

Friends of Sabeel UK

READING THE BIBLE



An introduction for those planning to facilitate a Bible reading session (perhaps half a day or longer) for a group of people committed to discovering how to read scripture in the context of the Palestine/Israel situation and Palestinian Christianity in particular.



Friends of Sabeel Theology Group
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Most Christians read scripture regularly, both at weekly worship and/or in personal prayer. But many passages create difficulties – even stumbling blocks – in our understanding of God’s care for Palestinians. Yet scripture does not need to be interpreted in a monolithic way. This booklet tries to open up a way for scripture to be used as a pastoral tool for Sabeel’s work with and for Palestinian Christians.

1. **An introduction to the Bible**
2. **Aims and objectives of the Bible reading exercise**
3. **Which lens(es)**
4. **Which passages**
5. **Questions and issues**
6. **How to try it: practical steps**

5. Close with some opportunity for feedback, either verbally in a closing session or through responses to a list of questions such as:
 - What did you expect?
 - What surprised or challenged you?
 - What insight do you now have to share with others?
 - How does the bible reading exercise enable hope?
 - How do we now take peace with justice for Palestinians forward?
6. Above all, surround the meeting with prayer and quiet reflection. Reading the Bible is a spiritual exercise, listening for the word of God for today, especially in this exercise a word of hope for Palestinian Christians.

6. How to try it: practical steps!

1. Select a venue, date and time, in consultation with others.
2. Invite people to gather for a half/whole day, or even an overnight. The exercise can of course be done in a single session, afternoon or evening, depending partly on how well the people know each other and how comfortable they are with each other.
3. Introduce the method:
 - First, by making it clear in the invitation leaflet what sort of bible study this might be. Remember that some people feel disenfranchised because they are not experts in the bible. Try and encourage them to realize that this may be an asset, as they will bring less luggage to the text.
 - Secondly, by having a brief introductory session in which members get to know each other, gain a little more confidence in the method to be used, and generally feel more equipped to share with others what they hear and see in whatever the passage is.
 - Above all, invite the group to trust the method! There is no expert to say what the passage means or how it should be interpreted. Simply listen with heart and soul and mind for the voice of God.
4. If there is more than one group (perhaps maximum 5-6), make sure that each facilitator is clear about what their role in the group is: to encourage and enable each member of the group to participate, which of course includes listening carefully to each other as a way of listening to God's voice in the scripture. Let no one voice dominate.

1. *An Introduction to the Bible*

The books of the 'Old Testament' (the Hebrew scriptures) are part of the history, laws, poetry and prophecy of Jewish people. At first, they were spoken. During this oral period, often layers were added to the stories and these layers are sometimes still preserved as different accounts of events which happened. This continued to happen as the oral preservation of material began to move into written form, a gradual and uneven process which began some time before the 'books' of the Old Testament came to be written in the form we have them now. In the Old Testament we see scripture constantly re-interpreting itself for fresh circumstances. This happened quite naturally precisely because these events were still alive with meaning for a further generation. We make them the word of God today by interpreting them afresh for our generation, searching for answers to our own specific questions.

Christians interpret the Hebrew scripture in the light of the New Testament, that is, in the light of who they understand Jesus to be, itself covering a wide range of answers. Such interpretation is continuing the process already begun within scripture.

In the New Testament, Paul's letters are situational and occasional, that is, they were written on a particular occasion and in response to a particular situation, usually to a particular group of Christians in a particular place. This makes them open to interpretation for each new situation and occasion and underlines their usefulness for us today.

The Gospels are based on oral traditions about the life of Jesus of Nazareth and its meaning. They were eventually written (probably from the mid 60s onwards) in response to the questions 'who is Jesus?' and 'what is the meaning of his life, death and resurrection?' Within the four gospels there is a rich diversity of voices, a variety found even within each individual gospel, reflecting of course the nature of the community in which they were produced and perhaps the preferences of the editors (the evangelists) of the material.

The Bible becomes the word of God when it interacts with human life. To understand what the word of God is saying to us today we need the interpretative tools of experience, reason and tradition, alongside our knowledge and understanding of world affairs, culture and society.

We cannot fruitfully ask ‘what does the bible say?’ about this or that, expecting over-literal specific answers, for the bible is not like that. Rather we listen for God’s voice in the snapshots given of God and God’s people. Through struggling with this story we work out God’s word for today.

For meditation:

The Bible is like . . .

“The Bible is like a river. The river reflects human life, sometimes rushing along in full flow, sometimes tumbling over waterfalls, sometimes in deep pools of still waters. The millions of drops which make up the river each tell a story of their own experience of being part of the river. If you remove a cup of water from the river it will tell you something of the nature of water but it will tell you little of the vibrant life of a river. The river never ceases to flow; in the same way the Bible is an ongoing conversation. The authors of the river of life, the Bible, complement, correct and struggle with the insights of their predecessors. From the river we hear the whisperings of their struggles with questions. . .

We are invited to jump into the river and be part of the Bible’s ever-flowing, life giving conversation with God.”

So we can pray:

For the word of God in scripture,
For the word of God among us,
For the word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Nevertheless, it is the task of the facilitator of such a bible group to select a passage or a variety of passages for group study. Clearly, careful thought needs to be given to this. If two passages are selected, it is probably better if one is from the Old Testament and the other from the New Testament, as different perspectives are encountered in each.

As an hour needs to be set aside for each passage, much will depend on the time available and how much you want different groups (if more than one) to share their experience with the wider group.

5. Questions and issues

Can I be sure that this free liberation approach to scripture will work?

Trust the method. It has been used successfully in a wide variety of places and situations. Simply read through the passage together and reflect on it, bearing in mind the Palestinian context.

Don’t we need an introduction to the passage so that people know how to understand it?

Despite the temptation, resist this approach as it simply undermines not only the method but the conviction that scripture belongs to the people of God and that God will lead us to hear God’s voice if we listen for that voice.

Does it matter how much I know about the Bible?

You may know very little about scripture, or you may be a scholar; this method will offer illumination to all.

You may know for whom this text was written and when, or you may not; but provided that you are open to where God’s Spirit leads, in the context of our commitment to the Christians in Palestine, no more is asked of you.

4. Which passages?

If we are arranging a bible reading occasion for a group of people who are committed to listening for the voice of God in scripture in the particular context of a concern for Palestinian Christians, we need to bear in mind the issues surrounding the lenses through which we read scripture.

We also have the difficult task of selecting and suggesting a number of Bible passages for the group to read and interpret together. What method do we employ to do this, a method which seeks both to be faithful to scripture and is pertinent for study within the Palestinian context?

On the first occasion, in 2009, when a group of Sabeel supporters met for an exercise in reading the Bible in the context of liberation theology, we deliberately chose what we thought were some of the harder passages, that is, passages which raised difficult questions about land and race. These were:

Joshua 5. 13- 6. 21, the conquest of Jericho
I Kings 21. 1-24, Naboth's vineyard
Mark 7. 24-30, the Syrophenician women

On the second occasion, we chose passages which we thought were relevant, but not confrontational. These were:

Genesis 16, 1-16 Hagar
Acts 16, 16-40 Paul's release from prison.

However, the method of liberation theology which we adopted in our bible studies may fruitfully be used on any and every biblical passage. Moreover, there is no passage in the Bible which cannot become a word of God for today - if it is interrogated and struggled with, and the voices of the group are listened to in the way outlined above.

2. Aims and objectives of the bible reading exercise

When preparing for a recent Sabeel group, meeting for bible study, we wrote:

"Our meeting together for Bible study is in the context of a deep commitment to the Palestinian people, and our work together will be surrounded by prayer. Palestinian theology, as expressed through Sabeel, is an ecumenical liberation theology. Our bible study will reflect a grass roots method. In our group work and together, we shall seek to allow God to speak through scripture. The method takes seriously the conviction that scripture can be a word of God for us today and for Palestinian Christians everywhere."

Our hope is that we shall together

- ☞ experience a fresh reading of scripture
- ☞ equip ourselves to undertake a similar exercise locally
- ☞ share our experience more widely with Sabeel UK."

This method involves a serious, indeed profound, view of scripture! It involves trusting scripture to speak to us, trusting God to speak through scripture, trusting the text to speak for itself, refusing to avoid difficult questions which might arise. Behind this approach lies a very clear conviction that scripture can be a word of God for today, but only if we engage with scripture creatively. This is in fact the most traditional method of all, commonly in use prior to our modern preoccupation with issues narrowly related to the literal or historical correctness of the text.

"Come, divine interpreter,
Bring us eyes thy book to read,
Ears the mystic words to hear,
Words which did from thee proceed,
Words that endless bliss impart,
Kept in an obedient heart." - Charles Wesley

3. Which lens(es)?

There are many different ways of reading the Bible. Descriptive names are sometimes given to some of them, for instance, feminist, fundamentalist, liberation theology. Although such shorthand runs the risk of caricature, or pigeonholing an approach, their use can be helpful in illustrating the very wide variety of approaches to reading scripture. Their use can also help each of us to identify more clearly what approaches we have sympathy with and what we find less helpful. The aim is not to sit in judgement of others, but rather to act as a challenge to our own lens.

We can readily recognise that people view the events of their own lives and of the world through different lenses, just as we see and describe other people in quite different ways. This is partly dependent on what experiences have affected our way of thinking and what sort of person we are. In other words, it is not just with regard to scripture that we look through different lenses. The notion should not seem strange to us because we look at the whole of life through a variety of lenses.

Sometimes we use catchwords or catchphrases: breaking open the word, multi-coloured mosaic, interrogating scripture, re-visioning scripture. It might be helpful to use such a phrase to indicate one's own approach; but there is an obvious danger of characterising and dismissing someone else's perspective with such a label.

Despite this, there is still some value in identifying some of the possible ways of approaching scripture. It is one way of acknowledging a variety of approaches which have been used as people have sought to enable the Bible to become the word of God for them. And this needs always to be both respected and challenged.

We may approach scripture seeking to identify and maybe recover some major strand of scripture so that we may learn to recognise another voice in scripture:

- A third rule of thumb, directly related to our desire for a Christian interpretation of scripture, is to seek the mind of Christ. Roughly put, if a teaching discerned in part of scripture does not ring true to the mind of Christ as we can discern it from the New Testament and within the life of the church, then our interpretation of that passage must give way to Christ. Jesus Christ is God's living Word, the supreme revealing of God's nature and will. Of course, there is a certain circularity in this process, but making this journey is always part of seeking a 'Christian lens'. This journey always involves seeking to see the mind of Christ in approaches other than our own: always listening more closely to those whose views you do not hold.

These rules of thumb can be used as part of an attempt to engage in an interpretation of scripture which is an expression of liberation theology. For the method of liberation theology does not mean that there are no guidelines to reading scripture but rather that we free ourselves of ready made answers and allow scripture to speak for itself, so that God's word may be heard.

Some opening questions for a group, or in pairs:

- What do you bring to your reading of the Bible?
- What texts or passages do you live by?
- Through which passages do you approach (or 'enter') scripture? (For example, the universal element in Isaiah or the creation stories of Genesis? Or cross/resurrection? Or a particular story of Jesus?). In other words, what for you are the key passages?
- What lenses do you look through when reading the Bible?
- What do you hope to learn from others about reading the Bible?
- What do you have to offer to the group?

Sometimes a lens is described as ‘the Christian approach’ to the Bible, particularly in reading the Old Testament. Of course, a Christian reader seeks to read the Bible in a Christian way and in the context of Christian beliefs – but the Bible should never be abused as a mere source of scriptural texts to support a particular church belief or doctrine. The Bible will not become the prisoner of the church, not of any denomination or pressure group. There is always the danger of seeking to abuse, or inadvertently abusing, scripture in this way, again making the Bible say what we want it to say.

Some simple ‘rules’ of thumb might help.

- Every reader needs to respect the form of the passage being studied. The form might be poem, prayer, an account of an event, a parable, a story, a sermon, a set of rules for a particular community, a vision, a drama, a testimony, a reflection Respecting the form can help prevent an abuse or at least a fruitless journey: the story of Jonah is a story with a powerful message, not a lesson in the behaviour of large fish and the possibility of surviving three days in the belly of a very large fish. A failure to recognise the form can easily prevent hearing the word of God within the passage.
- A second rule of thumb is to recognise that scripture needs scripture. The whole teaching of a major issue, say human sexuality, is rarely captured in just one text or passage or group of passages. Other passages are also needed in order to gain a fuller, more rounded view of what scripture is saying. There are usually several voices in scripture. It is better to seek this wider variety than just the few which support our presuppositions, even and perhaps especially when that endorses the official teaching of our church or group. Scripture must be freed to challenge the church; that is one of its primary functions.

- For example, a concern for the environment might lead a person to identify ‘justice for the earth’ as a significant strand in scripture. This could be done simply by identifying a selected number of passages which illustrate the significance of this theme.
- The Bible’s concern for the poor is another obvious theme. But let us remember that this has become obvious to us only because in fairly recent years this particular concern has been highlighted by those committed to this cause in today’s world: ‘God’s bias to the poor’ is a watch word which has arisen only out of using this lens.
- The position of women is another such contemporary concern which has uncovered the Bible’s treatment of women, positive and negative alike, in both Old and New Testament.

Sometimes a lens is used which brings no such concern or perspective to scripture. This might well lead to a different method of reading scripture: a fresh lens quickly gives way to a new method:

- For example, there is the lens of simply taking a biblical story and ‘releasing the story’ to speak for itself. Of course, adopting this lens does not free the reader from approaching scripture with certain presuppositions or perspectives. It is good to acknowledge that this simply is not possible.
- So ‘releasing the story’ is an attempt to free a well known story, say a story about Jesus or a parable/story which Jesus told, from a traditional interpretation. This might well free the story to speak in a fresh way. This after all is what the parables of Jesus are inviting the hearer/reader to do.
- A similar approach is adopted by speaking of a ‘go where it takes you approach’. The intention is to allow the Spirit to lead you into a fresh way of reading and understanding a passage, sometimes quite self-consciously free of church or traditional interpretation.

A more refined and focused lens, quite similar in its intention, is to be found in an 'apologetic' reading of scripture, that is, seeking some common ground with a culture or situation which enables the truth of your belief to be received.

- One illustration of this is the deliberate offering of the same selected passage from scripture to people in a wide variety of cultural situations: city, village, hearing-impaired communities, social workers, clergy. Such an experiment has shown, rather obviously, that the same passages, ruminated on in different cultural contexts, can yield a wide spectrum of interpretation and even evoke quite different responses.
- On a wider historical and cultural canvas, this is well known to be the case in the introducing the Bible to cultures as different as say China and Africa - each of which contains a very wide cultural range within itself.
- More specifically, indigenous peoples in South Africa found an apologetic approach a good way to uncover the strong liberation theme in scripture.

There is much overlap in this brief indication of some of the lenses through which scripture is viewed and the consequent methods which are employed. The real value of recognising different ways of describing our reading of scripture is that we listen to scripture with fresh expectation, especially as we become aware of the value of approaches different from our own.

Recognition that there is a permissible wide variety of approaches to reading scripture brings its dangers:

- One such is the danger of post-modernism: everyone's view is of equal value, not to be evaluated by anyone else; and you can legitimately take one lens for one passage and another lens for another, without seeking any coherence.

- There is also the associated danger of bringing to scripture too clear and pre-determined an understanding of a particular issue - and then simply claiming that this is the scriptural message.
- For example, in answer to the question 'whose land is it?', asked in relation to Palestine/Israel, it is possible to bring the answer to the text, or to confine one's study of scripture to those passages which seem to indicate a clear answer - just happening to echo the answer which is sought from a 'study' of scripture.
- A different example is seen in the lens adopted by every denomination or church grouping which simply employ this technique in order to justify its doctrine or stance: church leaders must be male; the authority of the church rests in a certain place or person or office.

When we use the Bible in this sort of way, we simply endorse rather than challenge our own opinion. It is very tempting to identify with an approach which in effect imposes on scripture a pre-determined answer. It is a temptation which needs identifying and acknowledging before it can be avoided and corrected. This is best done through a readiness to interrogate scripture.

At the same time, we have to recognise that every reader of the Bible cannot but help approach scripture from some perspective or other. But this can be balanced by respecting as well as challenging the lens used by other people or groups of people.

In this search for a proper way in which to read scripture, we can speak rather grandly of what is sometimes called a 'hermeneutical principle'. As already noted, here the lens metaphor begins to break down and we are moving towards speaking of different 'methods'. In a way, that is precisely what we are all seeking. However, it is possible to adopt a hermeneutical principle which recognises and embraces a variety of lenses through which to read scripture, explicitly rejecting the notion that there is only one way, one approach, to discerning the word of God.