

How can different perspectives help us understand the Bible?

We all **interpret** the Bible. If we want to read it well two things matter.



The first is getting as **close to the original meaning** as we can.

The second is about knowing that **each of us has a certain perspective** – no one is likely to have the full view of what is going on. This is true in any area of life.

Sometimes people get worried

by talk about lots of different interpretations of the Bible. They might ask, "Surely there is one truth from God which we all need to find when reading it?"

Acknowledging that there are different perspectives is not necessarily saying that they are all as valid as each other or denying that there is truth. But because it is impossible for any human being to have a complete view, we need to read with humility and openness to keep on learning – our reading of the Bible can be enriched and challenged by those whose perspectives are very different from us, and who might open up new ways of seeing things.

This requires a trust that the Bible has been given by God as something that is best read in relationship with others. (The technical word to describe the way we interpret things is hermeneutics, and when talking about the Bible we talk about "biblical hermeneutics".)

At least four different perspectives have been discovered.

"How do we discover the most **literal** way of reading the Bible, according to its original meaning and intention?"
(Luther and Calvin).



"What might this story show us about how to live **morally** now?"

"Can we interpret the Bible in any **allegorical** ways, with a second level of meaning?" (Origen) e.g. "Can we read of Jesus calming the storm as only about God's control over the weather, or more allegorically as a way of Him in our own "storms of life?"

More recently people have asked:

"How can we make sure we are understanding the Bible better from the perspectives of those who have **previously been left out or sidelined by history?**"

For example, Professor Howard Thurman argued that for centuries the Bible had for the most part been interpreted by those who were powerful in society – and even in order to justify slavery. He said that to understand Jesus better we need to read the Bible from the "**liberation**" perspective that **Jesus was poor and a member of a minority group.**



“Liberation theologians” look for ways in which the Bible can be understood as a resource for overturning unjust structures in the world. They offer the view that however we understand the Bible, we interpret it well when it is “good news for the poor”.

More recently this kind of perspective has been highlighted by people reflecting on the experience of Black Christians in the West – people who feel their experience has been missing from the way the Bible has been interpreted.

Others give better attention to the perspective of women when it comes to interpreting Scripture well.

How much should these other perspectives influence our reading of the Bible?

For example, while the Bible was not written for men, they notice how religion has traditionally been dominated by men and how most of the Bible has been written by men.

They ask questions about what difference it makes that Jesus was a man.

How could being more aware of the female imagery for God in the Bible will help lead to a higher view of women’s places in the church and society?



Some would say that these voices have been so ignored in the past that they need to be centre stage. (Some liberation theologians would argue that liberation is the main theme of the Bible.) At the very least, they can jolt us into thinking in fresh ways about what God might be saying through the Bible.

Taking these perspectives seriously will help us when we are thinking about which **themes** are important throughout the Bible, but they might also help us to read **particular parts** of it with fresh eyes. We might ask, “How would a refugee / rich person / poor person / differently-abled person / male / female / black / white / child / adult see this passage and what could I learn?”

Good questions to ask when interpreting the Bible well are:

How can I read this with others?
Are there other ways of interpreting this which are still faithful to the original meaning?
Whose voices are missing in the way that this has been traditionally understood?

