

Bible-plus-classics reading plan

This document has some general info, followed by a session-by-session syllabus that tells you what to read each week, along with some questions for discussion.

Group vision

The idea is to have a reading group where we'll discuss excerpts from the Bible and other great classic texts. It's a bit like a Bible study, but it's not just for religious people – beliefs not required! It's also a bit like a book club, although we'll be more structured and sequential with our selections.

A major audience I have in mind is atheists and agnostics who are curious about the Bible, whether it's for reasons of cultural literacy, or to find some meaning in it. Believers and ex-believers are welcome too, from all denominations or none. Part of our aim is to share different ideas about what the Holy Bible means across our heterogenous community, and see if we can build a shared map of the text.

Each session will pair some Bible passages with readings from the wider Western canon. The non-biblical readings will vary between scholarship, fiction, philosophy, and poetry, with a smattering of other media such as music, video, and visual art.

Session structure and time commitment

The sessions will be fairly informal, and you can come or skip as you please, although Bible beginners will benefit from continuous attendance at the start. Starting out, we'll meet once every 2 weeks.

Each session will run for about 2 hours, with a short break near the middle. The bulk of the time will be a group discussion. The first few sessions will also include short background lectures, and generally, we'll do a spoken reading of some of the Bible passages.

Each session will demand about **60-90 minutes of assigned reading upfront**, with the major passages for discussion highlighted, in case you find yourself strapped for time. You will also be asked to do **about an hour of follow-up readings and exercises** afterward, at least for the intro sessions.

Intro series: An intro to the Bible and its echoes

The first five seven sessions are a ground-up introduction to the Bible. What's in the Bible? How is it structured? How to read it?

We'll also get a taste of authors like Rene Girard, T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus, W.B. Yeats, and William Shakespeare. During our intro series, these non-biblical readings will often play a more supporting role; later, the outside classics will be treated more equally, sometimes taking center stage.

Although this is all beginner-friendly, **I'm hoping that some knowledgeable people will show up to the intro sessions** from whatever religious and/or scholarly background, to supplement my layman's understanding.

Required materials

I strongly recommend you own a physical Bible that you can leaf through. It's a tactile experience. We will mainly use the King James Version (KJV) in our materials and discussions.¹

You will also need to **locate or borrow a copy of [I See Satan Fall Like Lightning](#) by René Girard (2001)**, and it might make sense to just buy it. Of our non-biblical texts for the intro series, this short book is the main one still under copyright, and we'll be using it twice: in Session 1, and again in Session 6.

The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus (1942) is also under copyright, but pdf translations are widely available that will cover our excerpts. It is therefore less important to purchase that one, unless you anticipate wanting to read the rest on your own.

Series outline

Here's a brief synopsis. See individual session descriptions below for full detail, including the exact selections we'll read from each book or source.

Session 1: Teachings

- **Wednesday, March 4**
- Exodus (OT Torah)
- Luke (NT Gospel)
- Girard (Comparative mythology)

¹ This classic translation is apropos because we will often take a literary perspective, and because we are curious about the Bible's resonance throughout history. You're welcome to do the readings in whatever version you please, and to bring your edition along to the sessions for comparison.

Session 2: Stories

- **Wednesday, March 18**
- 1,2 Samuel (OT History)
- Acts (NT)
- Cohen, Eliot (Modern song and poem)

Session 3: Meaning

- **Wednesday, April 1**
- Ecclesiastes (OT Wisdom Literature)
- Romans (NT Epistles)
- Camus (Continental philosophy)

Session 4: Apocalypse, then and now

- **Wednesday, April 15**
- Isaiah (OT Prophets)
- Revelation (NT)
- Agnus Dei (liturgical music)
- Butler (modern scientific apocalypticism)

Session 5: Dreams and drama

- **Wednesday, April 29**
- Joseph story (OT Genesis)
- Matthew (NT Gospel)
- Texts from Sophocles, Freud, Jung

Session 6: Sacrifice and mercy

- **Wednesday, May 13**
- Joseph story cont'd (OT Genesis)
- Mark (NT Gospel)
- Girard again, later chapters
- *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare "comedy")

Session 7: Truth

- **Wednesday, May 27**
- ...a special surprise ending...

Session 1: Teachings

Wednesday, March 4

Selections from: Exodus (OT Torah) | Luke (NT Gospel) | Girard (Comparative mythology)

Here in our first meetup, we'll introduce an 8-part model of the Bible, which will help us structure these introductory sessions. We'll be asking: What is the Bible? How do different people relate to it? What do we want this "Bible-plus-classics reading group" series to look like?

We'll introduce the Old and New Testaments, subdividing each into four parts. We'll consider some fraught questions about how Christians repurpose the Hebrew Bible into what they call the "Old Testament".

In each testament, we'll zoom in on an early chapter. We will meet Moses the lawgiver and Jesus the teacher, and we'll see them in action. We'll discuss how we should grapple with these verses today.

We'll also consider what a 20th-century scholar named René Girard had to say about these passages, and how he used Bible analysis to develop his own ideas about "mimesis".

Texts

Read these beforehand. The '*' indicates a principal text for our discussion.

The full reading should take you about an hour, or perhaps a bit more.

Exodus

Exodus is the second book of the Torah and of the OT. It tells the story of Moses, who leads the Israelites out of servitude in Egypt towards the "promised land". Along the journey, Moses receives God's law directly from the source Himself, and he transmits it to the people.

- Exodus 3 (Burning bush)
 - "Exodus 3" is a shorthand that means "Book of Exodus, Chapter 3".
- Exodus 4:1-5
 - Shorthand that means, "Exodus, Chapter 4, verses 1 through 5". We're continuing on into the next chapter.
 - The chapter divisions of the Bible are somewhat arbitrary, and were largely imposed by medieval scholars. Sometimes the divisions make sense, but sometimes they break up the flow.
- ***Exodus 20 (Decalogue / "Ten Commandments")**

Also have a glance at:

- Deuteronomy 5
 - Two versions, both in the Torah! What's up with that?

Also look up these two other Torah verses:

- Leviticus 19:18
- ***Deuteronomy 6:4-9**
 - This is called "The Shema".
 - It's recited by observant Jewish groups:
 - Twice daily in prayer (morning and evening)
 - Before sleep
 - Traditionally, as one's final words before deathly (if possible)

Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Torah. By the later books, the Torah is doing less story, and mostly just laws. Leviticus, the third book, is similarly filled with laws.

Gospel of Luke

Luke is the 3rd of 4 "Gospel" books that appear at the start of the New Testament. Each gospel gives a slightly different account of Jesus's life and teachings.

- ***Luke 10**
 - This chapter is a neat microcosm of the sort of material, themes, and tone you'll find in the gospels. It also has several famous bits – see if you can spot them!
 - Q: How does Jesus teach?
 - Q: Do you see anything here that echoes our Torah verses?

René Girard

- ****I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, Chapter 1 "Scandal must come"***

Rene Girard (1923 - 2015) was a French scholar of comparative religion and mythology who converted to Catholicism in 1959.

ISSFLL is the most accessible statement of his worldview. In the book, Girard compares biblical passages against pagan stories, which helps him lay out his own famous ideas about "mimetic desire" and scapegoats. The book's title comes straight from Luke 10:18 in today's NT reading.

Girard's ideas are trendy in some tech-adjacent spaces, in part thanks to his influence on Peter Thiel, whom he taught at Stanford. Here, we are looking at Girard's ideas in their own right, and we're taking this book as an example of creative biblical interpretation.

In the selected chapter, Girard closely examines the Ten Commandments. Some questions to ask:

- Which of Girard's points are best supported by the Bible text? Or, by concrete reality?
- Where does he go more out on a limb?
- What questions will he need to answer in the rest of the book? What points still need clarification?
- A college dropout named Mark is building a social network website where elite college students can browse around and see their peer's interests, as well as hints of their glamorous lives. Should you invest?

(We will return to *ISSFLL* in Session 6, where we'll discuss some of the later chapters.)

Session notes

We started out with a group brainstorm on the question, "What is the Bible?", and compared some different perspectives, before diving into the texts.

The 8-part model of the Bible

Our working map for the early sessions:

- Old Testament – i.e. Hebrew Bible ("Tanakh") in a different order
 - Torah / Pentateuch
 - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
 - History
 - Joshua through Esther
 - Wisdom literature
 - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
 - Prophets
 - Isaiah through Malachi
- New Testament
 - Gospels
 - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
 - Acts of the Apostles (just one book)
 - Epistles
 - Romans through Jude
 - Paul's letters are named after the recipient church, like "Romans". Other apostle's letters are named after the sender, like "Jude".
 - Revelation (just one book)

Fun facts about the deuterocanon / Apocrypha

There's also a ninth part of sorts, consisting of mostly-Hebrew* writings that are not included in the Tanakh, but which some Christian groups treat as canonical and insert into various points in the Old Testament. These "deutero-canonical" writings include Maccabees (which tells the story of Hanukkah and the successful revolt against the Seleucids circa 167 BC); a couple of extra Wisdom Literature books; some insertions and extensions to various books of the Tanakh; and so on.

The deutero-canonical books were canonized into the Catholic Old Testament, but Martin Luther and most Protestants reject their scriptural status, classifying them as Apocrypha. Thus, the Protestant Old Testament is simply the Tanakh in a different order.

To confuse matters further, the Eastern Orthodox and the Ethiopian churches each include their own additional Hebrew writings, on top of the Catholic deuterocanon.

*Technically, some of the deuterocanon seems to have been first written down in Greek, as additions to the Hebrew versions of the books of Esther and Daniel. Still, all of the deuterocanon is situated within the Old Testament.

Follow-up reading and exercises

We'll discuss these briefly at the start of the next session, and take any questions. (But also remember to do next week's text readings, too!)

Ideally, **do the follow-ups in the days immediately following the session**. By contrast, you can do the readings for the next session closer to the time so that it's fresh on your mind.

As much as you can, **do these follow-ups using a physical copy of the Bible**, especially for this week, which is about finding your way around the text. Our goal is to inspect how the entire volume fits together, and to get a feel for where some famous parts are located. Leafing around in the Bible is a tactile experience.

Sinews of the Bible

Read these short transition passages to see how the Bible fits together.

Beginnings:

- Genesis 1:1-5
 - Maybe: tk add an audio clip of someone reading the first sentence in Hebrew
- John 1:1-5

- John is the last of the four gospels, both in canon order and in its likely date of composition. It is the least like the others: it reads as more mystical, deep, and theologically developed.
- Maybe: audio clip of someone reading first sentence in Greek
- Compare the start of John to the start of Matthew, i.e. the start of the NT
 - Glance at the first chapter of Matthew. What's happening?
 - Matthew is the most concerned with establishing continuity with Judaism. That is probably why his Gospel is placed first, even though Mark's was written down earlier.

Relation of NT to OT:

- Matthew 5:17-18
- A common reference point on how Christians should view the OT
- Ripe for many interpretations, and many sermons.
- What's your immediate reaction?

Torah flowing into "History" (or "Prophets"):

- Deuteronomy 34 (Moses dies, Joshua takes over)
- Joshua 1:1-9 (God commissions Joshua)
- Joshua goes on to begin the (re-?)conquest of Canaan, starting with the ancient walled city of Jericho.
- This smooth transition is shared by Jewish and Christian order

A pretty smooth Christian splice:

- 2 Chronicles 36:11-23
 - This is how the Tanakh ends. It's not the last part of the story chronologically, but Chronicles comes at the end of "Writings", so it's the end of the Hebrew Bible.
- Ezra 1:1-7

The return of Elijah:

- Jewish prophets promised a Messiah – but first, the prophet Elijah will return
 - Isaiah 40:3
 - Malachi 3:1
 - Malachi 4:5-6
- The gospels start by introducing an Elijah-like character.
 - Mark 1:1-8
 - Mark's Gospel was probably written down first, and it gets right to the point.
 - Matthew 3:1-6
 - Note: In the New Testament of the KJV, Isaiah is written "Esaias"
 - Luke 3:4-6
 - John 1:6-34
 - To add to the confusion, Elijah is written as "Elias"

- Under questioning from authorities, JTB denies being either Elijah or the “Christ” (i.e., the Messiah)
- Q: Does your bible edition use ALL CAPS when the NT quotes the OT?
- Q: Which Ivy League university draws its motto from a passage here? (Hint: it’s rural.)

Locating the highlights

This is a sort of scavenger hunt for some of the famous parts. Continue to flip around in your physical Bible to locate each of these highlight passages. (I’ve jumbled the order up, for a bit of a challenge)

Which of our 8 sections does each passage fall under? (See the Session notes above)

As you proceed, you can read as much as you like from each highlight passage. Is it familiar? Is it different than you had imagined?

Answer the optional questions, if you like. Some of them are about great books and/or pop culture. Some might require a bit of Bible literacy. You can look up the answers to check your guesses.

“The Lord is my shepherd...” (Psalm 23)

- Q: Who is attributed as writing this?

“Love is patient...” (1 Corinthians 13)

- Popular text to read at weddings
- Q: Who is attributed as writing this letter? To whom? Why?

Jonah and the whale (Jonah 1-2)

- Q: Can you guess which “Great American Novel” has a minister character who delivers a sermon about this story? We might discuss it in a later session, after the intro series.

John 3:16

- The core of Christian theology in one single verse
- Q: Search the internet for images of “John 3:16”. What role does this verse play in our culture?

Noah's Ark (Genesis 6-9)

- Q: What does the rainbow symbolize?

Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6:20-49)

- Jesus’s longest recorded oration. Matthew’s version is more complete.
- Q: Does your Bible follow the red-letter convention, where Jesus’s words are printed in red? That will make it easy to find this sermon!

- Fun Q: How is this convention alluded to in “A Whole New World” from Aladdin?

Amos 5:24

- Q: What American minister quoted this line in a famous speech?
- Q: That same minister also referenced one of our “sinews” passages above, in his final speech before he died. Which passage?

Galatians 3:28

- Q: Who wrote this? How does this line connect to his life’s work?

God’s rebuke of Job’s friends (Job 36 through 41)

- This last “highlight” is the most challenging. Here are some questions, if you read it.
- In the context of the Job story, God is saying that you should not presume to know the mind of God or to question his workings.
- Q: How does that challenge the workings of an organized religion?
- Q: Does it also pose any challenges to the non-religious?
- Q: A line from this passage of Job provided the title and epitaph to which book by Thomas Hobbes?
 - (Hint: it’s near start of Chapter 41)
- Q: A different line from this passage is alluded to in what speech, in what *Star Trek* movie, by which captain of the Enterprise?
 - (Hint: The same scene makes an even more direct reference to *Moby-Dick*, a book with Joban themes of its own.)

Other optional readings

Continue reading further in the Girard book. We will return to it in Session 6.

Session 2: Stories

Wednesday, March 18

Selections from: 1,2 Samuel (OT History) | Acts (NT) | Modern song and poem

Here, we will sample two more major sections of the Bible: OT's "History", specifically the two books of Samuel, and the NT's standalone Book of Acts.

We will get to know the (arguably) 2nd-most-important character in each testament: King David, and some guy named Saul of Tarsus.

(If you count God the Father as a character, then maybe these are the 3rd-most-important characters of their respective testaments. And we'll also meet the third member of the Holy Trinity.)

The Bible readings will be longer than last session; the external materials will be short and fun.

Texts

Read these beforehand. The passages with * are for our main discussion.

Samuel

There are two books named for the prophet Samuel. When you see "1 Samuel", or in Roman numerals "I Samuel", you say "First Samuel".

1 Samuel 8 (The people demand a king)

- Up until this point, Israelites were governed by judges, ending with the judge/prophet Samuel.

1 Samuel 16:14-23 (A young David plays harp to soothe King Saul)

1 Samuel 17:1-11 (Goliath)

1 Samuel 17:32-51 (David and Goliath)

Now, from "Second Samuel":

***2 Samuel 11 (King David and Bathsheba)**

***2 Samuel 12 (The prophet Nathan's response & reaping the consequences)**

The Acts of the Apostles

***Acts 2 - Pentecost**

Acts 7:55-60 (Fate of an apostle named Stephen)

Acts 8:1-4 (Wrath of Saul)

***Acts 9:1-31 (Road to Damascus)**

Acts 13:9 (An important little aside that's easy to miss! Key for keeping track of the story!)

Acts 17:15-34 (Areopagus – Jerusalem meets Athens)

Modern song and poetry

(Once again, our “classics” texts are extremely Bible-themed. We will branch out soon, I promise!)

Leonard Cohen “Hallelujah”

- Cohen wrote many extra lyrics, and the exact choice of verses differed from one performance to another
- Full lyrics, with all the variants: <https://genius.com/Leonard-cohen-hallelujah-lyrics>
- Here, we are most interested in verses 1-2, but there is Biblical imagery throughout.
- Fun Q: This song is very widely covered! Do you have a favorite cover version of it?

TS Eliot, Little Gidding (1942), Part 4 (“The dove descending”)

- We are looking at two short stanzas within a much longer poem. Here is our snippet, followed by some notes on the context:
<https://seamussweeney.net/2018/05/20/pentecost-the-dove-descending-breaks-the-air/>
- The longer poem, for reference:
<https://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>

Session notes

We had short lectures on the relevant history: first, the overall story arc of the OT, and second, the subsequent history of Judaism and the Eastern Mediterranean leading up to the NT. The rest was group discussion of the texts, and other historical questions that people brought to the conversation.

Follow-up reading

Sinews of the Bible, continued

Once again, we're exploring how the Bible fits together by reading some transition passages. (If you missed the follow-ups from last session, you may want to start there.)

Genesis into Exodus

- Genesis 50:22-26
 - Joseph's story ends with his brothers coming to join him to live Egypt, where Joseph is the top advisor to the pharaoh
- Exodus 1:1-14
 - A new pharaoh deals with their descendants
- The new pharaoh is sometimes identified with the historical [Ramses II](#), whom the Greeks would later call Ozymandias. (You might know the [poem](#) by Percy Bysshe Shelley or the *Watchmen* character.)

The Gospel writer who just kept on writing:

- Luke 1:1-4
 - Who is he writing to?
- Luke 24:50-53 (end of Luke)
 - Jesus leads his remaining disciples to Bethany, then he ascends to heaven.
- Acts 1:1-5
 - Same author, same audience!

Our remaining 3 sinews will compare snippets from two parallel versions of events. For Christians, all 6 of these books fall within the "History" section of the OT.

First version: 1 & 2 Samuel + 1 & 2 Kings

- In Tanakh, these books are classified under "Former Prophets"
- Probably written/compiled during Babylonian exile (6th century BCE)
- More critical of the monarchy. Emphasizes prophetic voices like Samuel, Nathan who sometimes rebuke the kings.

Second version: 1 & 2 Chronicles

- In Tanakh, these books are classified under "Writings", and comes last
- Written later, likely post-exile (4th century BCE)
- More favorable to the Davidic line
 - For example, Bathsheba is only mentioned in passing (1 Chronicles 3:5).
 - No scandal, no Uriah, no adultery.
- Heavy focus on Levitical priests and temple ritual

Look at these passages to compare the two versions of the story.

SKIM for flavor: David's reign

- 2 Samuel 5-10
- 1 Chronicles 11-19

SKIM for flavor: King Solomon building the temple

- 1 Kings 6-8

- 2 Chronicles 2-7

Destruction of temple and exile to Babylon

- 2 Kings 25:8-21
- 2 Chronicles 36:15-21
 - This was part of the section we read earlier, 2 Chronicles 36:11-23.
 - Remember, the Tanakh ends at the end of 2 Chronicles. We read how this flows into Ezra 1:1-5.
- Psalm 137
 - The psalms are part of the Wisdom Literature, which we'll discuss more in the next session. They are explicitly poetic and lyrical, and are popular material for musicians
 - Listen to some musical settings of Psalm 137. Search for these:
 - Palestrina - "Super flumina Babylonis"
 - Boney M - "Rivers of Babylon"
 - Don McLean - "By The Waters Of Babylon"
 - All three of these sound entirely different! The psalms are fertile ground for musical expression and interpretation.

Doves everywhere!

Animal symbolism forms some of the most famous through-lines of the whole Bible. In our discussion, we mentioned the dove imagery, associated with peace and the Holy Spirit.

Here are a few examples of doves:

Noah's ark (Genesis 6-9) which was one of the "highlights" you located in last week's follow-ups

- In particular, the role of the dove (Genesis 8:8-12)

Baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16)

Jesus contrasting two major animal symbols (Matthew 10:16)

Session 3: Meaning

Wednesday, April 1

Ecclesiastes (OT Wisdom Lit) | Romans (NT Epistles) | Camus (Continental philosophy)

For the first time, we'll read a whole book of the Bible. We will also pull in sections from Paul's longest letter, as well as the intro of a famous existentialist book. There will be a lot to chew on!

Moreover, this is the first session where our external reading, instead of just engaging with our Bible passages, will grapple on its own with the same themes. This shift brings us closer to the general format of the reading group going forward. In one way or another, all of this session's readings are dealing with themes of despair, monotony, wisdom, and hope.

Per our 8-part model, we are in the 3rd section of each testament: OT "wisdom literature", and NT "letters/epistles" from the apostles to the early churches they had founded.

For bonus points, you are welcome to come dressed in black. Turtlenecks and berets are a plus.

Texts

Ecclesiastes

Read it all. It's a mood. Roll with it.

For prep purposes, you can take this text as a standalone artifact, without worrying about authorial intent, or where it fits into history or scripture, etc. *L'auteur est mort.*

Questions to consider:

- How is it structured?
- Which parts feel the most "biblical" to you? Why?
- Have you ever felt how the author is feeling? How do you cope? How does he cope?

Paul's Letter to the Romans (and also a snippet from James)

Paul wrote the most letters, so each letter is named after the church he was writing to. Romans is Paul's longest letter, the most doctrinally complete, and the one addressed to a church he founded the farthest away from Judea. Let's see how themes of hope and despair are handled in Christian theology.

The main texts for discussion are bold and marked with a *.

***Romans 3:9-31**

- The passage starts out with a pastiche of quotes from various Psalms (and one from Isaiah)

***James 2:14-26**

- Contrast this with Romans 3:21
- James only wrote one letter that made it into the Bible, so it's named after himself. He disagrees with fellow apostle Paul on the question of faith vs. works.
- Does the worldview of Ecclesiastes line up better with Paul, or with James?

Romans 5:1-11

***Romans 8:12-39**

Albert Camus

Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

- ***Required:** p. 1-4, stopping at the heading "Absurd Walls", where he sets up the problem.
- Optional: Read as much of this book as you can before our discussion.
 - You may want to just skip to the final chapter, also titled "The Myth of Sisyphus"
- You can find a PDF online, such as <https://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil360/16.%20Myth%20of%20Sisyphus.pdf>
 - (This is the version where our snippet is "p. 1-4")
- Or, you can find a full book, such as [the Justin O'Brien translation](#).
 - (In this one, our snippet is p. 3-10).

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French philosopher. He is often named as a key figure in the existentialist movement, alongside Sartre and de Beauvoir, although Camus has reservations with the term, and he spends part of *The Myth of Sisyphus* criticizing earlier existentialists. He was born in French Algeria, and he died in a car accident.

Fun listening, to cheer you up

Still a little sad and wistful, but at least it's in a major key.

"Turn! Turn! Turn!" – The Byrds

Session notes

A very interesting discussion this time. Wide-ranging.

A surprising number of analogies to Buddhism and other eastern philosophies.

Even just verse 7:13 about straight/crooked prompted some interesting loose associations:

- “Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?”
- Zhuangzi’s crooked tree <https://historycourses.com/chuang-tzus-tree/>
- It also connects to Kant’s “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made”. We speculated, was Kant referring to Ecc 7:13?

When Camus insists upon preserving the tension of the absurd without ever landing on a fixed belief, it reminded me of the Bokonon poem in Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*:

Tiger got to hunt, bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder 'why, why, why?'
Tiger got to sleep, bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

Can anyone truly “live without appeal” for long?

Follow-up reading

As usual, I recommend using a physical bible for this. Flip around and get a feel for where everything lives.

Rounding out the Wisdom Literature

Read the start of the five Wisdom Literature books. Is the whole book attributed to someone in the history of Israel?

Flip through the Psalms. Does your edition have attributions? Who are they attributed to / written for?

Read at least 2 Psalms. Read at least 5 Proverbs.

Lastly, read Psalm 150, the final psalm, and listen to the choral piece “Salmo 150 by Ernani Aguiar”.

Here it is with the score: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIBeuyCauZM>

Straightforward and final!

Romans and its impact

The epistles got short shrift in our discussion. Let's look closer at Romans now, and read a full cross-section.

You've read sections of chapters 3, 5, and 8. Now, start from the beginning and read all of chapters 1-3.

Next, let's look at a preface to Romans by a monk who translated the Bible into German – a troublemaker named Martin Luther. It is in this preface that he most cleanly develops his idea of “*sola fide*” – salvation by faith alone. (Controversially, his translation of Romans 3:28 added the controversial word “*allein*”.)

Read from the beginning of [Luther's preface](#), stopping at the paragraph where he says,

“Unless you understand these words in this way, you will never understand either this letter of St. Paul or any book of the Scriptures. Be on guard, therefore against any teacher who uses these words differently, no matter who he be, whether Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Origen or anyone else as great as or greater than they.”

Who is this Augustine he speaks of?

Next, return to the Bible and read through Romans chapters 5, 8, and 13. (Obviously you don't need to re-read the sections you've already read. Also, you don't need to read chapter 1 twice, although that would give you the full Fibonacci experience.)

Now, read this excerpt from the Confessions of St. Augustine, Book 8, Chapter 12: bible-researcher.com/tolle-lege.html

Augustine was a prolific church scholar and the bishop of a city called Hippo in North Africa during the final century of the Roman Empire. His writings would have a massive influence on church doctrine as the Western world moved into the Middle Ages. But before becoming a bishop, he was a wayward youth. He loved drinking, carousing, and debauchery, right up until one day when he opened up a book to a random page.

Finally, read these two verses:

Deuteronomy 32:35

Romans 12:19

What great Russian novel uses this line as its epigraph? Have a guess, and then look up the answer.

Optional

Read more of the Camus. I'd always be down to discuss it more!

Session 4: Apocalypse, then and now

Wednesday, April 15

Selections from: Isaiah (OT Prophets) | Revelation (NT) | Agnus Dei (liturgical music) | Yeats (poetry) | Butler (modern scientific apocalypticism)

In this fourth session, we'll wrap up our initial cross-section tour of the Bible by sampling the final part of each testament.

A pair of modern texts will play a distinct role in the discussion, complementing or challenging the Bible by offering their own version of the End Times.

Also, we will widen our view of what counts as a religious text, branching out from the Bible itself into liturgy and music. There are some musical settings that I recommend you listen to, to complement the reading.

These texts are dense with vivid imagery. There are tons of symbols ripe for interpretation. We're going to focus mainly on one symbol: the Lamb.

The main reading will take about 70 minutes, or 100 minutes if you include all the optional parts. The music listening adds up to 21 minutes.

Texts

The main texts for discussion are marked with *. If you're short on time, you can treat the others as optional.

Isaiah

The Prophets form the last section of the Christian OT. The order starts with the three "major prophets": Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, so called because their books are on the longer side. After Ezekiel come the twelve "minor prophets".

(The Book of Jeremiah is followed immediately by the Book of Lamentations, traditionally attributed to Jeremiah.)

Among these prophets, Isaiah is by far the most cited in the NT. A "whole Bible" synopsis like ours will often emphasize the prophecies that Christianity claims to fulfill. Thus, we land on Isaiah. (However, it's worth mentioning that OT also has many other prophecies, tied to many other historical times and circumstances.)

*Isaiah 1 and 2:1-5

- Right from the intro, we set up a contrast between the doomed Old Jerusalem, and the future New Jerusalem that will come.

Isaiah 2:6-22

- Finish the chapter for more prophesy. (Remember, when there's no "**", that means it's for additional flavor, but less central to the discussion.)

*Isaiah 6

- What is a prophet? How is a prophet made?

Isaiah 7:1-17

- Verse 7:14 predicts a new king with the name "Immanuel", meaning "God with us"

Isaiah 9:1-7

- Christians like to cite Isaiah 9:6 at Christmas, and it's quoted in Handel's *Messiah*.

Isaiah 11:1-9

- Foretelling a shoot from the stump of Jesse.
- Jesse was King David's father. The stump image symbolizes Israel, or more specifically the Davidic line of kings, after being felled by Babylon.

Isaiah 24

*Isaiah 25:1-8

- Chapters 24-27 are sometimes called "Isaiah's Apocalypse". In this passage, you see destruction, and then death swallowed up, and a banquet on a mountain.

*Isaiah 53

- A famous prophecy, concerning God's "servant". In a traditional Jewish reading, the servant is Israel, collectively. In a Christian reading, it is a particular somebody who is to come.

Interlude: The many Johns

A quick diversion back into the gospels:

*John 1:29 and John 1:36

- John the Baptist identifies Jesus with a core image from Isaiah.

There are many Johns in the Bible. To start, there are two major characters in the gospels: John the Baptist, who paved the way for Jesus, and John the son of Zebedee, who was one of the twelve disciples.

In one traditional view, the disciple John is the author of five Biblical books: the Gospel of John, the three epistles of John, and Revelation... and that's not even mentioning non-canonical works such as the gnostic Apocryphon of John!

For many secular scholars, these are several distinct authors. For example, the text that we now call the Gospel of John was first attributed to the disciple John at some point long after its composition, for added legitimacy. Secular scholars believe that such attributions-after-the-fact were commonplace, and that writing under someone else's name was not necessarily seen as deceitful by the ancient world.

In a third view, advanced by certain recent scholars, there was a forgotten "Johannine community", possibly stemming from the disciple John himself, and possibly based in Ephesus, which nurtured a distinct theological branch. Perhaps the members of this community composed most or all of these texts under the shared name "John". This is a fun hypothesis, though by no means a consensus.

As for the author of Revelation, he is typically called "John of Patmos", after the Aegean island on which he received his vision.

Revelation

The Book of Revelation is the final book of the NT, laying out what John saw on Patmos. It's long and weirdly structured. Here are a few selections.

The required (*) parts link us to Isaiah and our non-bible texts. I'm also including some other famous passages, unstarred, so that we can talk about their implications/resonance for the culture at large.

*Revelation 1

- Read the whole first chapter. Here are some comments by section:
- *1:1-3
 - The first verse has the title-drop word "revelation", i.e. "ἀποκάλυψις" / "apokálypsis", which means "unveiling"
- *1:4-8
 - We establish the "seven" motif from early on
 - Like the epistles, this is a letter for a specific audience at specific early churches.
- *1:9-20
 - John's initial vision of Christ, and the context for the book.

Revelation 2:1-7

- Chapters 2-3 have targeted messages for each of the seven churches. Here's one example, as optional reading.

*Revelation 4-5

- The throne room and the Lamb

(Then, there's a weird structure in the middle of the book, telling the same story several times with several different images.

- Seven seals
- Seven trumpets
- Signs and symbols, including Beast section that we'll read
- Seven bowls)

Revelation 13

- The Beast and his mark
- John's readers would likely have known that "666" referred to the late Emperor Nero (reigned AD 54-68), as a symbol for all evil rulers, with possible additional reference to the current emperor Domitian (reigned AD 81-96). Later readers have had many other theories about what "666" might mean.

Revelation 14:1-13

- The Lamb's army opposes Beast.
- What happens to those who receive the mark? And to those who refused it?

Revelation 20:1-10

- A thousand-year reign after the final battle (and before the attempted final-final battle).
- Major point of divergence among different Christians: How to interpret this "millennium"? Has it already happened? Is it now? Will it happen later?
 - Lots of words to learn, if you like words:
 - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millenarianism>
 - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennialism>, in particular https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennialism#/media/File:Millennial_views.svg
- You can continue to Revelation 20:11-15 to see some final judgement and more about the "lake of fire".

*Revelation 21:1-14

- A joyous ending!
- How does John's vision of the New Jerusalem compare with Isaiah's?
 - Hint: Have another look at Isaiah 25:6-8

Revelation 22:12-21

- Some final words from Jesus, through the mouth of his angel

Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei is a liturgical text

- Read in English, and aloud to yourself (as best you can) in Latin
 - https://dailyprayer.us/Christian_song_lyrics/Christian_song_lyrics.php?s=agnus_dei
- Compare it to John 1:29

Listen to several settings of the “Agnus Dei text”

- Listen on whatever platform you prefer. Here, I’m favoring YouTube links where you can see the score.
- W.A. Mozart, from his *Requiem*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGn-9A4mFhw>
- Frank Martin, from the end of his *Mass*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZvPdHhleYM&t=1258s>
- Samuel Barber, as a choral setting of his *Adagio for Strings*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCc5lrR3oh4>
- G.F. Handel, as part of his *Messiah*, in English as “Behold the Lamb of God!”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keX7IG6VsiY>

Two modern-day Butlers

* “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats (1919)

- <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>
- Read it aloud to yourself. Like, out loud! Always makes a great poem better.
- You can read up a bit on the background of the poem. What is the historical context?

* “Darwin Among the Machines” by Samuel Butler (1863)

- A letter to the editor in a New Zealand newspaper
- <https://mediarep.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/e0da505d-200c-43ab-be4b-6604a4df816f/content>
- This is an early text in a new form of scientific apocalypticism.
 - How soon was this published after *The Origin of Species*?
- Fans of Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965) may appreciate this deep cut.
 - What part of the original novel’s backstory, omitted from the Villeneuve films, was likely an allusion to this letter?
- Butler was English, but he wrote this letter during the years when he was living in New Zealand, which loosely ties into our theme of sheep.
- Butler later wrote a utopian novel called *Erewhon* (1872). One of the book’s fans started an upscale grocery store chain with the same name.

Session notes

A good, wide-ranging discussion on all of the readings.

We did a read-aloud of Isaiah Chapter 6 and discussed it in detail. We mentioned the connection to the popular hymn “Here I Am, Lord”. I didn’t realize until looking it up that the composer is Catholic; we definitely sang it in my Protestant church growing up.

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Here_I_Am,_Lord
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcXOkht8w7c>

We spent some time trying to decode the meaning of Isaiah 6:10. Why would God tell Isaiah to do this counterintuitive thing?

- “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.”

Follow-up readings

As usual, it’s best to do these by flipping around in a physical Bible so that you learn your way around it.

Sheep everywhere!

In this session, we saw the Lamb of God used to represent the servant who sacrificed – for Christians, this is Jesus. But there are a few other ways that the Bible uses images of lamb and sheep. Read the following passages to see the differences and commonalities:

- Psalm 23
- John 10:1-18
 - Who is the shepherd now? How does that square with the Agnus Dei image?
- Luke 15:3-7
 - A similar parable to Matthew 18:12-14. Matthew and Luke have a lot of overlap.
- Isaiah 53:6
 - How does this verse from this session’s readings match with the parable above?
- John 21:15-19
 - At the end of the last gospel, a resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples, including Simon Peter, who had denied Jesus when questioned by the authorities. What does he have to say to Peter?

- If you read to the end, John 21:20-25, you'll catch a reference to a disciple who had asked a question at the Last Supper. This is probably John himself, and these final verses tie into the Johannine hypothesis.
- Revelation 7:17
 - Can this verse help to tie the various sheep images together?

Optional: Snakes everywhere!

Do a similar search for images of snakes, dragons, and other reptiles. Research on your own to find some passages.

There's at least one in Genesis 3, one in Revelation 12, and a few important ones in between.

Read the "highlights"

In Session 1 follow-ups, you located some "Highlights" passages, and I said to read as much as you like. Now, it's time to actually read them all, if you haven't. To see the list, scroll up or search for "highlights", or maybe [this link](#) will work.

We've already read some of these highlights, (such as Psalm 23 just now, as part of our sheep search). Also, it's not necessary to read the dups. For example, pick just one version of Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's version is more complete than Luke's.

Which of these passages resonates with you? Which would you like to discuss further? Let me know!

Session 5: Dreams and drama

Wednesday, April 29

Having completed our initial cross-section of the Bible, we're now going to spend a few sessions tying together some core themes. For this session, we'll be exploring the motif of dreams, and we'll relate it to how thinkers across the centuries, including Freud and Jung, have discussed the meaning of dreams.

We'll be looping back to the first part of each testament – in fact, to the very first book of each: Genesis and Matthew. We discussed the Torah and the Gospels in our first session on “Teachings”, but these books have more than just instructions: they are also filled with stories, including several about dreams.

There are also many external sources this time. We'll read a small chunk of *Oedipus Rex*, an ancient play that is relevant to the previous, current, and next sessions. We'll also read a short, fun snippet from another Greek writer, Artemidorus. It will shape up to be quite a feast of concepts, including some holy parts, and some very unholy parts.

Texts

“*” indicates the main texts for discussion. There is a lot of reading this time.

Genesis - the story of Joseph (first half)

***Chapters 37-41**

- The start of the Joseph story has most of the dream stories.
- Jacob is one of the main patriarchs of Genesis. He is sometimes known by the name “Israel”. This is the story of his twelve sons.

Chapters 42-44

- Keep reading to see how some of Joseph's earlier dreams will be fulfilled. We will continue with the rest of the Joseph story in the next session.

The Old Testament has many other famous stories about the interpretation of dreams, such as in the Book of Daniel, which we will have an occasion to read at a later time. The Joseph story sets the tone for all of these.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* (c. 425 BC)

***Lines 300-512 in the Murray translation** is the required passage, but first, please read the following context:

We could almost call *Oedipus Rex* the Platonic ideal of a Greek tragedy, except for the fact that Plato distrusted art, so the rules of tragedy were formalized not by him, but by the next guy. Thus, it's more accurate to call *Oedipus Rex* the Aristotelian ideal.

Here are some core elements of tragedy that Aristotle identifies in his *Poetics* (c. 335 BC).

Q: Which of these are present in the Bible stories we've read together, or that you know? In what ways does Biblical storytelling defy these rules?

- The emphasis is on **plot**, not on characters, language, or spectacle.
- The plot must have a **beginning, middle, and an end**.
- The plot turns on two key mechanisms:
 - **Peripetia**, a reversal of fortune (in tragedy, from good to bad)
 - **Anagnorisis**, a recognition, where the hero's ignorance is exposed.
 - The best plots use both, and ideally **they happen simultaneously**.
- The hero must be someone of **high standing**, so that his/her fall is more dramatic
- The downfall is caused by **hamartia**, sometimes translated as "tragic flaw", but also just means error
- The ending produces a **catharsis** or cleansing of negative emotions.

Next, read a plot synopsis of *Oedipus Rex*, such as [this one here](#). How well does Sophocles's play (circa 425 BC) line up with Aristotle's rules (circa 335 BC)?

Now, to our scene.

Read the conversation between OEDIPUS and the prophet TIRESIAS, with minor input from the CHORUS and its LEADER. In the Gilbert Murray translation available [here](#) on Project Gutenberg, the line numbers are:

- ***Start: Line 300** ("Enter Tiresias led by a young disciple...")
- ***End: Line 512** ("Oh, my heart shall uphold him to the last!")

Questions to consider:

- How does the role of prophet seen here differ from the prophets in the Bible?

Trivia: *Oedipus Rex* is one of three works that scholars came to call Sophocles's "Theban Plays". It comes first in the story, but the three plays were written in reverse order. Next in the story is *Oedipus at Colonus*, to which you saw a reference if you read the last chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus* for Session 3. The third play, *Antigone*, was the first to be written.

Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew has several of the more famous dream stories in the New Testament. Among the gospels, Matthew is the most concerned with establishing a continuity with Judaism.

Incidentally, these passages will introduce two key authority figures from the gospels: Herod, the puppet king of Judea backed by Rome, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province. In our next session, we'll see how René Girard took an interest in the relationship between these two figures.

***Matthew 1:16-25 + Matthew 2**

- Jesus's stepfather has the same name as Jacob's favorite son
- The dreams in Matthew are often a way for God to tell people where to go. The plot moves forward, and the prophecies get fulfilled in the correct places.
- A historical detail: There was a long succession of Roman-backed kings who were all named Herod. The "King Herod" in Matthew 2 seems to be Herod the Great, who was the father of the Herod Antipas who reigned during most of Jesus's life and crucifixion.

***Matthew 27:11-26**

- Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.
- In particular, 27:19 is unique to Matthew. What do you think this verse means?

Artemidorus of Ephesus, *Oneirocritica* (2nd Century AD)

Our remaining readings follow the evolution of dream analysis. First, here is one of the earliest surviving examples of someone writing on the subject. The title literally means, "the interpretation of dreams".

***Oneirocritica - Selections from Preface and Book 1**

- Read the first few selections seen on this page:
<https://www.attalus.org/translate/artemidorus.html>
- Don't worry about Books 2-5.
- If you're pressed for time, everything after 1.2 is optional.

Artemidorus enjoys drawing distinctions. From the start, he is contrasting *oneiroi* ("dreams") and *enhyponia* ("visions"). The former are meaningful prophetic dreams, whereas the latter just reflect your current state such as hunger, lust, or fear. (The translation "visions" is a bit counterintuitive here, if you ask me. Having a "vision" in the night sounds grandiose, but for Artemidorus, it's mundane.)

Sigmund Freud

Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis - Lectures 5, 13, 21

Available on Gutenberg in a variety of formats here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/75810>. Easiest might be to click the [plain text link](#) and do a CTRL+F search for e.g. "FIFTH LECTURE".

Freud was an Austrian doctor and the father of psychoanalysis. These lectures from 1917 have a more condensed, accessible presentation than his earlier writings such as *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

I am marking the Freud readings as optional, because if you only have time left for one of these guys, you should skip forward to Jung. I anticipate that the discussion will center more on him, with Freud as a foil.

Carl Jung

* "The Practical Use of Dream Analysis"

This essay is about 22 pages, available in various Jung compendia, or online [here](#).

Jung was a Swiss doctor and a disciple of Freud until their dramatic falling out in 1913. Jung developed his own ideas about archetypes and the collective unconscious.

Session notes

It's not fun being a Greek prophet. No one ever listens to Tiresias.

Why is it that in ancient stories, dreams are just assumed to have meaning? When did that start, and why did it stop?

Follow-up readings

None. Just dive right in on all the reading for next week. Order your copy of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* if you don't have one yet.

Session 6: Sacrifice and Mercy

Wednesday, May 13

Joseph story cont'd (OT Genesis) | Mark (NT Gospel) | Girard again, later chapters (exegetis) | *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare “comedy”)

We've been circling through many stories, themes, and sections of the Bible, but now time to discuss the main event. From a Christian standpoint, the entire book leads up to the Crucifixion. We will read the Gospel of Mark's account of those final days, and we'll also finish the Joseph story in the book of Genesis.

We'll return to René Girard to get his view on how the Crucifixion stacks up against other sacrifice stories of the Bible and the ancient world. (You'll need to get [a copy of *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*](#).) We'll also hear a more conventional interpretation of Christian grace and mercy from a character in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Throughout, we'll see themes of persecution, scapegoats, and forgiveness, and we'll be well-equipped to ask: What is Christianity really about?

Texts

The Merchant of Venice - William Shakespeare, c. 1597

This is classified as one of the comedies, but it's one of the more thorny Shakespeare plays to read nowadays. It is difficult for us to read it as entirely lighthearted.

If you're unfamiliar with the play, read a plot synopsis, such as <https://www.bard.org/study-guides/synopsis-the-merchant-of-venice/>.

Then, read these two scenes.

* Act III, scene 1, lines 20-72

- From Shylock's entrance through his entire speech "Hath not a Jew eyes?..."
- Folger's edition online [here](#)

* Act IV, scene 1, lines 168-211

- From Portia's entrance through her entire speech "The quality of mercy..."
- Folger's edition online [here](#)
- Q: Look up the Lord's Prayer, which appears in Matthew 6:5-14. How does it tie into what Portia says here?
 - Hint: Matthew's Jesus spells it out pretty plainly in the surrounding verses.

If you'd like, prepare one of these roles to act out or recite during our meetup! Bonus points for memorizing one of the speeches. Let me know in advance so that we can maybe avoid duplication.

Genesis - the story of Joseph (second half)

Last session, we read the start of the Joseph story. Now, we'll get the payoff.

Genesis 37 and 39-41.

- This was required reading for last session. If you missed it, catch yourself up on how the story got started.
- Chapter 38 is a digression into Judah's family, and it is extra optional now.

***Genesis 42-44**

- Optional last time; required this time.
- Remember, their father Jacob is sometimes called Israel
- A key moment that Girard will reference happens in Genesis 44
- Q: What are Joseph's motivations at this point in the story?

***Genesis 45**

- Read one more chapter for the resolution.
- You can also read to the end of Genesis (chapters 46-50) for the completion of Joseph's life and times, but the plot is mostly done.

Gospel of Mark - the Passion story

Each of the four gospels has a Passion narrative near the end: the story of Jesus's last days and crucifixion. Mark is the oldest gospel, and has the most raw version, without a ton of explanation or extra symbolism.

***Mark 3:22-27**

- What does Jesus mean by all this?

The remaining selections from Mark form one contiguous passage, broken up here so that I can comment.

***Mark 14:10-72**

- The Last Supper, and final moments.
- Throughout Mark, Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of man". He does not call himself the son of God.
- Pay attention to Peter's arc in these coming chapters.

***Mark 15:1-15**

- Notice how this duplicates what we read from Matthew last week

***Luke 23:12**

- Each gospel differs slightly in what they include and leave out of this story. Here's a line from Luke that Girard will pick up on, concerning the dynamic between Herod and Pilate.

***Mark 15:16-47**

- i.e., the rest of the chapter.

***Mark 16:1-8**

- Bet you didn't see that coming!
- Some scholars believe that Mark originally ended after verse 16:8.

Psalm 22

- Optionally, flip back to OT and read this psalm to see what Mark's Jesus was quoting from on the Cross.

René Girard

I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (1999)

- Read the entire book if you can. Get a copy: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1570753199>.
- Below, I'll point out the chapters that will probably be the most important for our discussion
- See above in Session 1 for more context about the book.

***Foreword**

- Read the Foreword by James Williams, translator. It has an excellent 10-point summary of the book's main ideas.

***Chapter 1**

- If you missed Session 1, read this now

***Chapter 3 early pages** – pp.32-38 in my edition

- Here, Girard defines what he thinks Satan is.

***Chapters 4 and 5**

- Girard discusses some pagan stories. Say hello to Oedipus again!

***Chapters 9 and 11**

- The core of his uniqueness argument

Phil Ochs "The Crucifixion" (1966)

Your recommended listening for this session is [this intense, 9-minute whirlwind](#) through many of the session's themes.

For most of his folk singer career, Phil Ochs backed his voice with solo piano or rudimentary guitar, but for this one, he got help and went all out with the instrumentation. Does the orchestration work for you, or does it go too far?

I am struck by how Girardian this song is, despite being composed well before Girard's main writings were published.

Q: Who is Ochs singing about? Is it the same from verse to verse?

Q: How would this song have been different if written a decade before? After?

Note that Ochs's chorus can be heard as an ironic echo of a popular hymn called "The Lord of the Dance" (1963). www.hymntime.com/tch/html/l/o/r/d/a/lordance.htm