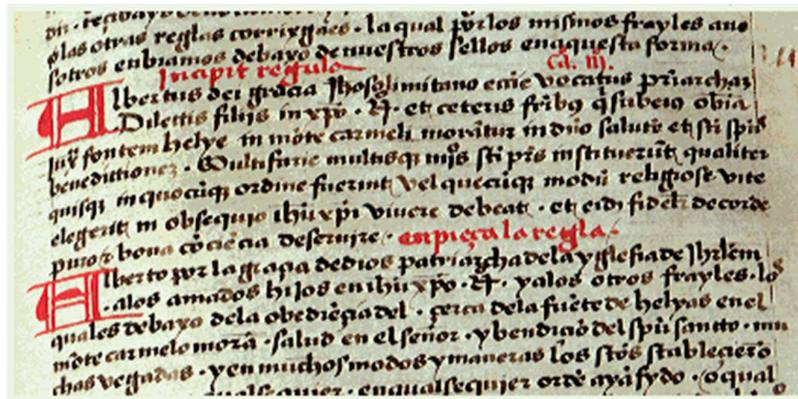


TIPS FOR READING THE BIBLE: FROM A CARMELITE PERSPECTIVE

"Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty." (Chapter 10, The Carmelite Rule)



There are many versions of the Bible available in English and each of them has their strengths and weaknesses. Always remember that the Bible is a translated text from other languages, normally either Hebrew or Greek, and every translation is dependent on how the translators decided to interpret these original texts.

A good selection:

- The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB): This is the bible used in Catholic liturgies and its language is familiar to us.
- The New International Version (NIV): A good translation that is quite readable.
- New King James Bible: A revamped and more contemporary version of an old standard from which we learned many familiar biblical phrases.
- The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): the bible that most biblical scholars use as a standard reference point because it is more literal and perhaps closer to the Geek or Hebrew original.
- The New American Bible (NAB) or the Catholic Study Bible: well worth indulging in especially for the footnotes and introductory material about the different books.

If you are purchasing a new Bible make sure you get one which includes the Apocrypha, otherwise you might miss out on some biblical books that are not accepted as Scripture by different religious traditions.

Also, I'd encourage you to acquire a bible that has footnotes and cross references in it. This helps to explain certain unusual phrases or words. The

cross references also alert you to where in other books of the bible there may be a reference to the text you are reading.

2. **Where to Start?**

Remember that the Bible is a collection of books that have, through use and tradition, been adopted as authentic revelations about God and from God.

One rule which I think is worth noting is **NOT** to try to read/study/pray the Bible from the beginning to the end. It can get very confusing if you start with Genesis and end with Revelation and it takes a major test of will power to get through it all.

Best guess: Choose a book or text of the bible that appeals to you. It might be a particular psalm, or a Gospel or even a narrative story like that of King David or even the 1st 2 chapters of the book of Genesis and the two versions of creation.

I'd also encourage you not to be too ambitious and try and read everything at one sitting. It's best to stay with a small text and try and read a little each day. You can make up a map for yourself for reading a particular book of the bible for example, a chapter or a verse. A really enjoyable read is the story of Jonah – it is a humorous and insightful study into human nature but it makes a point.

3. **To Begin**

Place yourself in the presence of the Lord and ask the Lord to give you guidance about what the word is saying to you.

Read the text a couple of times: slowly and with attention to the words.

Ask yourself: What is this passage about? What is the Lord saying to me in this passage? What does this passage teach me about God and myself?

Sit with the text for as long or as little as you like and resist the temptation to race ahead.

Write the passage down if you like in a notebook or pick out the words that speak most strongly to you.

Let the word(s) marinate in your heart and mind.

When you decide to finish, acknowledge the Lord by giving thanks and let the words or passage sit with you throughout the day.

4. To Study the Bible?

There is a multitude of ways to study the bible that have been refined over the centuries and especially the last century. Scholars have attempted to look at the texts from a variety of perspectives. They tend to call these ways "Criticism", not in the negative sense, but in the sense of having an eye to critique the text and to analyse it. For example:

Source Criticism: Scholars try to identify what were the sources for the material that eventually became written down and regarded as sacred text.

Illustrations of this might be:

What were the origins of the great stories of the Patriarchs, Moses and the Exile? How did these traditions coalesce into the Torah (the 1st 5 books of the Bible)?

Where did the psalms originate from? Were they used in private prayer or in Temple worship or in synagogue worship or all of the above? What might have been the circumstances of the original "pray-ers" of this particular psalm?

Why are there two versions of creation in the 1st Chapters of the Book of Genesis? Where did these stories have their origins? Is it possible that the authors of these texts borrowed insights from other religious stories? What material such as stories were available to those who put together the version(s) we read today?

Why did the story of David loom so large in the Jewish psyche? Where did these tales come from? Why is David such a favoured but flawed character? Why was Saul deposed as king and did the original stories have a precedent in other stories about similar characters?

Literary or Narrative Criticism: Scholars who favour this approach like to take the text at hand and analyse how it evolved as a particular narrative or story.

Examples of this might be:

Why are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke so different from John? Taken as a whole, why are some of Mark's stories about Jesus, used by the other Gospel writers, reduced in content? Why is the entire narrative of John's Gospel so different from the others and what was the author trying to say as he told the Jesus story in his unique way?

Why is the book of Proverbs so different from the book of Exodus and why were these collections of maxims put together in the way they were? Were these maxims taken from an existing book of etiquette that was Jewish or possibly from another narrative entirely?

Why are the letters of St Paul actually "letters"? If we have some of Paul's letters, why don't we have the other correspondence that Paul was responding to? How does Paul compose his letters? Can you gain a hint of what Paul is writing about

from his introductory words to a community? Why is Paul's letter to the Romans so different from his letters to the Corinthians?

Did the prophets like, Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah really speak their prophetic words? Why is Isaiah really quite different or in three parts and how did the final version of Isaiah come to be?

Redaction Criticism: While a form of Literary Criticism, Redaction Criticism focusses on the author of a text to try and discern the author's intention in writing the way he did.

For example, what was Mark's intention to frequently repeat the phrase that Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone about him? Why would Jesus or Mark have done this?

Another example might be the question of who redacted the final version of the 1st 5 books of the Old Testament? Was it an individual, a group or a community?

Who was the author of the letter to the Hebrews, as well as the letters of James and John, and what was their intentions in writing these letters?

Historical Criticism: As is obvious from the title, historical critical scholarship seeks to contextualise the texts of both the Old and New Testaments.

Was a particular text written at a time of great national distress, for example, during the period of the Babylonian Exile? What was life like in 1st century Palestine? Did Jesus speak Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Latin or some Galilean dialect?

All these particular approaches to biblical study feed into a remarkable picture of the world of both Judaism and early Christianity and have made considerable inroads into our appreciation of the text that we regard as the Word of God.

Strangely, biblical study will dismantle many preconceived notions about the Scriptures but at the same time can lead to an immensely rich appreciation of them and lead to a new and perhaps more vigorous engagement with God's words

To read the Bible is not just an academic exercise but is also one which can engage, not just our minds, but also our hearts and in them we can find life.

Hugh Brown