

There are a lot of people, billions, actually, who are interested in the Bible — either because of their personal beliefs or because they realize its historical and cultural importance — but don't actually know what it's about. The broader interest makes a good deal of sense, and not just for committed Jews and Christians. After all, a good deal of the history of the West is tied closely to the Christian tradition rooted in the Bible. And how can one understand Western culture without it? Think about the history of art, music, and literature, for example. Still, most people really don't know the Bible. By that I don't mean they don't know what scholars have come to learn about the Bible (that virtually goes without saying!); I just mean they don't know what's actually in the Bible.

One reason, of course, is that most people don't read the Bible. But an even more important one is that those who do read the Bible do not do so in order to learn what it's about, *per se*. They read it for personal devotion, comfort, enlightenment, and guidance. That's all to the good as far as I'm concerned. But doing that usually means dropping down in one place or another — say the Psalms, or the Gospels of John, or one of Paul's letters — and reading a bit, thinking about what it might mean for one's faith or life, and then getting on with other things.

Again, I'm absolutely fine with that. The Bible is a gold mine of valuable words of comfort and help and reflection that can take people out of the hard, confusing, or seeming meaningless rest of their lives. All to the good!

But what if someone really wants to know what the Bible is *about*? On one level, of course, the Bible is not about a single thing at all, but lots of things, with lots of different views about those things. How is God portrayed in the Bible? Depends which bits you read. Christ? Salvation? Human life? Proper ways to worship? Moral responsibility? Meaning of life? Meaning of death? Reality of afterlife? It all depends what parts you read.

But still — what if one wants to have a sense for what the various parts of the Bible are about? What if someone just asks you: Hey, what *is* the book of Exodus about? Or Joshua? Or Jeremiah? Or Mark, Romans, or Hebrews? Would you be able to say? If not, how do you learn?

Most people think that textbooks are meant for classrooms and enrolled students, and, well, that's obviously right. But one excellent way to learn about a field you're interested in is by seeing what is taught in an introductory course on it in a college or university. And since most of us are not going to go back to school (think Rodney Dangerfield), the easiest way to do that is by reading a standard and widely accepted textbook in the field. (Another way is to get the Great Courses course on it! But the value of an actual book in your hands is that you can look something up easily — just use the index. It is much harder to do with a video or audio course. Much, much harder — as many of us can attest.

A good part of my professional life has involved writing textbooks. My first endeavor was in the mid-90s, when I thought, probably rightly, that I wasn't seasoned and experienced enough to do it. But I was asked by Oxford Press to produce a college-level textbook on the New Testament, I spent about three years doing nothing else (for my research), and it came out in 1997, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings.

For the book I wanted to try something different from what was already available in the flooded New Testament textbook market. I wanted to produce an introduction that wasn't principally about the theology of the New Testament or about the books of the New Testament from a strictly literary point of view (two approaches I had no problem with: they

just weren't what I thought was most interesting or important). My book would be a historical introduction, one that discussed the NT from the perspective of history, while, of course, dealing with both its theological and literary aspects.

The book ended up doing well, and now it is in its seventh edition (which just came out!). Later I decided to write a simpler version of it for professors who thought the full edition was a bit too much for their students; this Brief Introduction to the New Testament has also done well and is now going into its fifth edition (which I just finished). Then I wrote a college level textbook on the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation: The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction, now in its second edition. Half of that book is on the NT - so a far shorter treatment still. And now I'm proposing a very very much shorter graphic textbook on the NT. It keeps getting shorter and shorter!

I firmly believe that understanding the depth of a topic is really important. Really really important. And my longer regular textbook itself barely scratches the surface. But sometimes someone needs a brief introduction.

And so how brief can it be? WELL! Recently a blog member sent me a clever summary of the entire Bible that she says has floated around for a while. But I had never seen it. I think it's terrifically witty. I don't think I want to abbreviate a discussion of the Bible any more than this! I hope you enjoy it as much as I did:

God made.
Adam bit.
Noah arked.
Abraham split.
Jacob fooled.
Joseph ruled.
Bush talked.
Moses balked.
Pharaoh plagued.
People walked.
Sea divided.
Tablets guided.
Promise landed.
Saul freaked.
David peeked.
Prophets warned.
Jesus born.
God walked.
Love talked.
Anger crucified.
Hope died.
Love rose.
Spirit flamed.
Word spread.
God remained.



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