

Part 3 Hebrews, Jews, and Christians

Chapter 3.00 Introduction

This part of the book appears only online as of early 2012.

This part of the book is “Bible studies”. It gives only as much as is needed to prepare you for reading the Bible yourself and for reading commentary on the Bible. It does not offer new interpretations, and it does not pick out the definitive interpretation from among interpretations. I give you the background, basics, and a few major interpretations, and then I guess about which is the best interpretation.

Most people turn green at the phrase “read the Bible for yourself”. It is not really hard reading, but it can be boring. Even so, if you want to feel easier with your religious feelings, sooner or later you have to read much of the Tanakh (Old Testament) and all the New Testament. You can skip a lot of the genealogies and really boring stuff. What remains is not that long or that hard and often it is really fun.

Holding the Tanakh in your hand is like looking at a forest from a helicopter. At first the Tanakh seems like one continuous undifferentiated canopy of green archaic language. Then you realize it only looks all the same because it is a big place with a lot of variations and a lot of resident species that interact. It is a busy interesting place with conflict, heroism, sex, war, intrigue, magic, and drama. Eventually, like a field biologist, you have to get down into the forest and meet the characters individually.

Looking at the New Testament is like gazing at wispy clouds on a slightly windy day. There is enough so that you can see just about whatever you want but not enough to see anything for sure. Different people see different things in the same patch of sky. It never sticks around long enough for you and your friends to agree for sure, “Oh, that is a whale”. You can agree for a while, but soon enough the whale has become a rabbit or a deer or the rings of Saturn. Usually people see what they want to see. Often they see an idealized version of themselves.

The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) offers an outstanding translation of the Tanakh. You can find the JPS on the Internet. Oxford University Press does the actual publishing. The JPS translation comes in several “packages” at various prices. Get a version with commentary and notes. I have the Jewish Study Bible. A good easy way to get the basics of Jewish history is a children’s Bible. The JPS offers an illustrated Torah (first five books of the Tanakh) by Michal Meron that is excellent for the family. “The Illustrated Hebrew Bible: 75 Stories”, by Ellen Frankel, tells you most of what you need in simple terms and with some great art borrowed from modern masters. Many Christian groups offer versions of the Old Testament for children but there are so many I cannot recommend anything. You can find them in thrift stores cheaply. If you have read and enjoyed the Torah, go to the Prophets and other Writings in the Tanakh. Many chapters, such as “Jonah”, are usually short, simple, and not laden with historical details. Some of it is beautiful poetry.

You can use whatever translation of the New Testament you have. The "King James" Version (Standard Version) is beautiful and is a pretty accurate translation of the text on which it is based; but it was based on a flawed Greek text and so is not fully reliable. Many people find the dated language hard to read but I like it. The Revised Standard Version (New King James Version) is better. I try to use it as my source of quotes when I can because most people have access to it now. I prefer the New English Bible but it is not widely available. Recent versions such as the New International seem fine to me, but I am not an expert. The New Testament is only about 200 pages long. If you are reading only to understand, and not to win an argument, you can read the entire New Testament in a few hours spread over one week.

More has been written about the few pages of the New Testament than on any other single topic. The section in the library with New Testament commentary is the largest section of non-fiction in the library. It is discouraging. The bibliography at the end of this book gives some tips on what to read.

If you have not read the Bible before, then you are in a bit of a bind. Ideally, you should read the whole Bible a couple of times, then read commentary, then go back and read the whole Bible again, and then read more commentary, and then read parts of the Bible again when you need to know something in more detail. Yet nobody reads back-and-forth like that but divinity students and some really devout people. Do what you can.

The next three chapters in this part of the book are on the Hebrews, especially as the story of the Hebrews is relevant to Jesus. The remaining chapters are on Jesus and the New Testament.