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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2174-8822> (2019) The role of the Bible. In: Chryssides, George and Gregg, Stephen E, (eds.) The Bloomsbury Handbook to Studying Christians. London, Bloomsbury, pp. 49-63

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# **Studying How Ordinary Christians Read the Bible**

**Andrew Village**

## **Introduction**

The Bible is a core resource for the Christian faith. It is a collection of 66 books divided into the Old Testament (39 books, mostly written originally in Hebrew) and the New Testament (27 books written originally in Greek). Christians share the Hebrew Scriptures with Jews, but the New Testament contains books specifically related to the faith founded on Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament consists of four biographies of Jesus (the Gospels), an account of the first Christians (the Acts of the Apostles) and collections of letters (Epistles) from Paul and other leaders of the early church. These writings were just some of hundreds produced in the first two centuries after Jesus' death, and it took many years for the church to decide which should be included in the 'canon', the generally recognized list of Scripture. The oldest list which contains the books of the New Testament as we know them was in a letter from Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria to the churches in Egypt in 367. From around that time the contents of the Bible were more or less fixed, though the contents of Old Testament are more varied because the Latin translation (the Vulgate) used by the Roman Catholic Church included the Apocrypha, which were seven books written originally in Greek.

For most of the first millennium the Latin Bible was the main version read and copied in Europe. Literacy was rare, so few Christians would have read the Bible themselves or been familiar with it. This began to change in the thirteenth century, and accelerated as a result of the Reformation. Martin Luther and other Reformers wanted to wrest the Bible from the control of the Church and allow what they thought was its original and true message to become the standard of Christian faith. The invention of the printing press occurred around the same time, and as a result more and more people were able to read and hear the Bible in a language they could understand. Five hundred years later the Bible is available in hundreds of different translations, in printed and digital formats, and is read aloud in millions of churches at least once a week.

The Bible has always been studied by scholars, and each year thousands of articles and books are published by people working in universities and theological colleges. This material does sometimes filter through to churches, but most churchgoers are unaware of it and engage with the Bible in ways that are not part of the academic discourse. In recent decades a

few scholars have begun looking beyond their own ways of handling the Bible and taken an interest in what are called ‘ordinary readers’. This chapter looks at ways in which scholars have studied how the Bible is used and interpreted in churches by people for whom it is not simply an interesting historical text, but sacred Scripture and part of their lived faith.

### **The Bible and ordinary readers**

‘Ordinary reader’ is a technical term used by scholars to refer to people who read the Bible the way that most people do. Scholars read the Bible in *extra-*ordinary ways because they are a small minority of readers who apply methods such as historical, literary or ideological criticism to texts, and who are mainly interested in persuading other scholars to their point of view. Most people who read the Bible, or listen to it being read, have a different goal that is more closely related to their faith. They may want guidance on how to live, teaching on what to believe, assurance of salvation, encouragement to serve, and so on. The distinction between ordinary and scholarly reading is not always easy to make. Some scholars see their academic engagement with the Bible as part of what it means to live out their faith. Some churchgoers who are not professional academics might nonetheless have studied theology or the Bible, and some may be highly qualified in other subject areas. Clergy might be considered ordinary readers, because they work in church contexts, but many will have had at least some exposure to academic biblical studies. Researchers need to be aware of these complexities and try and allow for the different backgrounds of ordinary readers when studying what they do with the Bible and why they do it.

When we study ordinary readers our subjects are usually people who read the Bible themselves. This might sound obvious, but a lot of people in churches never do that, though they might be familiar with the Bible because they were taught it as a child or because they hear it read aloud and preached in sermons. When scholars interview people or invite them to complete questionnaires it can be difficult to engage the interest of those who never read the Bible; after all, why spend time answering questions about something that you rarely if ever do? It is inevitable that studies of ordinary readers will tend to select those people for whom the Bible is important and who read it as part of their religious life. This does not mean that others are never included in such studies; it is rather the case that we need to be cautious in generalizing because it is likely there is a large pool of Christians who rarely engage with the Bible and who tend not to volunteer for studies related to it, so they can be underrepresented in surveys.

The availability of Bibles varies across the globe and sometimes over time within particular societies. The rise of the missionary movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began the era of translating the Bible into local languages, and at least parts of it are now available in over 3,000 languages, though the number for complete Bible translations is less than 700 (Wycliffe, 2017). Communist countries have sometimes restricted access to Bibles, and importing Bibles can lead to severe punishment (Kuhn, 2002). In western societies Bibles are freely available in a range of different translations and literacy rates are high, so most people who want to read the Bible for themselves will be able to do so.

### *Studying ordinary readers*

Most studies of ordinary readers have employed methods used more widely in the social sciences, such as ethnography, interviews and questionnaires. Ethnographic surveys can involve researchers joining congregations or Bible study groups and observing and/or participating in what goes on. For example, Brian Malley (2004) studied Creekside Baptist Church (a pseudonym) in the USA as a participant observer and also carried out interviews and distributed a questionnaire. He was interested in how the Bible worked to maintain the beliefs of that particular Christian tradition. In the UK, Andrew Rogers (2016) examined two evangelical congregations using a mixture of participant observation and interviews in order to identify how congregations shape, and are shaped by, their engagement with the Bible. James Bielo (2009) observed, mainly as a ‘fly on the wall’, a number of Bible study groups in six Protestant congregations in Michigan, in an attempt to understand how such groups function in the lives of their members. In these three cases the groups did whatever they would normally do, but some studies ask groups to engage with particular material so that the researchers can look at specific issues or compare the same material in different groups. Andrew Todd (2005) gave a Bible study group pre-selected passages to explore over a number of weeks so that he could see how the language they used to talk about passages pointed to the way they understood and interpreted the Bible. Other studies have given the same passage to many different groups and asked them to report their findings (Wit, Jonker, Kool, and Schipani, 2004).

Quantitative methods usually rely on questionnaires to assess aspects of Bible use such as ownership, frequency of reading, biblical literacy, beliefs about the Bible and how it is interpreted. Unlike qualitative ethnography, questionnaires tend to be completed by

individuals, and therefore reach people who do not belong to Bible study groups. Different sorts of questions (multiple-choice, forced-choice, Likert items, semantic differential etc.) can be used as necessary to quantify these various aspects, and open questions allow respondents to give information not covered by other means. Village (2007) used different types of questions in a study of lay people from the Church of England that explored how people read the Bible and how they interpreted it. A test passage (Mark 9:14-29) was used in order to ground responses in a particular case. Asking ‘How do you interpret the Bible?’ invites the response ‘It depends on which bit you mean.’ Using a test passage helps participants to demonstrate their interpretation in a particular instance and, even though that limits the scope of a study, it can make it more useful.

Questionnaires on the Bible are usually distributed to particular congregations or denominations, but bible-related questions occasionally appear in national surveys. A good example is the General Social Survey, which has been run every two years in the USA since 1972 (NORC, 2017). This usually contains the ‘Bible question’, which has had the same format each year. The question comes alongside others related to religion, but this is not a specific survey about the Bible, so the question is inevitably rather general. In Europe, where Christian affiliation is much lower than in the USA, questions about the Bible rarely appear in national social surveys, though some Christian organisations commission polling organisations to run surveys that may or may not be nationally representative. Examples of surveys run by Christian organisations include those run by the American Bible Society (BarnaGroup, 2016), the Bible Society in the UK (Bible\_Society, 2016), and the Pew Research Centre (PRC, 2017).

These different methods of studying ordinary readers have their own advantages and disadvantages. Participant observation can help gain the confidence of what are sometimes rather closed Bible study groups, but participation raises the real possibility that groups can be unwittingly moved in directions dictated by the researcher, which may not reflect what would normally happen. Non-participant observation might lessen the chance of this, but group members might still be unwilling to say what they really think when someone is watching. Interviews generate rich and varied material, which can give insights into what individuals do, but seeing wider patterns is difficult and there is a danger of researchers selecting material in ways that create bias. Quantifying always involves simplification and therefore some artificiality, but it can help to pinpoint the key issues and crucially allows researchers to isolate the effects of particular variables on reading in ways that are all but impossible otherwise.

## **Who reads the Bible?**

When we talk of people ‘reading’ the Bible we need to be aware that this is only one of several ways in which people engage with it. On 9 January 2011 the BBC celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible by broadcasting seven hours of readings by well-known celebrities. The dedication of national broadcasting to such a venture was condemned by secularists, but says something about the continuing role of the Bible for people who may not consider themselves Christians. The Bible is a cultural object, and is deeply embedded in western societies through the ideas it contains and language and sayings that many have learnt from childhood. While this may be changing with the drift away from organised religion, the figures from surveys (if they are to be believed) suggest a surprisingly high level of engagement. In the USA over 90 per cent of households own a Bible, though figures in Europe are lower, with a 2010 UK survey reporting 52 per cent (Field, 2014). Surveys of whole populations are unusual outside North America, and may be biased if those who are disinterested in religion tend to refuse to take part. Owners of Bibles may not necessarily read them, and in the States only around a third of people claim to read the Bible at least once a week, a figure that is declining among younger generations (BarnaGroup, 2016). Figures in Europe are even lower, and a survey of people who identified themselves as Christians in the UK found 14 per cent read or listened to the Bible at least once a week (ComRes, 2017). There was considerable variation between denominations, with reading being highest among Pentecostals (75 per cent), Evangelicals (64 per cent), and Baptists (49 per cent) and lowest among Methodists (15 per cent), Roman Catholics (11 per cent), and Anglicans (8 per cent). Much of the denominational difference relates to what proportion of those who claim to belong to a particular denomination actually practice their faith. In England many people will claim to belong to the Church of England without ever attending services, and they are unlikely to ever read the Bible.

Smaller-scale surveys of churchgoers give a better idea of how many actually read the Bible for themselves, rather than just hear it on Sundays. This varies between different Christian traditions, reflecting the importance of the Bible in Protestant denominations as a result of the Reformation. The Anglican Church is a Protestant denomination, but it has Anglo-catholic and evangelical wings, especially in the Church of England, where a study of lay people found 79 per cent of evangelicals read the Bible at least once a week, compared with 47 per cent in other traditions (Village, 2007). Among evangelicals, 69 per cent said

they read the Bible more than once a week, and this reflects the long-standing practice of a daily 'quiet time' where Christians spend time praying and reading the Bible alone, often using study notes. Daily Bible reading is common among evangelicals elsewhere in the UK and in the USA. Those in more catholic traditions do sometimes report reading the Bible every day, and this probably reflects its use in daily offices such as Morning Prayer in the Anglican Church.

Overall, the survey data suggests that casual and infrequent contact with the Bible is relatively high in western societies, but declining among more recent generations. In some church traditions adherents rarely, if ever, read the Bible themselves, but they do hear it often in the context of worship. The most frequent rates of engagement are among Protestants, and especially Pentecostals. Such people represent a large and growing proportion of Christianity, and as literacy rates rise in parts of Africa and Asia it is likely that Bible will continue to be read by a significant proportion of the global population.

### **Beliefs about the Bible**

Theologians and biblical scholars have long argued about the nature of the Bible, how it should be interpreted, and its status for believers. Is this a rather ad hoc collection of texts produced over many centuries that reflects evolving beliefs about God among the Israelites? Or is it a carefully selected collection of documents that represent the foundational testimonies of a faith community (or two faith communities, Jewish and Christian)? Or is it the Word of God, delivered and received exactly as intended by the divine Author? What we believe the Bible to be is the main factor that determines how we are likely to interpret it and what status it holds in our lives. Scholars who view the Bible primarily as historical evidence of past beliefs are likely to use the text alongside external evidence from archaeology or other writings to try and understand what the original authors or editors intended to say and why they needed to say it. Those who see in the biblical text carefully crafted stories or rhetorical argumentation will examine it using literary techniques to expose the voices of the authors that are implied from the text, and the way in which meaning might be delivered and unfolded to readers who are competent to decode the signals present in the narrative. Those who see the biblical text as reflecting or concealing the power of those who produced it will try and re-read familiar passages in ways that expose the abuse of power and that speak liberation to marginalized or oppressed groups in our society today. These various approaches need not necessarily undermine the authority of the text, but they can raise issues

of whether material that is historically contingent or produced by flawed humans can carry the authority of God for believers today.

The advent of scholarly (or ‘critical’) approaches to the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe has inevitably impacted ordinary readers. Some churches that were originally hostile towards modern scholarship have become more positive about it over the last century or so: a good example is the Roman Catholic Church, which rejected historical criticism in the nineteenth century, but which had come to see its value by the end of the twentieth century (PBC, 1993). This has not been the case for all Christians, and it was the threat of biblical scholarship, and its implications for believers, that drove some evangelicals in the USA to assert what they saw as the ‘fundamentals’ of faith at the start of the twentieth century (Ammerman, 1991). For fundamentalists in the Protestant tradition the Bible is considered to be ‘verbally inspired’: that is, the very words of the original documents (‘autographs’) were written exactly as God intended, and they are the ‘Word of God’. This implies that the Bible is without error, so that when it narrates stories they should be assumed to be historically accurate accounts of what actually happened, unless there is a clear indication to the contrary. This way of understanding Scripture has led to creationist beliefs, which challenge the scientific community’s acceptance of Darwinian evolution primarily because it seems to challenge the veracity of the creation accounts in Genesis. Such conservative Protestant beliefs about the Bible are most clearly articulated in the Chicago Statement, produced by leading evangelicals (ICBI, 1978).

Conservative biblical belief is one end of a spectrum. At the other end lies liberal belief, which is more diverse and difficult to define, but which generally sees the Bible as work produced by humans who were inspired by God. Being a largely human creation it might be flawed, and might contain some errors of historical fact or insights about God that may be historically conditional and inappropriate today. Liberal belief is not ‘unbelief’, and it can include the idea that the Bible is the inspired word of God. It may, however, also accept that truth can be better expressed in symbolic rather than literal form, so literal interpretation is not always the best option. This extends to miracles, including sometimes the core miracles of the Christian faith, such as the incarnation, virgin birth, and bodily resurrection of Jesus. Whereas conservatives consider the Bible to be the only reliable revelation of God, liberals are often open to truths about God that might come from other faiths or even non-faith sources. Conservative and liberal beliefs are related to views on the status of the Bible: conservatives talk of the Bible as the ‘final authority in all matters of faith and conduct’



whereas liberals will tend to see that authority as set alongside others such as tradition or human reason.

Most Christians will fall somewhere along the spectrum between these two positions, but deciding where is not easy. Although some will have given the matter a lot of thought, most will not, so they may not know what they believe, or may not have any opinion on the matter. Others will not want to identify with either an extreme conservative or extreme liberal position. They may uphold the historicity of key events such as the virgin birth or resurrection, but be more willing to see other events as mythological or symbolic stories. They may see the Bible as the main source of authority in their lives, but still be open to other sources that might seem to contradict it.

The complexity of beliefs about the Bible makes it difficult to encapsulate them in simple survey questions, though this has not stopped sociologists trying to do so. In the USA, the rise of the ‘religious right wing’ became a major political issue in the 1981 presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan. Sociologists wanted to identify who these people were, and whether it was possible to distinguish fundamentalists from other conservative Protestants, who might not necessarily share their political affiliation. Belief about the Bible was clearly a possible key, and there was a spate of studies (ultimately unsuccessful) that tried to address this issue (Smidt, 1989). It was around this time that the General Social Survey introduced the ‘Bible question’ in an attempt to categorize Bible belief across the whole population. It has remained much the same over the last 30 years:

Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; the Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word; the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man. (GSS, 2014)

This is not an ideal question because it conflates literalism with ‘word of God’, but it has served as a useful barometer of beliefs among the United States population. In 1984, the first year it was used, 37 per cent chose ‘actual word’, 46 per cent ‘inspired word’, and 14 per cent ‘Ancient book’. By 2014 the numbers had changed a little (31, 44, and 22 per cent respectively) but generally they have been remarkably stable (ARDA, 2014). Similar results have been found in other studies in the USA, suggesting that an overwhelming majority consider the Bible to be the ‘word of God’, and a sizeable minority think that it should be interpreted literally. Conservative Bible belief remains a central part of the faith of millions of Americans.

There is precious little equivalent data from elsewhere, perhaps because in Europe religion is less tied to politics so there is less general interest in what people believe about the Bible. The main source of information comes from surveys within churches, especially the Church of England. The 'Bible scale' was developed for use among Church of England lay people, and has been used among lay and ordained Anglicans in England (Village, 2007, 2016) and elsewhere (ACC, 2012). It consists of 12 statements with a five-point response scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The statements relate to beliefs about the Bible such as: 'The Bible contains some human errors', 'If the Bible says something happened then I believe that it did', and 'The Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct'. Responses are coded so that a high score indicates conservative belief and low score liberal belief about the Bible. In the Church of England, evangelicals score highest, Anglo-catholics the lowest, and 'broad church' in the middle, which is what you would expect (Village, 2007). What makes the scale more interesting is that it can be used to see how beliefs about the Bible vary between different groups. In 2013 this scale was part of a survey that ran in the *Church Times*, the main newspaper of the Church of England, and it was completed by over 3,000 people. Biblical conservatism was higher for men than women, for those under 60 than those over 60, for those with school-level than those with university-level qualifications, for laity than clergy, and higher among evangelicals and charismatics than among those in Anglo-catholic or broad-church traditions (Village, 2016). Some of these trends are again what we might expect, suggesting that beliefs about the Bible are partly an indication of what sort of church people belong to, partly about their educational experience, and partly about personal factors. Men are generally more conservative than women, and this might explain the sex difference in biblical conservatism. The greater conservatism among young people is interesting and suggests that as people get older they may take a more liberal stance to the Bible, perhaps as a consequence of the experience of using it through life.

### **Reading in context**

One important way in which academic and ordinary readers of the Bible have come together in recent years is under the umbrella of 'Contextual Bible Study' (CBS). The roots of this date back to the work of liberation theologians in South and Latin America in the 1960s, when Catholic priests who worked in universities, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, spent parts of their time in local 'base communities', working with the poor and marginalized (Aguilar, 2007). Part of the work was to encourage people to read the Bible in ways that were relevant

to their lives, rather than to simply receive interpretations handed down from the church hierarchy. Stories such as the Exodus became powerful texts that spoke directly to their struggle for political freedom and economic security (Mesters, 1980, 1991). This way of reading spawned ‘liberation hermeneutics’, which has spread to many different communities around the world and which has influenced those who feel oppressed by virtue of their race, gender, class, sexuality or political beliefs (George, 2001; Guest, 2006; Mosala, 1989; Rowland and Corner, 1990; Schroer and Bietenhard, 2003). This way of reading, which pays close attention to what has been termed ‘social location’ (Segovia and Tolbert, 1995a, 1995b) has not always successfully engaged ordinary readers, and sometimes tends to result in rather rarefied academic writing that they would find inaccessible and incomprehensible.

Some scholars have made deliberate attempts to overcome the barriers between academic and church communities. Gerald West created the Institute for the Study of the Bible in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa during the apartheid era. The intention was for academics to ‘read with’ local church communities with the intention that both academic and ordinary readers would learn from each other how to promote community change (West, 2007; West and Dube, 1996). A good example of such an engagement is a study among women in an African Independent Church in KwaZulu-Natal of Mark 5:21-6:1, the stories of Jairus’s daughter and the woman with a haemorrhage (Sibeko and Haddad, 1997). Laying on hands and prayer for healing was an integral part of church life for these women, but menstruating women were considered taboo and denied this ministry because ministers would not touch them and they were not allowed to attend services. When the women read the passage, they identified solely with the unnamed woman who broke Jewish taboo and touched Jesus’s cloak. In this context, a story that might seem strange in western contexts became a powerful inspiration to challenge the status quo.

One of the most significant recent attempts to explore the effect of cultural contexts on Bible reading has been a project in the Netherlands called *Through the Eyes of Another* (Wit et al., 2004). In the initial study, researchers took a test passage, the woman at the well in John 4, and asked Bible study groups to read and discuss it, and then report their findings. There were over 120 groups from 25 countries and the co-ordinators arranged for groups in different parts of the world to read and respond to the reflections of others from different cultures to their own. Reports and reflections were digitized and coded, and then analysed using a ‘grounded theory’ approach (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007), whereby analysis and interpretation go hand in hand, allowing ideas to emerge from the data, rather than being imposed upon it beforehand. The results have indicated the importance of social and cultural

factors in shaping the way in which the Bible is interpreted and used by ordinary readers. In the case of this passage, western readers found the story harder to apply to their lives than those from the southern hemisphere. Intercultural reading of the Bible is proving to be a growing way in which ordinary readers can appreciate both their own way of using the Bible and that of people from very different backgrounds to their own (Schipani, Brinkman, and Snoek, 2015; Snoek, 2015; Wit, 2012; Wit, West, and Snoek, 2008).

### **Interpreting the Bible**

How do ordinary readers interpret the Bible? This simple question is extremely difficult to answer. First, because the Bible is a complex collection of books written over many centuries and containing different literary genres. How someone interprets a psalm might be very different from how they interpret a gospel story or one of St Paul's letters. Second, because readers are even more complex and varied than the Bible. They belong to different faith traditions, they have different views of what the Bible is, they belong to different cultures and to different generations in those cultures, they have different educational experiences, and they are distinguished by host of other individual differences such as race, gender, sexuality and personality. Hardly surprising, then, that the simplest and truest answer to the question 'How to ordinary readers interpret the Bible?' is 'Differently.' That said, we might still want to find out what those differences look like and, more importantly, whether interpretations are related to some of the myriad variation we see in Bible and readers.

We have noted earlier some of the different ways of studying ordinary readers, and their advantages and disadvantages. When it comes to studying interpretation the issue of method is even more crucial. We might study interpretations by ethnography: observing what Bible study groups do and what they say about the passages they are reading. What often emerges from this approach is information about group dynamics and the symbolic importance of the Bible, but it is sometimes more difficult to identify particular interpretations or ways of interpreting. Using a test passage to try and reduce the variability caused by using different parts of the Bible can help, and this was the tactic in the *Through the Eyes of Another* studies mentioned earlier. This certainly produced different interpretations, but trying to sort through the thousands of statements to categorize them was a huge task. Even if successful, the next task would be to explain why some groups produced the interpretations they did: was it because of their cultural location, or the gender balance, or presence (or absence) of clergy, or the educational experience of members, and so on. Ethnographic methods are said to produce 'thick' descriptions of human activity that are full

of detail, nuance and complexity. They are close to reality and can produce rich accounts, but sometimes lack power to explain why readers do what they do.

Quantitative methods require researchers to simplify in order to measure. They usually require some prior theory to help narrow the focus and create the instruments to be used to gather data. Questionnaires or other methods that numerically quantify observations are said to produce ‘thin’ descriptions of human activity that are selective of particular aspects of the phenomenon and which may be totally blind to others. They are often artificial, and tend to reduce complex descriptions to more straightforward numerical quantities. Where they win out is the power of those quantities to explain what factors might be shaping different sorts of interpretations. For example, we might find in a large survey of churchgoers that, on average, women interpret more literally than men. We might theorize that this is because women are innately more likely to do so because of their sex, or because they have been socialized into do so by gender roles acquired through life. If we look closer, however, we might find that our sample of churchgoers is mainly people aged over 70, who belong to a generation where women were much less likely to go to university than were men. If we can allow for educational differences through statistical analysis, we might find that the difference between men and women disappears and they are equally likely to interpret literally. This is about education, not sex or gender, and we are led to a very different understanding of the causes of literalism.

In this section we will look at quantitative methods that have been used to explore two main sorts of interpretative strategy: literalism and choice of horizon. These are considered to be general interpretative strategies, rather than interpretations applied to specific passages, though understanding general strategies is sometimes best done through using specific passages. The aim in these studies is to simplify the questions asked so that participants can more easily indicate their beliefs and attitudes, and then build complexity by using statistical methods to test associations within the data set.

### *Literalism*

To interpret the Bible literally is to take the text at face value: events are assumed to have happen as described, and oracles, speeches and letters are assumed to be recorded verbatim. Before I embarked on my first questionnaire study in the Church of England I went around a number of different churches in my local area and interviewed lay people. I wanted to find out how they engaged with the Bible, and what things about it mattered to them. In

theological college I had studied what mattered to biblical scholars, and literalism was not really an issue for them: they had long relegated most events to mythological sagas or fictional stories, and moved on to more ‘interesting’ aspects such as the origins of the text or its literary structure. But it was an issue for my interviewees. Over and over again I heard people speaking of worries over passages that they found hard to take at face value, or asserting the importance of believing that certain events in the Bible must have happened.

Literalism remains an important aspect of biblical interpretation, and one that shapes the way that people understand and practice their faith. We have seen earlier how in the USA the issue of literalism is part of the ‘Bible question’ in the GSS, and that around a third of Americans think the Bible should be interpreted literally, word for word. A lot of people might not want to go that far, but they would nonetheless want to assert that *some* parts of the Bible should be interpreted literally. Where do people draw the line between fictional story and events that really happened, and what criteria do they use to decide? To answer this I created a ‘literalism scale’ using ten items mentioning events from the Bible drawn from both Testaments. I also included five items that referred to parables of Jesus and introduced by the phrase ‘The story of...’. For each item, participants were asked if this was something they thought definitely happened, or was a fictional story. They could rate answers on a five point scale, with one representing ‘definitely a story’ and five representing ‘definitely happened’. The literalism and parables scales were included in a questionnaire distributed to 11 Church of England congregations, and the results of 404 replies are shown in Table 1 as the proportion of participants who indicated that an event definitely or probably happened. The table is arranged with the highest scoring items (that is, those taken most literally) at the top and the lowest scoring at the bottom.

[Table 1 about here]

A few trends emerged from this study:

1. There was a surprising level of literalism among this sample. Overall, the literalism scale items were said to have happened by 83 to 41 per cent of the participants, depending on the item. Even the story of Adam and Eve was taken literally by 47 per cent.
2. The most literal events were those related to the miracles associated with Jesus, including his virgin birth. The events least likely to be taken literally were those associated with Old Testament stories and sagas such as Jonah, Adam and Eve,

and Noah. Items in the middle were ones that more people might consider to be historical, such as Joshua and walls of Jericho, Moses and the plagues of Egypt, and David killing Goliath.

3. The parable items were all much less likely to be taken literally, and the majority rated them as fictional stories. There was still considerable variation between parables, with ones that might be more familiar to contemporary readers (like the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan) being more likely to be rated literally than others that are less familiar.
4. Evangelicals were more likely to interpret literally than people from other traditions in the Church of England. However they were *less* likely to score the parables as literal. It seemed that most evangelicals distinguish story from event and generally believed events happened and parables did not. Others were less discerning of the difference between parable and event.

These results show how ordinary readers make careful decisions about literalism that depend on what the event is, and whether it is described as a story (or parable) in the Bible or just related without a label. Events that are equally implausible are rated differently depending on whether they relate Jesus or not. On rational judgement, raising someone from the dead is as unlikely to have happened as someone surviving in the belly of a fish for three days, but whereas 83 per cent took the Lazarus story literally, only 41 per cent did so for Jonah.

The advantage of quantifying literalism in this way is that each individual can be given a score, and these scores can be examined statistically in relation to other factors. In the study just described, education was found to be related to literalism, so that on average those with higher levels of education tended to interpret less literally. What was interesting, and revealed only through more complex statistical analysis, is that this trend was not apparent among evangelicals, where there was little or no effect of education on literalism, as shown in Figure 1. The literalism scale has been used on Church of England clergy, and the results were surprisingly similar to those for lay people. Although clergy were less literal, on average, than laity this was partly due to the fact that they had greater exposure to university-level education: allowing for this statistically suggested that, when it came to literalism, clergy were similar to lay people in the same church tradition.

[Figure 1 about here]

Literalism varies with gender, but in complex and interesting ways. In the 2014 GSS surveys the literalism option was chosen by 34 per cent of women but only 27 per cent of men, a small difference but one repeated across many surveys. When results are broken down by denomination, the sex difference remains only in those denominations where biblical literalism is most prevalent. John Hoffman and John Bartkowski (2008) suggested that was because in patriarchal congregations, where women are denied leadership roles, they may compensate for their status by promoting more rigorously the beliefs and practices (schema) that are central to denominational identity- in this case literalism. I tested this ‘compensatory schema’ hypothesis on data from the Church of England, and found that while there was some support for this idea, other explanations seemed possible for this particular denomination (Village, 2012b). These kinds of analyses show the power of quantitative methods to explore biblical interpretation across large samples of churchgoers.

### *Horizons*

The notion of ‘interpretive horizons’ is well known to biblical scholars, who use it to distinguish between the cultures that produced the Bible and those who subsequently read it. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur is often credited with the idea of different ‘worlds’ related to the text: the world ‘behind’ the text (the world of the author who wrote it), the world ‘in’ the text (the ideas created by the text), and the world ‘in front of’ the text (the world of the contemporary reader). Scholars may be used to thinking about these different aspects of a text, but are ordinary readers aware of them? When they read the Bible, do they notice the gap between their world and the world of the author? Do they stick with the world created by the text, or do they try and relate that world to their own? Studying this with ordinary readers is not easy, and requires similar methods to those used with literalism: simplification, quantification, and analysis.

The Bible and Lay People study (Village, 2007) examined two aspects related to horizons: first, whether readers were aware of the gap between their world and the world of the author or the text and, second, which of the three horizons (author, text, or reader) they preferred when interpreting. The issue was addressed using the test passage from Mark 9:14-29 and horizon separation was measured by responses to seven items such as ‘I find this story hard to relate to my life’ or ‘This story shows how differently people thought in those days’. For horizon preference, statements were given in triplets as forced-choice questions, with one item related to each horizon, and readers were asked to choose just one. For example:



This story shows ...

- a) The writer encouraged his readers to have faith in Jesus (author)
- b) Jesus encouraged the father's weak faith (text)
- c) God encourages us today when our faith is weak (reader)

The horizon labels were not part of the original questions. There were eight such items, so this was the maximum anyone could score for a particular horizon. In practice most people chose each horizon at least once, but often chose one more than others.

The study with laity was repeated with clergy, which allowed each group to be compared (Village, 2013). With horizon separation there was no difference between clergy or lay people, between men and women, or between those with different levels of education. A few people in the sample had not read the test passage before, and they were more likely to report higher horizon separation than those for whom this was a familiar passage. This suggests that familiarity with the Bible may lessen the extent to which stories can startle or intrigue us because they lose their strangeness. The main factor predicting horizon separation was church tradition, with evangelicals being more likely to 'fuse' horizons than were readers from other traditions. This was explained by their high Bible scale scores: their conservative stance to the Bible generally made it more likely they would accept this passage as something familiar and related to their own world.

When it came to horizon preference, most readers preferred the text or reader horizon over the author horizon. The world of the author is not usually accessible to readers unless they have done some advanced biblical study, and most had not. Clergy (who would have done some historical biblical studies) were more likely than laity to choose author horizon options, but even they did so rarely. Education seemed to be a key factor shaping horizon preference: those with higher education experience were more likely to choose the author horizon, and less likely to choose the reader horizon, than those with lower educational qualifications.

Horizon is an important aspect of interpretation for Christians because it may determine how likely they are to find the Bible useful for living out their faith. If the gap between our world and the biblical world seems large, it may be more difficult to bridge. Reading the Bible to understand the world of the authors may be intellectually interesting, but if interpretation stops there it may be difficult to apply a text to daily life.

### **The Bible and psychology**

The ways in which Christians interpret the Bible is partly dependent on their personality. Biblical scholars have for some time used the psychological theories of people like Sigmund

Freud and Carl Jung to analyse the Bible and suggest ways in which it reflects the conscious or unconscious minds of authors and readers (Rollins, 1999). Until relatively recently there has been little empirical study of ordinary readers. This began to change when Leslie Francis produced a book that applied psychological type theory to readings from the Gospel of Mark (Francis, 1997). Since then there has been a growing number of studies that have tested whether the theory can explain what readers do when they hear or read the Bible, and this has led to suggestions about how to preach (Francis and Village, 2008).

The idea of psychological ‘types’ was first put forward by Carl Jung (1923). He suggested that our minds are required to perform functions related to acquiring, processing, and evaluating information, and that we can do that in different sorts of ways. Most people, he argued, tend to prefer to function mentally in particular ways, and this partly explains why people have different personalities. His genius was to divide the functions into three independent dimensions, and to suggest that in each dimension there were two options. The first dimension is ‘orientation’, which refers to whether we process information internally or externally. Introverts prefer to process internally by thinking about things on their own; whereas extroverts prefer to process externally in conversation with others. The second dimension is ‘perceiving’, which refers to the process by which we acquire information. Perceiving through sensing involves getting information through sight, sound, touch and smell, and paying attention to what is actually there; whereas perceiving through intuition involves using our imaginations to bring together ideas and to speculate on possibilities that might happen in the future. The third dimension is ‘judging’, which refers to the process by which we evaluate information and make decisions. Judging by feeling means paying attention to others in order to decide what is best according to commonly-held values and likely outcomes; whereas judging by thinking means applying logic objectively to decide what is right according to rational principles.

Jung’s three-dimensional model was expanded to four dimensions by Katharine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator has been widely used in business and industry to explain why people are different and why they prefer to do things in particular ways (Myers, 1993; Myers and Myers, 1980). A key point to note is that although people often *prefer* to use a particular function (sensing or intuition to perceive; thinking or feeling to judge) they can use the other function if they need to. The analogy often used is left and right handedness: we can write with our non-preferred hand but for many people that feels awkward and requires a lot of concentration. When we use our preferred functions it has profound consequences on how we behave and relate to others. Sensing tends

to make us prefer the concrete rather than the abstract. We look for details and we value repetition and familiarity. Intuition tends to make us prefer the abstract rather than the concrete. We like to speculate and imagine; we are happy to question the status quo and to look for new ways of doing things. Feeling tends to make us prefer the subjective to the objective. We empathize with others and will try and make sure our decisions are acceptable to others, even if sometimes this means fudging on principles. Thinking tends to make us prefer the objective rather than the subjective. We use evidence and logic to decide what to do, and we will apply our principles even when this might sometimes upset others.

It seems likely that some of the differences in religion that we observe might be related not just to the content of beliefs but also to the way they are expressed. This is where psychological type might have a role (Goldsmith and Wharton, 1993). Leslie Francis' idea was that when Christians hear the Bible being preached they will attend to it according to their preferred functions. Sensing types will attend to the details of the text, and especially any references to the senses. They may like familiar passages and to have sermons delivered in traditional fashion. Intuitive types will see a text as a springboard to other ideas. They may want to link it to other passages, to use symbolic interpretations, and to ask questions rather than accept what they are told. Feeling types will attend to characters in a text and try and 'stand in their shoes'. They will look for material that expresses values and which will create harmony. Thinking types will attend to the theological principles in a text to try and see how they should be applied and what they imply about how we should live. The SIFT method of preaching is derived from these four functions (Sensing, Intuition, Feeling and Thinking) and suggests that preachers should attend to these four different ways of approaching texts when they expound the Bible. That way they will offer something that most people will be naturally drawn to, as well as challenging them to use their non-preferred functions.

Does this theory work in practice? One way to test it is to develop interpretations of a passage that are deliberately designed to appeal to the four different functions, and then see if people prefer some over others. We can test their psychological type preferences using instruments designed to be used in questionnaires such as the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey and Bates, 1978) or the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). I included these instruments in my Church of England lay and clergy studies, and in both cases there was evidence to show that readers who generally in life preferred sensing over intuition tended to prefer sensing-type interpretations to intuitive-type interpretations, and vice versa. The same was true for feeling versus thinking interpretations (Village, 2010; Village and Francis, 2005). Another method for testing this idea has been used on training courses for

clergy or lay preachers. Participants are first sorted into groups according to their psychological type preferences. They are then asked to work as a group to prepare sermons based on a particular passage. When researchers have examined the sermon outlines produced by different ‘type’ groups they have been able to show links between the preferred psychological type and the material we would expect based on type theory (Francis, Robbins, and Village, 2009; Francis, Stone, and Robbins, 2015).

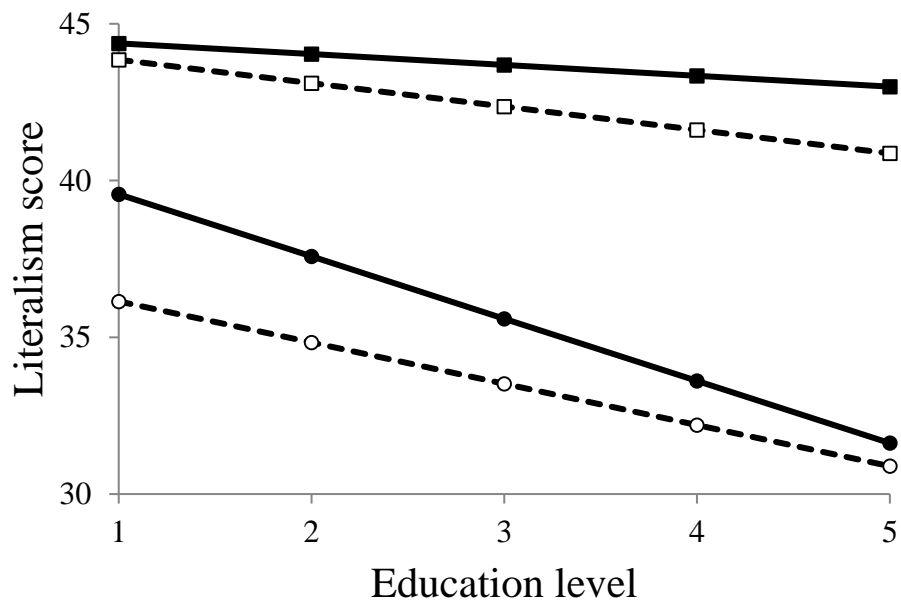
Psychological type preferences are also linked to more general interpretative strategies such as literalism and horizon preference. Type theory predicts that literalism will be more likely among those who prefer sensing over intuition, and this has been shown using the literalism scale in Anglican clergy (Village, 2012a) and a measure of literalism related to interpreting Genesis among lay people from a range of churches England (Village, 2014). Preference of intuition should also be linked to being able to ‘imagine oneself into a story’ as encouraged in the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius (Ganss, 1998) or the contemplative method of *Lectio Divina* (Robertson, 2011). Results from both clergy and laity in the Church of England have supported this idea (Village, 2009, 2012c), showing that psychology is one factor that helps to explain differences in Bible reading among ordinary Christians.

Table 1. Responses to items in the literalism and parable scales among Church of England lay people

	All	AC	BC	EV
<i>N</i> =	404	94	109	201
Item	%	%	%	%
Jesus' mother was a virgin when she conceived Jesus.	81	68	73	93
Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.	83	72	76	93
Jesus turned water into wine.	80	65	72	92
David killed a giant called Goliath.	83	73	76	92
Moses went to Pharaoh and threatened terrible plagues.	79	62	67	93
Jesus fed 5000 people with two fish and five loaves.	74	52	62	90
Joshua destroyed the walls of Jericho.	73	58	66	83
Noah built an ark and filled it with animals.	57	32	49	74
Adam and Eve lived in a garden called Eden.	47	21	45	61
Jonah was in the belly of a fish (or whale) for three days.	41	16	34	57
The story of the Samaritan who helped a man attacked by robbers.	46	46	62	38
The story of the prodigal son who left home and later returned.	45	51	56	37
The story of the farmer who scattered seed as he sowed.	35	43	44	26
The story of the unforgiving servant who was released from his debt.	30	36	38	23
The story of the enemies who sowed weeds in a farmer's field.	24	28	32	18
The story of the ten virgins who waited for the bridegroom.	21	21	28	17

*Source:* after A. Village, *The Bible and lay people* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)

Figure 1. Relationship of literalism to education level clergy (dashed line) and laity (solid line) from evangelical (squares) or other traditions (circles) in the Church of England



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