

PERSPECTIVE

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WHAT BIBLE DID JESUS USE?

MAY

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WHAT BIBLE DID JESUS USE?



Living in the United States in the 21st century, we have an abundance of English Bible translations available to use. Glancing at my shelf, I see an ESV, a CSV, a NASB, a HCSB, and a NIV. If I open any of them up to the table of contents, I see the books of the Protestant canon: 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books. But what would we see if we went back to the time of Jesus? What Bible did he use?

Jesus didn't use any of the English Bible translations on my shelf. The New Testament was not yet written, and there were no English versions of the Bible available in his day. The codex (a forerunner to our modern books) was not yet available either. Rather, books of Scripture in ancient languages were written on scrolls. This means there was no single, consolidated Bible—no one big book with all canonical books written between the two covers. Nor was there a table of contents page to check which books were in and which were out. So how do we know what Scriptures Jesus used? After all, the Protestant canon of 39 Old Testament books is considerably shorter than the Roman Catholic canon of 46 books. Did the collection of scrolls read by Jesus reflect one of these canon lists or something else?

In this article, I want to make the case that the Old Testament canon Jesus used was fixed in his day. Furthermore, essentially all Jews agreed with him about the stability of the text and the scope of the canon. The books of the canon match our Protestant

Old Testament, but the organization of the books was different. We'll proceed by answering several questions.

WHAT SCRIPTURES WERE IN CIRCULATION IN JESUS' DAY?

Aside from portions of a scroll in individual possession for devotional purposes, or a scroll or more in the possession of someone with more means, most access to Scripture came through exposure to scrolls in synagogues. These scrolls gave a local community access to Scripture.

A variety of Old Testament versions existed. And in a variety of languages. Israel was a multilingual area. Besides the Jews, Moabites, Ammonites, Arabs, Ashdodites, and Edomites lived in and around first-century Palestine. Greek had spread widely (Jerusalem became a Greek city about 175 BC), and Aramaic had been on the rise since the exiles returned several hundred years before Jesus. Hebrew was on the decline. Though in conservative rural places and Jerusalem, there was more Hebrew. In bigger cities, there was likely more Greek. Probably everyone had Aramaic. E. Y. Kutscher estimates that "the educated Palestinian knew 4–5 languages more or less fluently, and that his less educated fellow citizen had a smattering of several of them."¹ Imagine small European nations where everyone speaks several languages, because that's just what's there, and you

need to be able to interact with the people around you.

Scripture existed primarily in Hebrew and Greek, with oral Aramaic translations. The most pristine Hebrew text was stored in the Jerusalem temple. Downstream translations of the temple text were used in synagogues and were recovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Old Testament began to be translated from Hebrew into Greek around 280–250 BC. The first five books of the Old Testament were translated first. The other books were translated significantly later, but probably all were completed before Jesus. Almost as soon as individual books were finished being translated, revisions began to be made.

Though most of these Greek Old Testament scrolls were primarily used by synagogues outside the land of Palestine, some were used within it. The synagogue of the Freedmen in Acts 6:9 was a Greek-speaking synagogue in Jerusalem consisting of Jews from the diaspora, which would have used Greek Old Testament scrolls.

Aramaic oral translations of Scripture arose because, after the people of Israel returned from Babylonian captivity, their Hebrew wasn't as good. They were used to speaking Aramaic in Babylon. Ezra's giving the sense of the law, "so that the people understood the reading" is often understood as the very beginning of the Aramaic Targums or Bible paraphrases (Neh. 8:8). There are a few of these. The Targums were written after the New Testament was finished, but sometimes they contain interpretations from the time of the New Testament. It's difficult to know which of these go back to the first century.

Where does this leave us? Various versions of the Bible in a few languages were available in Jesus' day.

WHAT SOURCE TEXTS DID JESUS QUOTE FROM?

The evidence suggests Jesus either quoted from or was informed by each of these versions. However, it's often difficult to tell if he truly is quoting from a non-Hebrew version. Ancient citation practices were more flexible than ours. Speakers and writers felt the freedom to adapt their source when they drew out its intention and it helped to clarify the point they were making. Authors could cite verbatim. But they could also freely adapt for rhetorical effect, to smooth a confusing referent in a citation, or to better communicate the sense of the author.² Sometimes, authors made their own translations of their source

as opposed to going directly to a pre-existing translation.

Because of this, it can be difficult to know for certain which source may underlie Jesus' reference to the Old Testament. Sometimes his words align with the Greek Old Testament, but he may or may not be quoting it. Either way, he's faithful to the ultimate source text (Hebrew).

WHAT LANGUAGES DID JESUS HIMSELF SPEAK?

This question helps us know which Old Testament Jesus used. He probably mostly spoke Aramaic. He was from a small conservative town in Galilee. We get some words of Jesus from the gospels preserved in Aramaic: *abba*, *talitha qumi*; *eloi eloi lama sabachthani*, *Cephas*, *rabboni*, *ephphatha*. Others in conversation with him say *Hosanna*. The inscription on the cross, in addition to Latin and Greek, is also in Aramaic.

Jesus also engaged with Pharisees and scribes in scriptural debate, and even the temple authorities on occasion. He read from the Old Testament in the synagogue. All this likely required Hebrew (especially reading from the Old Testament).

Jesus also grew up just four miles away from Sepphoris, a city in Galilee with a large Greek influence. How did Jesus talk to Pilate? Probably in Greek. Pilate would have had enough Greek as the *lingua franca* in the Roman East to govern locally.³

Where does this leave us? There were a variety of Old Testament translations around in Jesus' day—multiple versions in Hebrew, Greek, and oral translations that were later written in Aramaic. The average synagogue in Israel would likely have used Hebrew scrolls, but there were Greek-speaking synagogues in Israel, too. Jesus engaged with a very wide audience, probably in a variety of languages.

WHAT WAS JESUS' ATTITUDE TO THE SCRIPTURES HE WAS USING? AND WHAT DOES THAT SHOW US ABOUT THE UNDERLYING SCRIPTURE HE USED?

Jesus had an extraordinarily high view of Scripture. He says things like, "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). Iotas and dots were the smallest partial distinguishing marks of single letters. Jesus thinks those are around for good. Consider also John 10:34–36: "Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods

to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’” How do Jesus’ interlocutors engage him when he speaks to the unchangeable nature of Scripture? They’re trying to kill Jesus, but on this point, they agree! This is a point they share in common. Jesus had total perpetual confidence in the Scriptures, and so did his peers.

WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING SCRIPTURES JESUS AND HIS PEERS HELD TO?

The presence of multiple Bible translations in multiple languages didn’t stop them from thinking there was *one foundation*—one unbreakable underlying Scripture. Translations of the Scriptures were great. They gave non-native Hebrew speakers access to God’s self-revelation. They were acceptable. But what were the Scriptures they all went back to that held the line of unbreakability?

At this point, we need to think along two separate lines. First, what is the list of books the Jews held in common with Jesus? That is, what’s the canon of accepted books? Second, what is the text of the books the Jews held in common with Jesus? That is, when there were disagreements among Hebrew and Greek texts—usually small ones—which text ultimately wins? What are the right books? And what are the right words within those books?

WHAT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON?⁴

In the early books of the Bible, we see the beginning of the canon formation process. God makes a covenant with his people at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20–23. In Exodus 24:4–7, we read, “And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. . . . Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people.” What did he do with the book of the covenant? Moses placed authoritative instruction from God in and beside the ark of the covenant (in the holy of holies): “Then I turned and came down from the mountain and put the tablets in the ark that I had made. And there they are, as the Lord commanded me” (Deut. 10:5; see also 31:24–26).

These books consist of God’s covenantal dealings and relationship with Israel. In Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) practice, when two nations made a treaty or a covenant, the final documents were stored in the respective temples of each party’s gods so that they could not be changed. The gods they served

became the enforcers of the covenants. In other words, covenants in the ANE were the way to make something authoritative, binding, inerrant, and unchanging. And because this is from God, it is also clearly inspired. Inspiration and inerrancy are not modern doctrines that evangelicals recently made up. Rather, they are baked into the very beginning of the canon because they’re baked into what ANE covenants were.

Various passages in the Old Testament show the continuing canon formation process. You can look at Joshua 24:26; 1 Samuel 10:25; Jeremiah 36:1, 4; Isaiah 8:16; 34:16. Most intriguing is Daniel 9:1–2:

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

Do you see the distinction Daniel makes between “the books” which are a class of documents and “the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet” (as one of those “books”)? Daniel is referring to the canon which preceded his writing as “the books” and names Jeremiah’s book as one of them.

The canon came to a close after the days of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, as is witnessed to by various early Jewish groups. The rabbis would talk about a “daughter of a voice” or an echo of God’s will after the cessation of prophecy. They wrote, “After the last prophets, Haggai, Zacariah, and Malachi, died, the Holy Ghost stopped from them, but nevertheless they were using the ‘daughter of a voice’” (Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 9:13; probably 4th–5th c AD). The rabbis claimed guidance from God after Malachi but in a qualitatively different and lesser way.

WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON?

Our English Bible Old Testaments are arranged by chronology and content. The books are organized as law, history, poetry, and prophecy. This order generally follows the arrangements of Greek Old Testaments. It may be interesting to learn that the ancient Jewish order was quite different.

Structurally, there are three parts of the Old Testament canon. The first five books are the *law*. The next section is the *prophets*. These are eight books. Four are the former prophets which are

history books written by prophets (Joshua, Judges, the books of Samuel as one book, and the books of Kings as one book). Next in this section are the latter prophets: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the 12 (what we call the minor prophets as one book). The third section is the *Baraita*. These are divided into poetical books with a prose introduction: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations. Next come history books: Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah as one book, and finally Chronicles as one book. These scriptures were named by their sections: “the law, and the prophets, and the writings.” This was also abbreviated at times by “the law and the prophets” or simply, “the law.”

We see this in the New Testament. “Then he [Jesus] said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled’” (Luke 24:44). Paul also refers to Scripture according to this division: “In the Law it is written, ‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord’” (1 Cor. 14:21). This verse is interesting because Paul clearly calls the “prophets” “the law” because he cites Isaiah 28 as “law.” In other words, he uses the word “law” as shorthand for the whole Old Testament.

Each section has history books and another item. The name of the section comes from the non-history section. So, the “law” has law plus history, and so the name is “law.” The history books are arranged by chronology, and the non-history books are arranged by size in decreasing order. There are two exceptions. Ruth comes before the Psalms because it is the prologue to David, the main author of the Psalms. It provides David’s genealogy. And Chronicles sums everything up. It starts back at Adam and goes to the very end of the exile.

This numbering of 24 books is variously attested, including a first-century non-inspired Jewish document, 4 Ezra 14:45b–46, which says, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people.” 4 Ezra refers to 70 books treasured by his particular community, but 24 which were to be read by all Jewish people.

The arrangement of books comes from a *Baraita* in the Babylonian Talmud, a tradition of the rabbis that goes back to the first or second century AD. They say, “The Sages taught: The order of the books of the Prophets

when they are attached together is as follows: Joshua and Judges, Samuel and Kings, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and Isaiah and the Twelve Prophets. . . . The order of the Writings is: Ruth and the book of Psalms, and Job and Proverbs; Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Lamentations; Daniel and the Scroll of Esther; and Ezra and Chronicles” (Baba Bathra 14b).⁵ Ezra refers to Ezra-Nehemiah.

Do only non-Christian ancient sources support this arrangement? No. Jesus actually indirectly supports this ordering. In Luke 24:44, cited above, Jesus names “the Psalms” as the major book at the beginning of the writings. The Psalms were the first major book in the writings when the books were numbered as 24, in contrast to later and condensed lists, which begin with Job. Similarly, in some later lists, Esther ends the canon. But in Luke 11:49–51, Jesus ends the canon with Chronicles:

Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.

Abel comes from Genesis 4, and Zechariah is from 2 Chronicles 24. These are the first and the last books of the canon. All blood of the martyrs, from A to Z, Jesus says, comes due on his generation.

Notably absent from the Old Testament canon of Jesus’ day are the apocrypha found in Roman Catholic Bibles. These are books like Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and additional chapters in Daniel.

It’s incredible that the Roman Catholics put these in. The apocrypha were never considered part of the Jewish canon. The Jews considered them edifying but not Scripture, just like we all own John Piper books and 9 Marks books and are edified by them and quote them all the time. But none of us is confused as to whether they are canonical.

Consider the evidence of 1 Maccabees, one of these apocryphal books. Three times we’re told that the Jews are unsure what to do because no prophet is around to instruct them. “And they tore down the altar and put away the stones on the mount of the house in a suitable place until a prophet would come to give an answer concerning these things” (1 Mac 4:46; see also 9:27; 14:41). The clear implication is that

if no prophet can instruct them, then no prophet is writing this book. In other words, 1 Maccabees claims not to be Scripture. For the Roman Catholics to claim that it is absurd. The consensus of Judaism was that no prophets were speaking or writing in this era. One brief example of this comes from Josephus, the first century AD Jewish historian. He writes, “Our history has been written since Artaxerxes very thoroughly, but it has not been considered of equal authority with the earlier records by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time” (*Against Apion* 1.41–42). Josephus says that since Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, there have been no prophets, so the Jews have been less diligent about preserving their history. Similar early Jewish evidence could be multiplied.

WHAT IS THE TEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The temple library stored the collection of books that were canonical for the Lord’s covenantal dealings with his people. The books stored in there were the canon. They governed the covenantal relationship between the Lord and his people. Copies were made of this text for synagogue or private use, and before the era of the printing press, it was inevitable for small scribal changes to be introduced.

However, the scribes who transmitted the temple text were extremely careful. Even non-Jewish ancient societies used extraordinary rigor when copying pristine texts. How much more the scribes responsible for transmitting the text stored in the temple! A number of ancient writers refer to this text. Here is an example from Josephus in his discussion of the passage in Joshua in which the sun didn’t go down: “Now that the day was lengthened at this time, and was longer than ordinary, is expressed in the Books laid up in the temple” (*Antiquities* 5.1.17).

Many bible scholars today claim that the Old Testament text was not fixed until around the second century AD. The reason for this is that lots of different textual readings are present among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are different from later major Hebrew codices. However, Anthony Ferguson has shown by studying scribal habits that essentially 100% of different readings among the Dead Sea Scrolls are demonstrably derived from and inferior to the much later codices from which our English Old Testaments are translated.⁶

What does this mean? The best extant Hebrew Old Testaments (these are the Aleppo Codex and

the Leningrad Codex of the 10th and 11th centuries AD), though copied later than the Dead Sea Scrolls (3rd century BC to 1st century AD), are more tightly related to the manuscripts from which the Dead Sea Scrolls were copied. In other words, the Aleppo and Leningrad codices are essentially in the relationship of model to copy (Dead Sea Scrolls). These manuscripts are the heirs of the text stored in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day.

That means you can have supreme confidence that the Old Testament you read today is essentially the same one that the Jews in Jesus’ day relied on. In summary, what can we say about the Bible Jesus used? Jesus used an Old Testament remarkably identical to our Protestant Old Testament, both in terms of books and text. However, the order of our English Old Testament follows a later arrangement, that of the Greek Old Testament.⁷

Jeffrey Timmons

Resources

¹ E. Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (1 Q Isaa)*, Vol. VI, *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah*, ed. J. van der Ploeg, (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 11–12.

² Christopher D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 306.

³ G. Mussies, “Greek in Palestine and the Diaspora” in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural, and Religious Life and Institutions*, Sec. 1 Vol. 2, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976), 1056.

⁴ This section is indebted to my professor, Peter Gentry. He’s a leading expert on Old Testament textual criticism and the world expert on the early revisions of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. And he will be here, at Mount Vernon, the evening of Saturday, August 15, to talk to us about the text and the canon of the Bible. You don’t want to miss that!

⁵ The order of the law is known by all and therefore unmentioned.

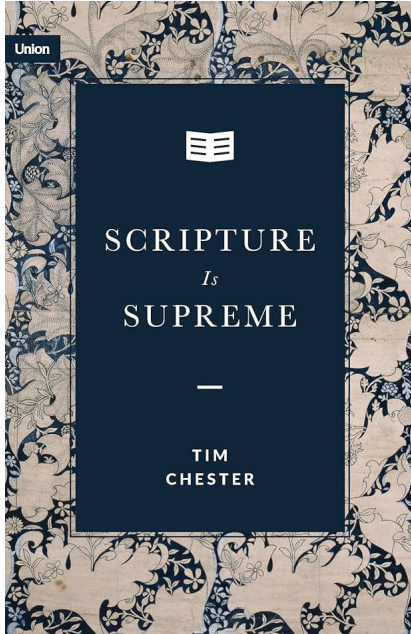
⁶ Anthony Michael Ferguson, “A Comparison of the Non-Aligned Texts of Qumran to the Masoretic Text” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018).

⁷ In order to see the significance and superiority of the earlier arrangement of the Old Testament for understanding the Bible’s plot line, see Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

BOOK HIGHLIGHT

SCRIPTURE IS SUPREME

Written by Tim Chester | Recommended by Olivia Davis



Perhaps the highest praise I can offer a book titled *Scripture Is Supreme* is that it made me so excited about Scripture that I often put it down to pick up the Bible instead! In five short chapters, Tim Chester shows that a high view of God is inseparable from a high view of Scripture. He emphasizes that Scripture transforms our lives when it is truly supreme in our hearts.

What I enjoyed most about *Scripture Is Supreme* was spending some time meditating on how precious it is that God has spoken to us. I'm a seminarian, and too often I approach the Bible as a textbook—an assignment instead of an opportunity to hear from the Lord. In class recently, a professor said that the Bible is our “ultimate epistemological authority.” I like that phrase a lot, but *Scripture Is Supreme* helped me remember that the Bible is so much more than a source of knowledge. It's a Living Word and meets me in my worst moments and my deepest questions. You could say that “ultimate epistemological authority” tickles my brain cells, and *Scripture Is Supreme* delights my heart.

Because of its clarity, heart, and brevity on a topic as critical as the Bible, I recommend *Scripture Is Supreme* to all Christians. However, people in two particular places might find it especially beneficial. The first are those longing to be diligent in their Bible study but struggling with boredom or an occasional “dry spell.” Chester's emphasis on Scripture being the very words of God is a sure recipe for reverence and joy in the Word. The second are those suffering or even feeling like God is silent in the midst of pain. Chester's book is a gentle reminder that at the end of the day, it is Scripture—not our feelings or circumstances—that grounds us in truth. And what's true? God sees us, is never truly silent, and has given us everything we need to know in His Word, which is truly supreme.

BOOK EXCERPTS

To say that Scripture is supreme is to say that the Bible has authority in everything that really matters—time and eternity, earth and heaven, humanity and God.

– “Whose Voice Matters Most?,” p. 18

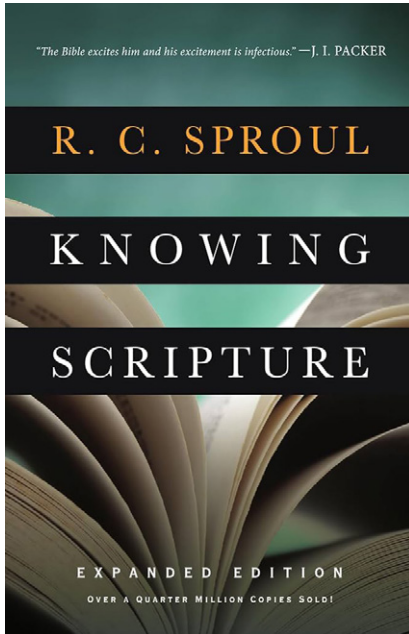
We accept the supremacy of Scripture because we accept the supremacy of its author.

– “Why is Scripture Supreme?,” p. 32

BOOK HIGHLIGHT

KNOWING SCRIPTURE

Written by R.C. Sproul | Recommended by Andrew Martinez



Knowing Scripture by R.C. Sproul is an excellent book for any student of Scripture who wants to strengthen their affections for the Bible. This book is not an in-depth academic work that goes into all facets of hermeneutics, but rather an introduction to the rules of studying Scripture. Sproul provides simple guidelines to the great task of interpreting and studying the Bible.

In this work, Sproul provides a wealth of insight into the task of in-depth study of God's Word. Two things stuck out to me most. The first was the topic of personal interpretation. This is the idea that, as Christians, we can, in fact, interpret Scripture from our own study and from the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This idea comes ultimately from Scripture but was reclaimed during the Reformation. Men like Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated for personal interpretation and fought back against the idea that only the church can interpret Scripture. This speaks to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers—as adopted sons and daughters of God, we enter into a priesthood with Christ as our great high priest. As priests, we have the ability and the duty to wrestle with the Bible and understand it through study. The second thing that stuck out to me from the book was Sproul's chapter on understanding the culture of

the Bible. He argues that for us to truly understand and glean the original intent of the biblical authors, we must seek to understand the culture in which they lived. This is important for us to do today because we need to mitigate the amount of modern cultural bias we read into sacred Scripture. Reading our bias into the text of the Bible is dangerous because it could very well lead us to conclusions the biblical authors did not intend us to make. This convicted me in my study of Scripture. It showed me I can be lazy in this area because it takes hard work. The task of understanding the culture of antiquity is hard but not impossible. It just takes humility and a willingness to learn.

Who is this book for? *Knowing Scripture* is for any humble Christian seeking to grow in their ability to study the Bible that our gracious God has given us.

BOOK EXCERPTS

We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work.

– Why study the Bible , p. 20

In a word, the better I understand the first century culture of Palestine, the easier it becomes for me to have an accurate understanding of what was being said.

– Culture and the Bible , p. 116

BIBLE READING PLAN

MAY

TAKE UP & READ

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message.
Take Up & Read!

May 1	1 Kings 8:22-26	May 17	Revelation 11:15-19
May 2	Hebrews 7	May 18	Revelation 12:1-17
May 3	Luke 11	May 19	Hebrews 12
May 4	Luke 24:13-35	May 20	Genesis 2
May 5	Hebrews 8	May 21	Genesis 4
May 6	John 20	May 22	Genesis 3:8-15
May 7	Psalms 22	May 23	Hebrews 13
May 8	Deuteronomy 18:15-22	May 24	Revelation 12:1-17
May 9	Hebrews 9	May 25	Revelation 13:1-18
May 10	Luke 24:13-35	May 26	Daniel 7
May 11	Revelation 11:15-19	May 27	Isaiah 46
May 12	Hebrews 10	May 28	Romans 8:31-39
May 13	Psalms 96	May 29	Exodus 15:11-18
May 14	Hebrews 11	May 30	Psalms 2
May 15	Psalms 2	May 31	Revelation 13:1-18
May 16	John 21		

*Sermons in Bold

NEW MEMBERS



ALEX & LESLIE
AMARO



WILL & ANGELICA
BAKER



NOEMI
FELIPE



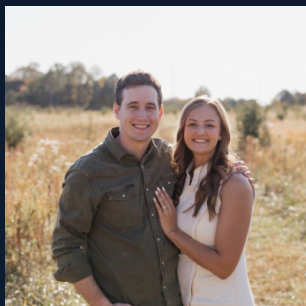
TREY & CHRISTINA
GOODEN



ANSLEY & KEVIN
JOHNSON



WILL & ELIZABETH
KANG



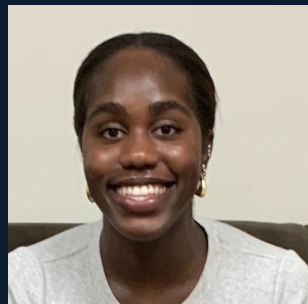
JOSEPH & SENA
LAMBERT



MATT & NICOLE
MILLER



BILL & EVELYN
RODGERS



RYENNE ULETT



TRISTEN ULETT



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