

Sunday 14th September 2025 - How To Read The Bible: Who Wrote The Bible?

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

- [0 : 00] We're starting a new Sunday series this morning called How to Read the Bible.! And I appreciate that that's quite an ambitious title, really.
- Because we're not going to get the Bible well and truly cracked in a few short Sundays, especially knowing that millions of people have spent hundreds, even thousands of years, perhaps either being bored or bamboozled or blown away by this book that we call the Bible.
- So the purpose of this series over the next couple of months or so is not really to aim high with that, more to aim wide, shall we say.
- So we're going to be offering a range of ways and insights to hopefully help us engage with the Bible in order to deepen our understanding and experience of God through its pages.
- So that's why we've got a range of speakers coming up. Alongside me, there'll be Laura and Ian and Kim and Dave and Helen, with each of us bringing a slightly different angle, a slightly different experience, perhaps offering different ideas in response to this desire to learn how to read the Bible.
- [1 : 11] Indeed, the fact that we're even doing this series, I guess it acknowledges the fact that reading the Bible is not always simple or straightforward.
- Of course, we can read the Bible like most other books. You know, we can start on page one and go right through page by page to the end. And there's maybe some value in doing that, perhaps at least once in our lives, if we've never done that.
- But it's not the most common way or perhaps even the best way to read the Bible. So because of that, straight away, it's clear we're dealing with a very different kind of book when we look at the Bible.
- And I say book, but as you may well know, the Bible is not really just one book. Rather, it's a collection of 66 mini books.
- So our English word Bible comes from the Greek word biblia, which means books, plural. It's a library, basically.
- [2 : 16] Equally, you might have heard the Bible called the Holy Bible. The word holy meaning set apart. So the Bible is a collection of books set apart for a special divine purpose.
- And what is that purpose? Well, I'd say it's the key way by which we can understand the story of our relationship with God and God's relationship with us.
- And I put it like that because, as I've said before over the years, I think the Bible is a very human set of books written and put together by dozens of people from all sorts of backgrounds and over maybe, what, 1300 years or so.
- All with the expressed purpose of telling God's story through their own experience and understanding of what they believe God has revealed to them.

As such, because it's not, and it never describes itself as the word of God, only Jesus is described as the word of God in the Bible.

[3 : 32] I'd say the writers of the Bible sometimes get things wrong, or they misunderstand or misrepresent God. And that's to be expected, because the writers of the Bible were just as human as you and I are.

But God can still use those sometimes mistaken views to point us towards who God really is. Usually, I'd suggest, through the corrective lens of Jesus.

But sometimes, and indeed often, the writers get God beautifully right. And he express eternal, exquisite truths about God, truths on which we can build our faith.

And that is part of the heart of the Bible. Now, either way, I think, with all its flaws, but also with all its wisdom, the Bible is inspired by God.

God, very human book, yeah, but one through which God's inspiration, God's breath, God's spirit, brings his words to life in a uniquely life-giving, life-shaping way.

[4 : 47] And that inspiration, that's why I love the Bible. And that's why I'm keen we do this series, because as we learn together, hopefully a little bit better, how to read the Bible, I believe we'll increasingly encounter the presence of the good God, whose spirit speaks to us through its pages.

So just to let you know where we're going with this series. Next week, for example, we'll be looking at the importance of genre and the type of writing that we find in the Bible.

In future weeks, we'll look at the ways in which doubt and uncertainty can sometimes open up new doors of understanding for us. We're going to be exploring different ways of reflecting on Bible passages, drawing on ancient practices that you might have heard of, things like Ignatian reading and a practice called Lectio Divina.

And we'll reflect on the way the Bible can actually help us to read our own lives and perhaps make more sense of them in the world. We're going to see how our relationship with the Bible can shape our relationship with the world in an environmental, ecological way.

And we'll explore as well why there are four accounts, for example, of Jesus's life. You know, and what the uniqueness of each of those four Gospels can teach us.

[6 : 10] So all that's to come over the next couple of months, as Ian hinted, to kick off our consideration of how to read the Bible this morning. I thought we'd start today with a kind of obvious, but sometimes perhaps overlooked question, which is this, who wrote the Bible?

Who wrote the Bible? And I ask this question, because if we can delve into trying to find out who did indeed write the Bible and therefore how it came about, I suspect that will help us to know how best to read it as well.

So who wrote the Bible? Well, as I said, because it contains 66 books, the simple answer is to say, lots of people, lots of people wrote the Bible.

And I guess if we looked at the authorship of each of these individual books, we could be here for some time this morning, so we're not going to tackle them all. Instead, my suggestion for today is that we focus on the opening five books of the Bible.

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They make up a little set of their own, sometimes collectively called the Torah. So for Jewish folks, they have these as their scriptures.

[7 : 28] Torah means teaching. It's the Hebrew word. Or you might have heard these five books called the Pentateuch, which means five scrolls in Greek.

So they're seen as a distinct and different group of their own. And so exploring who wrote them and how they came about might hopefully give us a bit of a framework for how we might think about other books in the Bible.

So in terms of who wrote these famous five, it's not Eni Blyton, who wrote these famous five opening books of the Bible? Well, the traditional answer is that it was Moses.

These are called the books of Moses sometimes. The traditional thinking is that Moses wrote them all. Belief being that Moses, in the midst of leading the ancient Israelites to escape Egypt and wander through the wilderness for 40 years.

At the same time, people would say he was directly inspired by God to write these five books, which are some of the greatest literature the world has ever seen. And it's a nice idea.

[8 : 35] It's kind of heroic to think of this desert wanderer sitting down each night and writing a scroll or two. We might even want it to be true that one man wrote these five books.

But actually, it's an idea which falls down pretty quickly. So there are all sorts of things in these books that Moses couldn't have known about at the time that he was around.

There's lists of future kings, for example. Well, there are verses like this in the book of Numbers, which tells us that Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.

Which if you think about it, it's not exactly the description you'd expect the humblest man on earth to write about himself, is it? Or then perhaps most decisively, at the end of Deuteronomy, we read this, that Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in Moab.

And again, Moses was a special man, but it's a stretch to think that he could write about his own death. Now, some Bible scholars suggested that these kind of obvious anomalies, well, they perhaps might have been added in by a different writer at a later date to the rest of what Moses might already have written.

[9 : 55] But when these same scholars took a closer look at the original texts in their original language of Hebrew, they realized that these verses about Moses, well, they were written in the same style as other parts of the books that they imagined were written by Moses.

What's more, as they looked more closely at the original texts, these scholars also realized that still other parts of these books had a very different style with a different kind of vocabulary, suggesting that not only were these books not written by Moses, but that there were, in fact, multiple different authors who'd each written different parts.

And so to cut a long story of biblical studies short, scholars basically concluded that due to the varied styles of writing and language used, they reckon there are at least four different authors or sources of these five books of the Torah, the Pentateuch, these first five books of the Bible.

Now, so far, so moderately interesting, perhaps. I appreciate it's a little bit like a sort of English class at school in that respect.

But what I think is fascinating is the different ways in which each of these different authors or sources described and understood God.

[11 : 35] So two of them, remember there's perhaps at least four sources, four writers of these books. Two of them were in the habit of calling God by a word we've come across before, which was this in Hebrew, Elohim.

That's the word they use to describe God. And it's a title, an ancient Hebrew way of describing God in a very big cosmic kind of way, Elohim.

That's two writers used that. Whereas the other two writers, they described God as Yahweh, not a title, but a name by which God introduced himself to Moses when he appeared to him at the burning bush.

And because it's a name, it's a much more personal way of understanding and relating to God. Now we've looked at this before, but these differences, they're particularly clear in the two stories of creation that are found at the beginning of Genesis.

So in Genesis 1, you know, that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, six days of creation story. God is consistently called Elohim, which makes sense, I guess, because we're talking about the big cosmic picture of creation, a big cosmic God.

[12:57] But then in the next chapter, Genesis chapter 2, when God is far more down to earth, you know, talking with Adam and Eve and described as walking in the garden of Eden and so on.

God is described by his name, Yahweh. So in Genesis 1, Genesis 2, first two chapters of the Bible, you've got two separate stories standing alone in their own right.

One in Genesis chapter 1 and one in Genesis chapter 2. But the fact that they're written by two different authors helps to explain perhaps the discrepancies between them, such as the fact that humans are created last in Genesis 1, but before all the other animals in Genesis 2.

It's quite a difference in the order that perhaps creation to these writers happened. Which got people thinking, because then they thought, okay, these scholars, what they read on from there, and they soon noticed that when they came to the story just a few chapters later of Noah's Ark and the flood, again, in the early chapters of Genesis, these two ways of describing God were not separate, as they were in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

They were, in fact, interwoven throughout the story. So, in one sentence, God is called Elohim in Hebrew, whereas in the next sentence, he's called Yahweh.

[14:38] And then they go back to Elohim, back to Yahweh, and so on, and so on. Two sources, two authors, two versions of the same event, but they're combined, mashed up into one story.

And in some places, there are some obvious problems with this mashup. So, the writer who describes God as Elohim, for example, states in one verse that pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the Ark.

You know, it's the classic, the animals went in two by two kind of version of the story. That's the writer who refers to God as Elohim. But the writer who refers to God as Yahweh has God give this command to Noah.

Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth.

There's quite a difference. How do you reconcile that? Is it pairs of animals? Or are there seven pairs? Of animals. Can't both be true, it seems.

[16:06] Difficult to reconcile, though, with that. And in fact, you can even buy a version of the Bible, like this one, which has these different stories, these different sources, highlighted in different colors and different fonts.

So you get things like this. I don't know if you can see this here. This is a copy of the page. Some of the text is in blue, and some of it is in green, with the idea being that these two different colors represent the two different writers whose words have been combined to make one long story.

And a fascinating thing, for me at least, is if you separate these out, and you just read, say, the green words, or the blue words, they make complete sense as stand-alone stories.

But, as with the different creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, most interestingly, perhaps, is the different ways in which these two different authors portray God in this flood story.

So for the Elohim writer, God comes across as a pretty detached, far away kind of being, cold even, we might say.

- [17 : 26] A deity who plans everything in advance, who gives commands, but who doesn't exhibit any human-like feelings at all. In contrast, the Yahweh writer, they depict God as having loads of human-like feelings, describing God as maybe displaying grief, or regret, or anger, or compassion, perhaps sometimes changing his mind.

Even at one stage, they describe Yahweh as smelling the fragrance of the offerings that came down, came up to God from earth. God had nostrils to this writer.

But, I think aside from maybe being an interesting exercise or not, I guess with all this, so what? So what? So what? Why does it matter to us and to our faith and to how we read the Bible or think of the Bible as having different writers with these intertwined different parts of a story?

Well, a few thoughts on this, I think. Because for a start, I think it gives us complete permission to be confused by the Bible.

Because some passages and stories are a blatant combination of different authors written from different perspectives and often with completely different ideas about just who God is.

- [18 : 52] That means there are inconsistencies that sometimes just cannot be reconciled. So often, if we read it and we think, I don't get this, it's not us, it's the Bible, it's not your fault, it's the fact that the Bible is confusing in places.

Secondly, though, if you follow the writings of these different authors or sources through the rest of these five books that start the Bible, actually a much clearer picture of who they each think God is emerges.

So, for example, as you read one particular source, one author's part in these books through, not once, for example, does the author who calls God Elohim in the first part of Genesis use words to describe God like merciful.

They just don't see God as being merciful. And neither do they ever use words like grace or faithfulness or repent. Now, this writer, we don't know their name, but scholars reckon, they were probably priests from the time when the temple sacrificial system was in full flow.

And that means that for him, and it would have been him because all priests at the time were male, God was this kind of unreachable, transcendent, cosmic deity who could only be accessed by sticking to the rules.

- [20 : 25] So this priestly writer, the one who calls God Elohim, they're a stickler for the rules. They're a stickler for procedure. And their understanding of God was shaped by their belief that good behavior and holiness were all important.

Nothing else was more important. And that's not to say there isn't perhaps lots we can learn from this writer and their approach about God. You know, they talk about God in kind of awesome ways.

Perhaps the importance of reverence and worship and so on. But if we wanted a down-to-earth God, that writer's version of God may not be the one that we find it easiest to relate to.

But if we compare this Elohim writer's approach with the other writer who describes God as Yahweh, our creation and in the flood story, again, we don't know their name.

But they see God in a completely different light. Indeed, for them, God not only has a name and is someone we can relate to, but God expresses emotions.

[21 : 34] God wants to be intimately involved in our lives. What's more, as the book unfolds or the books unfold, this writer is much more concerned with the stories of women and is sensitive and sympathetic to them, such as the story of Tamar, which comes from this same writer.

In fact, some scholars even suggest that this Yahweh writer may well have been a woman, which would certainly be in line with the more radical, revolutionary nature of the compassionate, loving God that they're keen to reveal.

But then thirdly, I think what's also interesting is that those editors who eventually put the Bible together, they often seem content or even deliberately intended, despite the differences, to weave, or you might say cut and paste these days, different sources and authors together into one continuous story.

As I said, it's thought there are at least four, maybe five, six, even seven different sources that have been combined to make up these first five books of the Bible. all. But the fact that when we read it, we might not always see the joins, if you like, is testament to the skill of these editors.

Who were these editors? Well, it's reckoned the main one was this guy, a guy called Ezra, thinking he's responsible for putting these first five books together. He's evidently an incredibly gifted and clever man.

[23 : 16] But why? Why did Ezra as editor often combine different stories together like this? After all, we see in the New Testament, and we'll look at it in future weeks, four very separate accounts of Jesus' life.

You don't combine all Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together into one big story. They're left separate. So why might Ezra have thought, actually, no, I'm going to combine them all in the first five books of the Bible, stories about God and us instead?

Well, we can't know for sure what his motivation was, but it seems to me that this is one of the ways, this woven nature of the Bible, that we can encounter the inspiration, if you like, the breath, the spirit of God in the pages of the Bible breathing life into us as we explore and unpack and at times wrestle with the stories and portrayals of God that we encounter.

You see, by including and mixing up such different understandings of God in his earliest books of the Bible, I think we're being encouraged to read these stories and make up our own mind about who we think God is.

We're not being spoon-fed one kind of understanding. Rather, we're encouraged to work out who we think God truly is. Is God more Elohim for us, cosmic, transcendent, or is God more Yahweh for us, naming, personal, down to earth, with us?

[24 : 57] Ultimately, I think, although Ezra and co couldn't have known this, because of this slightly confusing thing, the Bible as a whole points to and invites us to use Jesus as our benchmark, as our guide.

So we're encouraged to ask which aspects of God's character, as described in the Old Testament, are consistent with who we see Jesus being, and which aspects might be better off being left in the past with their writers.

That's the way I'd suggest God's breath, God's inspiration is present, breathing new life into these old stories, so that we might know more deeply through the Spirit and by the example of Jesus, what to embrace in the Bible and what to leave behind.

And indeed there's one thing I can leave you with, which I hope will be a kind of running theme throughout this whole series. I think it would be this, that when we read the Bible, when we open it up, that we don't start from a position of certainty, but of curiosity.

It's the importance of having an open and inquisitive mind. You know, the Bible, the Holy Bible, is a gift from God, but it's not a Botox Bible with all its flaws and wrinkles filled out.

[26 : 30] Instead, it's an ancient Bible, diverse, ambiguous, living, breathing book that is more interesting, more inspiring, and ultimately more beautiful precisely because its differences haven't been smoothed out.

And I'll finish for now with this, because as Nick Page says in an excellent book he wrote called *The Badly Behaved Bible*, he says this, he says, we often find theology in the Bible that is either wrong or incomplete because the people in the Bible are still trying to work things out.

And I like that because I think the same is true for us. We are still trying to work things out about God. I know I certainly am. So may God be with us and speaking to us as we try to work out, with the help of the Holy Spirit, how to read the Bible.

Amen. Amen.