

Ways of reading the bible

- As a **spiritual discipline** or form of **meditation**: In *lectio divina*, we read until a word or phrase speaks to our condition, then we take that phrase into silence with us, or imagine ourselves in the story, and explore how that phrase teaches us.
- **Metaphor** or **allegory**: As we read the text, the stories may become symbolic: What storms have we experienced, and how did Jesus calm the waters? When has God resurrected us? What is the cross that we know, what is the cross in our lives?

As a storyteller, Jesus himself often uses metaphor and allegory. The gospel writers do not seem to, yet we can still read their narrative accounts in that way.

Both of these ways of reading are quite personal. They search for the way the text speaks to us, and are not concerned with context: with whether the text represents historical fact, with the history of the text and the way the church formed it, with how the text agrees or conflicts with other biblical texts. There are also ways of reading the text by a particular method—the various forms of **biblical criticism**.

Biblical criticism

There are a number of forms of biblical criticism. They all begin with the knowledge that most of the bible is based on oral traditions eventually set down in a written text—sometimes a generation or two after the events narrated (as the gospels), sometimes hundreds of years later (as the Pentateuch). These are among the most prominent forms of biblical criticism:

- **Historical Critical**: The historical critical method tries to set the text in its historical context, to reconstruct the events, people, and religious and social practices from which the written books emerged.
- **Source criticism**: Tries to get behind a work as it now stands to the sources out of which it is composed. What are the sub-parts of the whole, which parts came first, is it possible to figure out when and why they were composed? What are the concerns revealed in the various parts?
- **Form criticism**: Focuses on the development of the church's oral tradition. Divides the text into short units of oral tradition—pericopes—and attempts to understand their setting

in the life of the church. Why was this particular type of story remembered and not forgotten? What role did it play in the church's worship, teaching, evangelism?

- **Redaction criticism:** Concerned with the way the writers of the texts, as we now have them, selected, combined, and arranged already existing materials to express special concerns and emphases.

Redaction criticism and source criticism study the same period historically, but they work in the opposite direction. Source criticism takes the edited text and seeks to move back in time to uncover its source or earlier stages in the written tradition. Redaction criticism assumes the sources that source criticism uncovers, but asks why the written tradition developed as it did moving forward in time. What patterns are evident in the way the redactor changes his sources and what do those patterns reveal about the redactor's theology or concerns?

- **Literary criticism:** Literary critics are concerned with the meaning of the text as it now stands. They consider theme, plot, climax, characterization, and symbols, among other literary devices. They consider each gospel as a story in its own right, with its own narrative point of view, its own plot, its own story world.

Literary criticism can and does make use of historical research just as historians can make use of literary studies, but the goals of these types of research are different. Literary critics use historical information to help them understand the text. Historical critics typically use the texts as evidence to help them reconstruct history.

Interlacing

Elizabeth Barnes proposes that we are shaped by the stories of Jesus, Israel, and the church—that we become Christians—by weaving together the biblical stories and our own stories so that they become one story. We read our lives backward into the story and the story forward into our lives in order to find the gospel meaning in both.

Quaker perspectives on reading the Bible

from Robert Barclay's An Apology for the True Christian Divinity :

from Margaret Fell (Fox), "The testimony of Margaret Fox concerning her late husband." :

