

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.

Fundamentalism: Biblical Inerrancy

A reaction to the development of biblical criticism in the 19th century, fundamentalism is the "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," approach.

"...the Bible is the Word of God, in the sense that it is the infallible product of the Holy Spirit's guidance. This infallibility, or inerrancy, applies to the entire scriptural record; there are no errors of any sort in the Bible. For fundamentalists the inerrant Bible stands alone on all matters as the final authority."

This view was most thoroughly developed by the faculty of the Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 20th century, and gained wide attention with the publication and free distribution of ten small books (1909–1912) entitled The Fundamentals, edited by Amzi C. Dixon and Reuben A. Torrey.

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

Margaret Fell:

In the year 1652 it pleased the Lord to draw him [George Fox] towards us... My then husband, Thomas Fell, was not at home at the time, but gone the Welsh circuit, being one of the Judges of the Assize, and our house, [Swarthmoor Hall] being a place open to entertain ministers and religious people at, one of George Fox his friends brought him hither, where he stayed all night. And the next day, being a lecture or a fast-day, he went to Ulverston steeplehouse, but came not in till people were gathered; I and my children had been a long time there before. And when they were singing before the sermon, he came in; and when they had done singing, he stood up upon his seat or form and desired that he might have liberty to speak. And he that was in the pulpit said he might. And the first words that he spoke were as followeth: 'He is not a Jew that is one outward, neither is that circumcision which is outward, but he is a Jew that is one inward, and that is circumcision which is of the heart'. And so he went on and said, How that Christ was the Light of the world and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this Light they might be gathered to God, etc. and I stood up in my pew, and I wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. and then he went on, and opened the Scriptures, and said, 'The Scriptures were the prophets' words and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord'. And said, 'Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from god?'

This opened me so that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly we were all wrong. So I sat me down in my pew again, and cried bitterly. And I cried in my spirit to the Lord, 'We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves'... I saw it was the truth, and I could not deny it; and I did as the apostle saith, I 'received the truth in the love of it'. And it was opened to me so clear that I had never a tittle in my heart against it; but I desired the Lord that I might be kept in it, and then I desired no greater portion.