

Glossary of Terms / Better Bible Reading

Biblical Studies (Methods & Reading Strategies)

Apologetic – a defensive approach that argues for the truth or reliability of the Bible or Christian claims, often in response to critique.

Biblical Theology / (Overarching) Narrative approach – reads the Bible as a developing, connected storyline that shapes theology through the plot of Scripture rather than isolated prooftexts.

Corrupt text – a text whose wording has been altered through copying, editing, or translation, creating omissions, additions, or mistakes.

Counter-testimony – the idea that the Bible contains tensions and multiple voices, sometimes pushing against each other, which can be theologically meaningful rather than “problems” to deny or solve.

Criterion of Contextual Credibility – a “historical-Jesus” tool that asks whether a saying or event fits what is known about first-century Jewish Palestine.

Criterion of Dissimilarity – a “historical-Jesus” tool suggesting that stories contradicting early Judaism and early church interests may be less likely to be invented (e.g., John baptizing Jesus for the remission of sins; Jesus’s harsh words to the Syrophenician woman).

Criterion of Independent Attestation – a “historical-Jesus” tool arguing that material found in multiple independent sources is more likely to preserve earlier tradition.

Eisegesis – reading one’s own ideas into a text rather than drawing meaning from the text’s language and context.

Exegesis – careful interpretation that seeks to understand what a text likely meant in its historical and literary context.

Ethos - cultural understanding of how life is to be lived.

Fulfillment Citations – places where a New Testament writer quotes the Old Testament in an attempt to frame events in Jesus’ story as fulfilling Scripture.

Hermeneutic / Hermeneutics – the approach or “lens” used to interpret a text, including the assumptions and questions a reader brings.

Historical criticism – seeks to understand a text by reconstructing its historical origins, social setting, and likely earliest meanings.

Hybridity – the idea that Israel emerged largely from *within* Canaanite society—through cultural continuity, intermarriage, shared religion, and gradual differentiation—rather than through the violent replacement of a foreign population.

Intercalation – a literary technique (common in Mark) where one story is “sandwiched” inside another to shape meaning.

Intertextuality – how biblical texts echo, quote, allude to, or rework other texts, creating meaning through those relationships.

J.E.D.P. (or Documentary Hypothesis) - is the theory that the first five books of the Bible were compiled from four major source traditions—Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P)—written and edited over time by different communities and authors.

Modernism(ity) - reason, logic, science, universally applied truths. The Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution.

Narrative criticism – interprets a text as a coherent story and analyzes how plot, characters, and rhetoric shape meaning.

Postmodernism - an intellectual movement that challenges claims of universal truth or objective meaning, emphasizing instead the role of language, power, context, and interpretation in shaping what we understand as reality.

Pre-critical / Critical / Post-critical interpretations (Ricoeur) – a three-stage way to describe reading: Pre-Critical (blind trust, first naïveté); Critical (rejecting what cannot be historically proven); and Post-Critical (re-appropriation and appreciation for metaphor and meaning after critique, second naïveté).

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Prophetic Critique – the Bible’s internal tradition of challenging injustice, empty ritual, and oppressive power in the name of covenantal ethics (e.g., Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Malachi, Habakkuk – Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, James, Revelation).

Redaction criticism – examines how an author edited and arranged sources to communicate particular theological or communal concerns.

Reductionism (“flattening” the text) – forcing diverse biblical voices into a single uniform message and minimizing tension, ambiguity, or disagreement.

Retrojection – projecting later beliefs, institutions, or debates back into earlier biblical periods as if they were already present.

Standing under, behind, and against the text – three postures in reading Scripture: *under* (receive and learn), *behind* (analyze sources/history), and *against* (critique harm, ideology, or injustice in the text or its use).

Univocality (vs. Multivocality/Polyphonic) – Univocality treats the Bible as if it speaks with one consistent voice; “polyphonic” highlights multiple voices and perspectives within Scripture.

World BEHIND / OF / IN FRONT of the text – a way to map interpretation: Behind (“the window,” historical setting and origins), Of (“the picture,” the intertextual/literary/narrative world of the text), In Front (“the mirror,” how communities receive and apply the text ethically today).

Texts, Manuscripts & Canon

Anonymous writings – biblical books whose authors do not identify themselves and whose authorship remains uncertain (e.g., the Gospels).

Apocryphal – Jewish or Christian writings valued by some communities but not included in all biblical canons.

Canon – (measurement) collection of writings a faith community recognizes as Scripture - formed over a long historical process (**roughly 1,500 years**) involving reception history, theological arguments, and ecumenical councils - rather than a single moment of decision.

Canonization – the long historical process by which communities came to treat certain writings as Scripture and exclude others.

Codex – a bound book (with pages and a spine) as opposed to a scroll.

Codex Sinaiticus – a major fourth-century manuscript containing much of the Greek Bible (Old and New Testaments).

Codex Vaticanus – a major fourth-century manuscript preserving a large portion of the Greek Bible.

Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran) – ancient Jewish manuscripts (c. 3rd century BCE–1st century CE) that include biblical texts and other writings, illuminating early textual diversity.

Diversity of Isaiah - Isaiah is separated in three sections by three different authors (First Isaiah – Ch. 1–39 linked to the 8th-century BCE prophet associated with Jerusalem / Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah Ch. 40–55 – the Babylonian exile, 6th century BCE / Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah Ch. 56–66 the post-exilic period (late 6th–5th century BCE)).

Forged writings – texts that claim a famous author for authority even though that person likely did not write them (a debated phenomenon in antiquity).

Four Gospel Canon (tetramorph / Irenaeus 2nd c. CE) – the early Christian recognition of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the four authoritative Gospel accounts.

Hegemony - domination, colonization - of a ruling power over others.

Homonymous Writing - (book written by the same name as a famous person): Revelation of John (written by someone named John, but almost certainly not “that” John, the disciple of Jesus, John the Son of Zebedee).

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Masoretic Text – the traditional Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible preserved and standardized by Jewish scribes (the Masoretes).

Pastoral Epistles – 1–2 Timothy and Titus, letters traditionally attributed to Paul that many scholars see as later in style and context.

Paul's Letters – letters widely considered authentically Pauline: Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians.

Pentateuch (Torah) – the first five books of the Bible (Genesis–Deuteronomy), foundational to Jewish and Christian Scripture.

Pluriformity - multiple unfixed texts circulating that were translated into Greek that destabilize a texts consistency.

Pseudepigraphal / Pseudepigraphic – writings attributed to a well-known figure who likely did not author them.

Pseudonymous – books written under an assumed name, especially to claim the authority of a revered teacher.

Semitic languages - Afroasiatic language family (e.g., Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Amharic, Akkadian).

Septuagint (LXX) – the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, widely used in early Christianity.

Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called “synoptic” or “seen together” because they share much material and can be compared side-by-side.

Textus Receptus – a printed Greek New Testament tradition (from the early modern period) that influenced the King James Version and related translations.

Vulgate – the Latin Bible associated with Jerome, which became highly influential in Western Christianity.

Theology & Doctrine

Androcentric - emphasizing male / masculine interests.

Apocalypticist – someone who expects history to move toward a decisive act of divine intervention that ends the present age and inaugurates a new one.

Apocatastasis – “restoration,” often used for the hope that all creation (or all people) will ultimately be restored to God.

Apophatic – speaking about God by emphasizing what God is not, recognizing the limits of human language about the divine.

Apotheosis – the elevation of a human figure to divine or semi-divine status.

Arminianism – a Protestant tradition emphasizing human freedom to respond to grace and the belief that Christ's saving work is for all.

Atonement theology – teachings about how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection relate to reconciliation, forgiveness, and salvation.

Calvinism – a Reformed tradition emphasizing God's sovereignty in salvation (often summarized by “TULIP” in later theology: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints (til the end)).

Catholicity – the “universality” of the church across time and place, often tied to shared faith, worship, and communal life.

Christology – theological reflection on who Jesus is and what it means to call him “Christ,” including questions of divinity and humanity.

Christian Universalism – the view that God's saving purpose ultimately includes everyone, though Christians disagree about how and when this occurs.

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Colonialism - is a system in which one nation establishes control over another territory and its people, often exploiting resources and imposing its own political, economic, and cultural structures.

Cosmogony - is the study or account of the origin and creation of the universe, especially as described in mythological, religious, or philosophical systems.

Cosmology – study of the origin of the universe (e.g., - big bang).

Creation *ex nihilo* – creation out of, or from, nothing.

Creation *ex profundis* – Genesis account of creation coming a primordial watery abyss (*tehom*).

Criterion of Contextual Credibility - method in historical Jesus studies that evaluates whether a saying or action attributed to Jesus fits plausibly within the cultural, social, religious, and historical context of 1st-century Judaism and the broader Ancient Near East.

Criterion of Dissimilarity - is a method in historical Jesus research that considers a saying or action more likely authentic if it is unlike both early Jewish traditions and the beliefs of the early Christian church.

Criterion of Independent Attestation - similar stories found in independent traditions more likely to reflect ultimate source.

Deicide - is the act or accusation of killing a god or divine figure, historically associated in Christianity with the charge that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

Deism – the belief that God created the world but does not ordinarily intervene in it through miracles or ongoing revelation.

Dialectic - rejection of a comprehensible God, inherent tensions, paradoxes, and ambiguities.

Diastasis – distinction without separation (e.g., “*The Word was with God, and the Word was God*” John 1:1 - “*with God*” → suggests distinction (a kind of diastasis), “*was God*” → asserts unity).

Divine Reprobating Activity (D.R.A.) - where God seems to bypass free will, uses someone (e.g., “strengthens” Eglon/Moabite; Pharaoh; Abimelech) for a divine purpose, then destroys them.

Dominionism – a view that Christians should exercise strong influence or authority in society and government based on particular readings of biblical “dominion” themes.

Epistemology - theory of knowledge - juxtaposing justified belief from opinion. How do we know things.

Etiology- study of causes/origins behind religious belief/ritual.

Etymology - study of the origin of words.

Fideism – the view that religious truth is grasped primarily through faith rather than through reason or evidence.

Gradualism - slow change over time (assoc. mostly w/Civil Rights, Evolution).

Henotheism – belief in multiple gods while worship is focused on one supreme deity.

Hermeneutics - interpretation of the text / Bible.

Heterodoxy – beliefs or practices that differ from what a community labels orthodox or what is the “received orthodoxy.”

Historicist - believe in a historical Jesus.

Immanence- the spiritual world permeates the mundane. It is often contrasted with theories of transcendence, in which the divine is seen to be outside the material world.

Inerrant – the claim that Scripture is without error in everything it affirms; many scholars treat this as a later doctrinal stance rather than a property of ancient texts.

Infallible – the claim that Scripture (or church teaching) is trustworthy for its intended purpose, often distinguished from being error-free in every detail.

Inspired – the belief that Scripture is “God-breathed” in the sense that it is spiritually formative and a witness to divine-human encounter.

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Liberation Theology (Black, Queer, Womanist, Feminist, Latin) - theology that interprets religion through the experiences of oppressed people and emphasizes social justice, freedom, and liberation from systems of oppression.

Magisterium – the teaching authority of the Catholic Church (pope and bishops) in interpreting faith and Scripture.

Monotheism – belief in (and worship of) one God.

Mythicist - do not believe in a historical Jesus.

Orthodoxy – “right belief,” the set of teachings considered standard or authoritative within a tradition.

Orthopraxis – “right practice,” emphasizing faithful action and communal ethics rather than doctrinal precision alone.

Ontology - study of existence / beingness.

Pelagianism – a contested early Christian view emphasizing human moral ability and denying that humans inherit guilt from Adam in the way Augustine taught.

Philology - the study/criticism of language - oral and written - through historical sources.

Pneumatology – theological reflection on the presence, agency, action, and authority of the Holy Spirit.

Polemics – arguments or writings that strongly attack or defend a particular idea, doctrine, or position, often in a contentious or persuasive way (Gen. 1-11 primeval history attempting to dismantle ANE creation stories and histories; i.e., Yahweh - supreme over the Elohim).

Polytheism – belief in and worship of multiple gods.

Procrustean(ized) - enforcing uniformity or conformity without regard to natural variation or individuality.

Protestant Liberalism – (Erasmus, 16th c.; Friederich Schleiermacher; John Shelby Spong) – the idea that Christianity should adapt to cultural changes / less emphasis on miraculous events associated with the life of Jesus / more emphasis on his ethical teachings.

Sola Scriptura – a Protestant principle that Scripture is the supreme authority for Christian faith and practice.

Soteriology – the study of salvation (how people are saved and what salvation means).

Supersessionism (replacement theology) – the view that the church replaces Israel as God’s people, so that earlier covenantal promises are reinterpreted as fulfilled in the church.

Theism – belief in a personal God who creates and sustains the world and can act within it.

Theodicy – attempts to reconcile belief in a good God with the reality of evil and suffering.

Theopneustos – Greek for “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16), often used in discussions of inspiration.

Theosis – an Eastern Christian way of describing salvation as participation in God’s life (being “made like God” by grace).

Theology – the study of God and religious belief, including how communities talk about God, faith, and practice.

Triumphalism – a tendency to tell religious history as a story of victory and superiority, often minimizing harm done to others.

Triumphalist Storytelling - Genocidal “tales” utilized to create a narrative of victory.

Biblical History & Early Christianity

Apocatastasis - is a theological term meaning “restoration” or “return to an original condition,” derived from the Greek *apo-* (“back/again”) and *katastasis* (“state or condition”).

Arianism – an early Christian teaching that understood the Son as subordinate to the Father (created or “lesser” than God), later condemned as heresy.

The Arian Controversy – the major fourth-century debate about how to describe the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father, leading to creedal formulations.

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Council of Nicaea – a fourth-century council that addressed debates about Christ (including Arianism) and produced an early form of the Nicene Creed.

Council of Laodicea – a fourth-century regional council sometimes associated (in later tradition) with discussions about which books were read in churches.

Decalogue - is another name for the Ten Commandments, the foundational set of moral and religious laws given to Moses in the Hebrew Bible.

Deuteronomistic History - the theological narrative laid out in Deuteronomy, and then reflected in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings that interprets Israel's history as a cycle of obedience and disobedience, explaining national success or disaster as the result of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God.

Docetism – an early view that Jesus only seemed to have a real human body, often rejected because it undermines incarnation and suffering.

Empire / Imperial - refers to a political system in which a central authority rules over multiple peoples or territories, often through expansion, control, and cultural or administrative dominance. Usually referenced in the church's critique, or adaptation, of this system.

Epektasis – (Gregory of Nyssa) the idea that the soul's growth toward God is endless, a continual movement into divine life.

Hypostatic union – classical Christian language for Jesus Christ being fully divine and fully human in one person.

Marcion – (2nd c. CE) perceived two different Gods (promoted a sharply different view of God and Scripture, prompting wider debates about canon). He found the New Testament to be so different than OT that he thought the Christian god (through Jesus/Paul) was trying to save them from that Hebrew god.

Monarchic Period - is the period in ancient Israel's history when the Israelites were ruled by kings, beginning with Saul and continuing through the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Patristic period – the era of early Christian “church fathers” (roughly 2nd–5th centuries) when doctrine, worship, and biblical interpretation were being shaped.

Pelagius vs. Augustine – a debate about human nature, sin, and grace: Pelagius stressed moral ability, while Augustine emphasized inherited sin and the necessity of grace.

Ancient Near East, Comparative Religion & Background

Ancient Near East Comparanda (A.N.E.) – texts, myths, laws, rituals, artifacts or cultural practices from neighboring ancient civilizations (like Mesopotamia, Egypt, or Canaan) that scholars compare with the Bible to better understand its language, ideas, and historical context.

Code of Hammurabi - an ancient Babylonian law code issued by King Hammurabi that outlines legal principles and punishments, and it is often compared to biblical law collections in Exodus to study similarities in Ancient Near Eastern legal traditions.

Divine Council - is the biblical and Ancient Near Eastern concept of a heavenly assembly in which a supreme deity presides over subordinate divine beings or spiritual entities.

Enuma Elish - is a Babylonian creation story in which Marduk defeats chaos to create the world, and its themes help scholars contextualize biblical creation imagery in Genesis.

Epic of Gilgamesh - is an ancient Mesopotamian epic that follows the hero Gilgamesh's quest for meaning, friendship, and immortality, and contains themes that parallel parts of the Hebrew Bible, including a flood narrative.