the Bible. As you read this book, return to the Bible at every inclination and opportunity. Whether to follow up on one of my biblical cross-references, or to continue to satisfy your spiritual thirst and curiosity, put this book down and go to the source. The following pointers will help you find your way around the Bible and discover the Bible's cohesiveness and consistency.

When quoting from the Bible, this book uses the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, because it is both literal and accessible (i.e., comprehensible to persons without a background in the Bible). You do not need to use the same translation to follow along.

The New American Bible (which is used in the American liturgy and Lectionary), The New Jerusalem Bible, and the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, are other fine Catholic translations. See *The How-To Book of the Bible* for a more extensive discussion of translation characteristics and differences.

For flow and space reasons, I frequently provide biblical cross-references (i.e., citations such as Gal 2 or 1 Sam 9) rather than direct quotations. The following is the system commonly used for referencing the Bible. Abbreviations of biblical books vary slightly by translation, but are easy to decipher. They can be found in your Bible's table of contents.

Deciphering a Biblical Reference

A biblical reference begins with the abbreviation of the biblical book, e.g., Gen for Genesis. The abbreviation is not followed by a period. (An older, decreasingly used, referencing system includes a period after the abbreviation and in lieu of colons, for example, Gen. 1.1).

A number before the abbreviation indicates the first, second, or third book of that name. For example, 3 Jn refers to the third letter of John, and 2 Cor refers to the second letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians.

After the biblical abbreviation comes the chapter. For example, Mk 8 refers to the eighth chapter of Mark.

If the reference points to a specific verse(s), it will continue with a colon, then the verse number. For example, Lk 2:4 means the fourth verse of chapter two of Luke.

A series of verses within the same chapter are designated by a hyphen. For example, Num 4:1-7 means verses one through seven of the fourth chapter of Numbers.

A sequence of chapters within the same book is also designated by a hyphen. Jn 13-17 refers to the thirteenth through seventeenth chapters of the Gospel of John.

Remember, a colon is necessary to designate a verse.

Commas separate discontinuous verses within the same chapter. For example, Mk 3:1, 6, 7 means the first, sixth, and seventh verses of chapter three of Mark's Gospel.

Semicolons distinguish different chapters. For example, Eccl 3:7; 5:8, means the seventh verse of chapter three of Ecclesiastes and the eighth verse of chapter five. Dt 3; 7; 9 means the third, seventh, and ninth chapters of Deuteronomy. Remember, a colon is necessary to indicate a verse.

If more than one biblical book is referenced, it will be contained in a separate designation and separated by a semicolon, for example, Jn 3:3; Ps 1:2.

Decipher this one: Mt 4:5-8; 3:4, 6; 10:1 (the Gospel of Matthew, verses five through eight of chapter four, verses four and six of chapter three, and verse one of chapter ten).

The letters "f." or "ff." following a biblical reference means the verse(s) designated and those that follow. Scholars use this with the assumption that their reader will know from the context how far to read.

The term "cf." means cross-reference, and precedes a passage(s) that is referenced but not quoted. If a passage is quoted verbatim, its reference will not be preceded by a "cf."

When a reference ends in a, b, or c, it refers to the first, second, or third part of a verse that is lengthy or reflects a break in thought. Such detail occurs mostly in scholarly writings.

Occasionally we encounter passages in which the chapter and verse designations do not accurately reflect breaks in the text. It is the biblical text that is inspired. The verse numbering system came more than a millennium after the final book of the Bible was written.

Gen 2:4 illustrates both of the above. The first half of the verse, identified as Gen 2:4a, concludes the first creation story (Gen 1:1-2:4a), and the second half of the verse, Gen 2:4b, begins the second creation story (Gen 2:4b-3:24).

I use the term “Old Testament” rather than the more ecumenically-minded “Hebrew Scriptures”, because I am including in my reference the seven books and additional material included in the Catholic Bible but excluded from the Jewish and Protestant canon. I ask that persons who prefer the ecumenical expression bear with my usage and make a mental substitution.

Feedback

The subtitles of this book promise guidance on becoming comfortable, confident, and competent with the Bible in four simple steps. This assertion was not made glibly or frivolously. Each step is equivalent to one chapter or subject: Resources (Selecting a Translation and Bible), Strategy (Developing a Reading Plan), Prayer (How to Practice *Lectio Divina*), and Interpretation and Applications. You are the judge of the degree to which I have fulfilled this promise. I invite you to share your verdict with me and others.

Your feedback helps refine my faith and message. I welcome your insights, stories, and suggestions. You can contact me through my web site (www.karlaschultz.com), e-mail me at karlaschultz@juno.com, or write to me at Genesis Personal Development Center, 152 Oakwood Drive, Daytona Beach, FL 32117-4636.