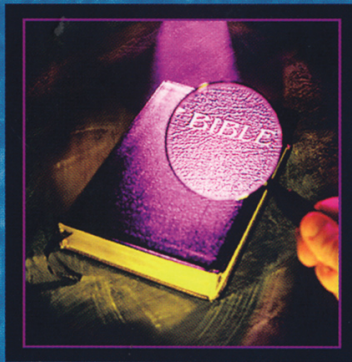


# Understanding Scripture

HOW TO READ AND  
STUDY THE BIBLE



A. Berkeley Mickelsen &  
Alvera M. Mickelsen

# UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE



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How to Read and  
Study the Bible

A. Berkeley Mickelsen  
and  
Alvera M. Mickelsen

 HENDRICKSON  
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# PREFACE

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ALMOST ALL OF THE BASIC TEACHINGS about the Christian faith depend not only on the Bible but also on how the Bible is interpreted. We all have some basic pattern of interpreting the Bible, whether or not we are aware of it.

For many years, the passion of my late husband, A. Berkeley Mickelsen, was to assist prospective pastors and other Christian leaders in developing sound principles of interpretation that would help them to understand the truths of the Bible and to be able to evaluate the many religious ideas that bombard us almost daily. Out of that intense interest came the book *Interpreting the Bible* (published in 1963 by Wm. B. Eerdmans). That volume has been used as a textbook in many seminaries, colleges, and departments of religion in universities around the world.

But we realized that more was needed. Laypeople, who did the majority of Bible teaching in our churches, also needed help in developing sound principles of interpretation. Out of that realization came the early versions of this book. It incorporates the same principles that appear in the textbook but with very little reference to Greek and Hebrew and more technical matters.

This book also has some material that my husband intended to include in the revision of his seminary textbook on which he was working at the time of his death. One issue he wanted to emphasize concerned how modern readers need to be able to distinguish between the highest norms and standards of the Bible and the regulations for people where they

were in the history and culture of Bible times. This distinction is important in interpreting many of the difficult passages.

This book also includes information about the process by which the Bible came into existence and the significance of this process in understanding the Bible today.

It is our hope and prayer that this small volume will help readers appreciate the vitality and significance of the Bible and its meaning for our lives today.

Alvera M. Mickelsen  
St. Paul, Minnesota

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# ABBREVIATIONS

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## **Old Testament**

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1-2 Sam	1-2 Samuel
1-2 Kgs	1-2 Kings
1-2 Chron	1-2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Esth	Esther
Job	Job
Psa/Pss	Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Song Sol	Song of Solomon
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel

Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

### **New Testament**

Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom	Romans
1-2 Cor	1-2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1-2 Thess	1-2 Thessalonians
1-2 Tim	1-2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1-2 Pet	1-2 Peter
1-2-3 John	1-2-3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation

### **Other Abbreviations**

AD	Anno Domini (Latin, in the year of Our Lord)
BC	before Christ
KJV	<i>King James Version</i>

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NIV	<i>New International Version</i>
NKJV	<i>New King James Version</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
p.(p.)	page(s)
v.(v.)	verse(s)



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# INTRODUCTION

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THIS BOOK HAS ONE PURPOSE—to help the reader learn how to discover what the Bible means. Why do we need a book to tell us that? Why not just read the Bible and see for ourselves what it says and means? We can and should do that. But because of some special reasons, we may need some help.

Most of the books we read have been written during our generation for the people of our day. The writers share much of their readers' cultural background and thought patterns. When this is not true, we find a book hard to read.

Most people who use this book will not have a reading background in Oriental philosophy. Books in Oriental philosophy are available—written by Orientals. But even though such books have been translated into our language, they are often hard to read because the total framework of thought is strange to us.

When a modern reader struggles through Greek mythology or Beowulf, or even Shakespeare, he or she must be constantly interpreting them. The words are the words of our language, but the setting is strange. The people think differently from us. They often have a different set of values. Even though we may recognize certain universal themes that are common to us in our day, we must make the transition from another culture and time to our own if the message is to be relevant.

The same is true of the Bible. It was written in a period roughly 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, in different languages, and for people whose thought patterns, customs, and ways of life

were very different from ours. The writers of the Bible were part of their generation just as we are part of our generation.

In studying the Bible, we are always confronted with these questions: What did this mean to the original readers? What does it mean to us today? In answering these questions, we are in the process of interpreting the Bible.

The Bible is by no means the only document that must be so studied to be understood. Volumes have been written interpreting Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Archaeologists who analyze the Dead Sea Scrolls must use every sound principle and skill at their command to determine what the writings mean.

It is especially important that we use great care in interpreting the Bible, for we are dealing with material of infinite worth—the very message and revelation of God. To the Christian, the Bible is the guidebook for all of life. It shows us the way to fellowship with God. It teaches what God expects of men and women. It is the one great record of God’s full revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Since fellowship with God is indispensable for a satisfying life, we dare not jeopardize it by a faulty reading or understanding of the Bible.

Incorrect interpretations of the Bible have had terrible consequences in days past. Erroneous interpretations have been used to support wretched causes, including racial and sexual discrimination, slavery, and particular views of science. One of the blackest chapters in the history of Christendom appeared in the seventeenth century when the great mathematician Galileo was tried and convicted by his church for propounding the Copernican theory that the earth revolved around the sun as against the “scriptural” view that the earth was the center of the universe.

Why have such things happened? Because honest, conscientious people *confused the message of God with their interpretation* of the words of the Bible. The two are not synonymous, and it takes honest persons to admit that some of our deep convictions (often held with the most intense emotion) are based on a particular view of certain verses of the Bible rather than on the basic message of God given in the Bible as God’s highest standard for us.

All Christians are constantly faced with the need to properly interpret the Bible. This volume will not give anyone a one-two-three formula guaranteed to bring “instant understanding” to difficult passages, but it will give some basic principles to guide our thinking and help us weigh the interpretations we hear and read.

### **How to Use This Book**

*Look up the Scripture references when the passage is not quoted in full.* Only then can you practice what you are learning while you read this volume. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture passages are quoted from the *New Revised Standard Version*. In some instances, particularly in the chapter on poetry in the Bible, a more literal translation from the original languages has been given. It is often wise to compare several translations of the passage you are studying.

*Think through questions at the end of the chapters and work out the exercises given there.* It gives you a chance to immediately apply and practice the principles discussed in that chapter. Only practice will give you the skill and the satisfaction that come with a deeper understanding of God’s Word.

*Study and read critically.* You will experience a new exhilaration as you learn to make your own judgments based on firm principles, and the Bible will become more alive and powerful in your life. Remember, you are intended to *understand* this remarkable book and to meet God in its pages.



## WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM BIBLE STUDY?

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THE BIBLE IS NOT A BOOK OF MAGIC. It does not give readers instant right answers to difficult questions nor fool-proof green or red lights on hard decisions they must make. But most people who make a practice of daily Bible study find that it helps them to have fellowship with God, renews them spiritually for the demands of the day, and provides moral guidance for daily conduct. Can any other activity be more rewarding?

Unfortunately, some people approach the Bible expecting results that the Bible does not promise or intend. Some expect every chapter to give inspiration and specific guidance for their own personal daily affairs. The Bible cannot be expected to help you plan your day, except in a very general way of arranging priorities.

A friend once complained that she was getting nothing personally helpful from her Bible reading and wondered what was wrong with her. We learned she was reading 2 Chronicles. We assured her that what she should expect from 2 Chronicles was mostly a history lesson regarding the Hebrew people during a particular historical period. She would be able to see how some kings used their power for good and some for bad; how the Israelites went through long periods of idol worship and occasionally returned to God. It was not highly inspirational material. We suggested that while she was reading in sections like 2 Chronicles, perhaps she should also read one

of the Psalms every day and a chapter in the Gospels, where she would be confronted with the life and teachings of Christ. She was relieved to discover that her failure to find deep inspiration in Chronicles was not an indication of spiritual coldness.

Some people read the Bible with other wrong expectations. They may read Revelation and Daniel hoping to find a blueprint of future history and to figure out if Russia or China or some other country is the anti-Christ or the beast of the future, and whether Christ will return this year or next! The Bible never pretends to answer such questions, regardless of how some “prophetic experts” try to make it do so.

Sometimes we want to escape from the responsibility of making personal decisions, so we try to find the answers in the Bible. The Bible will not, except in a very general way, tell us which of several jobs to seek or accept. It tells us to do whatever we do to the glory of God. If certain employment may demand exploiting other people, or selling something that is harmful to people, we can know that such acts do not glorify God. The Bible does give very clear guidance on some questions. The man or woman contemplating an extramarital affair need not read far to discover God’s condemnation of such activity. But in other areas the Bible has little or nothing to say. What does the Bible say about scuba diving? Nothing, of course. How then can Christians know whether it is God’s will for them to take up scuba diving? Such persons would have to look for broad biblical principles of action. The Bible teaches that believers are responsible to use their time and money wisely, to take care of their physical bodies, to give high priority to the welfare of their families.

One person might find that scuba diving takes too much time or costs too much for a limited budget. Others might find that the exhilaration that follows gives greater efficiency in their work for God and/or is a good activity to do with family members. Individual believers who honestly seek the mind of God in their lives must make such decisions after they “test everything; hold fast what is [morally] good” (1 Thess 5:21).

Unfortunately, there are people who say, “Lord, guide me in this matter,” then open the Bible and put their finger on a verse, expecting it to contain the answer to their ques-

tion. On rare occasions, God mercifully does give the needed guidance in spite of our foolishness, but that is not what we should expect from the Bible.

### **What Can and Should We Expect?**

What can we rightfully expect to gain from conscientious study of the Bible?

1. God speaks to us about love, truth, justice, righteousness, and the effects of sin in our own lives and in the world. These teachings permeate the Old Testament—even books like 2 Chronicles. They leap from the pages of the prophets—Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah—and from the Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament. Many of the teachings of the Old and New Testaments are concerned with social justice—our responsibility to help the poor, the sick, the downtrodden of the world. Bible study confronts us with such messages.

2. God is revealed to us in the history recorded in the Bible. We can trace God's choices in delivering the righteous; we see God using even unbelievers and pagans to accomplish the divine ultimate purposes. God's greatest act of self-revelation, of course, is in the coming of Jesus Christ to this world, to live as a human being, to suffer and die for our sins, to rise again in victory. In the Bible we meet God in a unique way.

3. We can expect spiritual growth as we study the Bible and *apply* what we learn. Spiritual growth is not automatic in Bible study. Some agnostics and some very wicked people know more about the Bible than many godly Christians. Both study and application are essential for spiritual growth.

4. We can expect a growing understanding of God's standards of right and wrong. We learn how much higher God's standards are than our own. For example, our whole society seems to be based on a power structure. The desire for power permeates marriages, families, churches, governments, businesses. Our idea of success is to be at the top of the power structure—to have the final say on matters that affect ourselves and other people. The greater our power, the greater our sense of success.

Yet one of Jesus' teachings that is repeated in all four Gospels lays down exactly the opposite principle as the stand-

ard for Christians: “You know how the Gentiles [unbelievers] exercise authority and lordship over you; but it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be first among you must be the servant of all” (Matt 20:25, 26, authors’ translation).

In the Bible we find that God condemns adultery, murder, stealing, etc. But God just as thoroughly condemns hatred, lust, gossip, love of money, and backbiting. For most of us, a study of the Bible makes us keenly aware of our own failures to live according to God’s standards.

5. We are confronted with Christ. A study of the New Testament shows us the person of Christ. We see his earthly life and teachings in the Gospels, and the interpretation of that life and teaching in the Epistles. Nowhere is the love of God so dramatically revealed as in the coming of Christ to give his life for us. A study of the Bible not only increases our sense of sin, but gives us the remedy for sin in the person of Christ. We can have joy and hope in our standing before God.

6. We can expect our Bible study to help us understand the problems of people in other times and to learn how God did or did not respond to their problems. In a sense, the Bible is a “case study” book of God’s dealings with people. We see God’s mercy, love, and judgment in action. The case study method is recognized in all areas of education as being one of the most effective ways of learning. We have had it in the Bible for thousands of years, although we may not have recognized it as such. We *can* learn from the experiences of others.

7. We can expect the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our study. The Holy Spirit has promised to “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13) and to enlighten our minds and our understanding if we ask for such enlightenment. Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our study is no substitute for honest, hard work, however. The Holy Spirit was given, not so that we could be lazy, but so that we might know God and God’s desires for our lives.

8. We can expect fellowship with God in our study. Bible study often becomes a genuine worship experience in which we are overwhelmed with the wonder of God and our desire to give praise. This is especially true in some parts of the Bible such as the Psalms, and in some of the hymns of praise in the writings of Paul.

9. We can learn more about ourselves and others. The Bible is an exceedingly honest, frank book in its details of the experiences of people. We find the prophet Jeremiah so discouraged that he says, “Cursed be the day on which I was born! . . . Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, ‘A child is born to you, a son’” (Jer 20:14, 15).

Job, too, was so disheartened by the things that happened to him that he wished he had never been born. “Why did you bring me forth from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me” (Job 10:18).

In the Bible we see saints falling into sin, and we also see sinners such as Cyrus, king of Persia, doing courageous acts of justice or kindness (see 2 Chron 36:23).

### **What Should We Beware Of?**

If our realistic expectations about Bible study are to be fulfilled, we should be aware of approaches or attitudes that work against our gaining all that we otherwise could.

1. We can be bound up in the “scientific method.” All of us are influenced by the philosophy of the world in which we live. Part of that philosophy involves the “scientific method” that assumes there is a cause-and-effect relationship in almost everything. In our twentieth-century thinking, everything that matters is supposed to be measurable in some way on some computer.

However, the principles of logic and research that may be applicable to the study of science, or even to the humanities, often are not applicable in the biblical sphere. But this is hard to accept because we are so accustomed to our cause-and-effect world view. Because of our mold of thinking, we tend to look for an explanation for every miracle and for every bit of predictive prophecy that was fulfilled. It is difficult for us to deal with biblical materials within the framework of the times in which they were written.

2. We can be more committed to the religious beliefs taught us in our childhood than we are to the actual teachings of the Bible. All of us are conditioned strongly by the religious beliefs (or lack of them) with which we grew up. Ideas planted early are hard to root out—whether they are good or bad. Actually, none of us comes to the Bible with a

truly open mind. Our preconceived ideas often condition the way we interpret the Bible.

Preconceived hang-ups are not new. Erroneous preconceived ideas kept the disciples from understanding Jesus' true ministry while he was on earth. The disciples, like most other Jews of their time, were convinced by their interpretation of the Old Testament that the Messiah would be an earthly king who would free them from the rule of Rome. They could not conceive of a suffering Savior, even though Jesus kept trying to tell them what was going to happen. These wrong interpretations of the purpose of the Messiah have kept the Jews from the time of Jesus until the present time from recognizing the messiahship of Jesus. The disciples themselves, after Jesus' death and resurrection, had to develop a new interpretation of the Old Testament. And it was difficult.

That is probably what Jesus was talking about when he met the two on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. He said to them, "Oh how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" And then, Luke says, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:25–27).

For us, too, Scriptures that have been interpreted incorrectly or incompletely in our own childhood may make it difficult for us to see what the Bible is actually saying on some important subjects. Our sense of loyalty to our early teaching can get in the way of our search for the meaning of God's Word.

For example, some people assume (because they have been told so) that later religious ideas are always more fully developed than earlier ones. If that is their assumption, they will find in the earlier writings ideas to prove that the God of the Hebrews is a tribal deity among the other tribal deities of other groups. They then look for evidence to show that ideas progressed from many gods to one supreme, universal God. Because they are looking for this, they tend to overlook anything that does not fit this pattern and to grab every shred of information that supports the idea. Yet the biblical emphasis is on the tendency of people to wander away from God—not to grope toward God!

We are all tempted to twist the Bible into the shape that pleases us and fits our preconceived ideas. Sometimes this can reach alarming proportions. For example, some have insisted that the Greek word *apostasia* (meaning apostasy), that is translated “falling away” in the *King James Version* and “rebellion” in the *New Revised Standard Version*, actually means “rapture” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: “for that day will not come unless the rebellion [*apostasia*] comes first, and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.” Making *apostasia* into *rapture* instead of *apostasy* is defended by a complicated appeal to etymology (root meaning of words). However, there is no support for any meaning other than “apostasy” or “rebellion” among the writers of Koine Greek during the period in which the New Testament was written. The effort to find “rapture” in that word is made to support a particular theological viewpoint.

3. Our fear of paradox may influence our thinking. In the Western world in which we grew up, highly influenced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, most of us are comfortable only with well-ordered systems of thought that give us tidy pegs on which to hang our ideas. Some statements in the Bible, however, seem to be paradoxical, and since our minds find it hard to tolerate paradox, we prefer to ignore one idea and exalt another when the two cannot easily be reconciled.

This is especially true when we become enamored with some minor element of the Bible and then try to see that element everywhere. We can turn almost any passage into support for our favorite theme, losing our sense of balance. Under the illusion of being exhaustive in our study, we find support for our idea in places where a normal reading of the passage (remembering the original readers’ situation) would give an entirely different meaning. Unfortunately, some such assumptions have been widely popularized. Most of us do not bother to look up the context of all the passages by which the writer or speaker supports his or her case. Thus we do not realize how many may have been taken out of context and misused.

4. We may practice “selective literalism”—the practice of selecting the commands or teachings we like and ignoring ones we do not like. Do we expound our belief that the Bible is “literally true” and then choose carefully which pas-

sages we say must be “taken literally because it is the Word of God”? All the Bible is the Word of God in the sense that it is exactly the material God intended us to have in this important book given to guide our spiritual destiny. However, few if any people actually believe and practice all the laws in the Old Testament or the New Testament. None of us carry doves to church to sacrifice on certain days of the year. We do not kill a red heifer or send a goat into the wilderness as a sin offering in keeping with Old Testament laws.

The same is true of the New Testament. First Timothy 2:9 says that women are not to adorn themselves with braided hair or gold or pearls. Yet almost every married woman wears a gold wedding ring. Braided hair is considered a very modest hairstyle today. In the same passage, men are told to pray “lifting holy hands” (1 Tim 2:8). This is not the usual procedure in most churches. How to deal properly with such passages will be discussed in chapter 2, “How Can We Know What the Bible Means?”

Unfortunately, many of us are so used to practicing selective literalism that we hardly know how to read the Bible without it. Selective literalism makes it hard for Christians to experience and practice genuine Christian unity. We all make different selections of what we want to practice “literally.”

Since all of the Bible is God’s Word to us, we need to study all of it carefully and humbly, looking for basic principles that should control our actions and that will give us a growing understanding of God and God’s people. That means we do not take “positions” until we have carefully examined all the evidence the Bible has to offer on a subject.

5. We may settle for easy answers to complex problems, even at the expense of the truth. All of us wish that our many problems had easy answers. Few of them do. The Bible rarely gives easy answers to the profound questions of life. We often have to live with unanswered questions or with half answers as we continue to study and learn more about God and the world in which we live. The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully.”

Many popular preachers and writers purport to have “God’s answer from the Bible” for our complex problems, and many Christians flock to these easy answers. Often, some-

times tragically, believers find that the easy answers do not work, and their disillusionment is severe. The Bible suggests honest answers, but not necessarily easy ones, to the complex problems of life.

### **How Should We Approach the Bible?**

If we are to gain what we can from Bible study, we need to approach it with the right attitudes. We need an openness to new ideas. If we approach all ideas with a “fortress mentality”—thinking that our main job is to defend the walls that make up the fortress of Christianity—we have very little space for growth. The Bible is a book of strength that has withstood all kinds of attacks during its 1,900-year history (nearly 2,300 years for the Old Testament). As in all other areas of study, scholars build upon and reevaluate the work of earlier scholars. We need not fear examining new ideas and evaluating them carefully in the light of *all* the teachings of the Bible, and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We need an attitude of willingness to meditate on what we are learning and to think through for ourselves how our learning can and should be applied in our own lives. To do this, it is usually helpful to share our ideas and interpretations with other Christians for discussion and evaluation. We learn from each other.

Bible study is trying work. It is also exhilarating and life-changing. Study of the Bible can enrich us as no other study can.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Do you think the doctrines you have been taught about the Bible regarding such things as water baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, predestination, or the second coming of Christ influence the way you interpret certain passages of the Bible?
  - a. Do you think this is good or bad?
  - b. How can we have an open mind in studying the Bible and still have convictions about what we believe?
2. In what ways do you think our “scientific attitude” that looks primarily at cause and effect might influence how we read these parts of the Bible:
  - a. The feeding of the five thousand (see Matt 14:13–21)?
  - b. John’s picture of the Holy City in Revelation 21:1–4, 10–27?