

Engaging with the Bible: versions, approaches and strategies

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Explanatory note

In this article, I use the term 'dyslexic' to describe a person with dyslexia for economy of space and to minimise reading.

Introduction

4 years ago I was identified as dyslexic. Being identified gave me an awareness of how dyslexia affects me. I wanted to use that self-awareness to find ways to engage with the Bible that work for me. In this article, I tell you about my journey as a self-aware dyslexic with the Bible to date.

Although dyslexia has a set of characteristics, everyone's dyslexia is unique to them. So what works for me won't necessarily work for another dyslexic. But sharing good practice enables dyslexics to *discover* strategies which they can then *try out* and *adopt* if they help. So by telling you about my own

experience, I hope to share good practice for dyslexics in the area of Bible study.

Something else I learned when I was identified was: **what is good practice for dyslexics is good practice for everyone else too.** So **while this article may be of particular help to dyslexics, it is also relevant to anyone who wants to engage with the Bible or support others to do so.**

Another reason for regarding the good practice in this article as being for everyone is that many dyslexics aren't aware that they are dyslexic. So they may not be fully aware of their difficulties and strengths. Therefore, when it comes to engaging with the Bible, they may lack the knowledge and tools they need to succeed.

So by regarding the good practice of this article as being for dyslexics and everyone, all dyslexics will benefit from it whether they are self-aware or not. It is estimated that 1 in 10 people are dyslexic.¹ Going by this statistic, at least 1 in 10 Christians - and potential Christians - are dyslexic. Therefore using the approaches to the Bible outlined in this article might enable up to 10% of the population to engage with the Bible who might struggle to engage with it through print alone.

Aims

This article aims to

- 1) Identify ways which may assist dyslexics (and everyone else) to engage successfully with the Bible
- 2) Explain how specific versions of the Bible may be particularly accessible for dyslexics (and therefore also for everyone else)
- 3) Outline various approaches and strategies that help me to engage with the Bible
- 4) Encourage dyslexics (and everyone else) to:
 - a) try out the different versions, approaches and strategies detailed in this article
 - b) adopt and / or adapt any that help
 - c) devise their own strategies and approaches that play to their strengths and address their difficulties

2 reasons for using a multi-sensory approach to Bible study

A multi-sensory approach makes use of a range of sensory learning styles such as visual (seeing), auditory (hearing) and kinaesthetic (doing).

Here are 2 reasons for using a multi-sensory approach to Bible study:

1) A multi-sensory approach makes successful learning more likely

Using a multi-sensory approach is good because if one sensory learning style (visual, auditory or kinaesthetic) doesn't work well or fails altogether, there are 2 others to make up the deficit.

2) A multi-sensory approach allows the person studying the Bible to 'overlearn' the content

If more than one learning style is successful, then they will reinforce each other. This will help people with short-term memory difficulties (a common feature of dyslexia).

New Testament

Versions, reading guides, accessibility and progress

Print and reading guides

When I was reading the NT in print, I used the **Good News Bible**. I also used Scripture Union's '**Daily Bread**' reading guides to help me understand what I was reading. It took me a few months to read through the entire NT in print this way.

Audio

A year later, I discovered an audio dramatisation of the **Contemporary English Version** of the NT by Riding Lights Theatre Company, produced by the Bible Society. Listening to a book is easier for me than reading it in print. So I was delighted to discover this resource and listened to it within the space of a week. I found it excellent and really enjoyed it. It's particularly accessible for me because:

- 1) It is dramatised with **different voices and accents**
- 2) The actors use all the **expression** that you could hope for. This really brings the content to life, as if it is a radio play
- 3) There is **dialogue** between different actors
- 4) It is **broken up into chunks** of manageable length

Old Testament

Feeling that I had familiarised myself with the New Testament, I started reading the Old Testament, from the beginning. As I'd found Riding Lights' audio dramatisation of the CEV NT so helpful, I looked for an audio recording

of the CEV of the OT. After a lot of searching online, eventually I found one called **podbible**, via the Wikipedia entry for the CEV. I use it in combination with the CEV in print as I work my way through the OT.

Versions

The versions of the Bible I use for the OT are an important feature of my overall approach as they make the OT accessible for me. I use different versions for print, audio and pictures as follows:

Version	I use this version for...
Contemporary English Version	Print
Contemporary English Version - podbible	Audio
Good News Colour Reference edition	Pictures

How these versions make the Bible accessible for me

1. Contemporary English Version in print format

Out of the versions of the Bible I've tried in print, the CEV is the only one that I can understand.

What is dyslexia-friendly about the CEV in print format?

The CEV's dyslexia-friendly features include:

1) Subject headings placed in the margin

The CEV edition published by Thomas Nelson places the subject headings in the margin rather than within the text. Headings placed in the margin are excellent for dyslexics because they:

- a) give the '**gist**' of the whole chapter. (Having the 'gist' of a passage of text before I read it is very helpful)
- b) **summarise** each section (I find summarising difficult so if summaries are provided, this is really helpful)
- c) are **easy to find** - I can refer to them whenever I need. (Due to short-term memory difficulties I may forget the heading at any point after having read it)
- d) **break the content down** into chunks. This makes it more manageable for me
- e) present the content in a **more visual way**, i.e. more like a picture than swathes of dense text

2) It is written to read like a novel

Narrative enables dyslexics to take in new information - we learn well through stories

3) Readability

- a) Short sentence length
- b) Simplified vocabulary
- c) Accessible sentence structure

4) Interest level

- a) Easy to read aloud
- b) Easy to listen to (this was a deliberate aim of the translators)²
- c) Captures and holds the reader's interest
- d) The text is appealing to the eyes
- e) The words and sentence patterns are familiar
- f) The thoughts are easy to follow and understand

5) 'Understanding the Bible' section

At the back of both the Thomas Nelson and the HarperCollins editions there is information that helps me understand the CEV:

- a) Maps
- b) Mini dictionary of biblical terms
- c) Explanations of Bible basics e.g. NT, OT, places, languages
- d) Timeline of the Bible

2. Contemporary English Version in audio format - 'podbible'

<http://podbible.com/podcast>

'Podbible' is a free digital audio recording of the CEV, read by volunteers in New Zealand. It is presented in podcasts. Each chapter is a separate podcast. The podcasts are all available on the podbible website.

How does the podbible help me?

I find podbible very helpful in the following ways:

- It is extremely **user-friendly**:
 - a) The podcasts are easy to find on the website
 - b) You just click on them to listen to them - no software to install
- At the end of each chapter, someone suggests 3 simple responses to the passage, through thought, prayer and action. I find these extremely helpful because they **reveal the underlying meaning** of the chapter to me. Things that are implicitly implied, rather than explicitly stated, are often difficult for me to 'see'. For example, I don't 'get' jokes. This is because of a dyslexic difficulty in non-verbal reasoning.

- It enables me to listen to the OT rather than read it in print. **I take in content better by listening** to it than by reading it

3. Good News Colour Reference edition

The Good News Colour Reference edition is an edition of the Good News Bible that has lots of excellent visual presentations of information e.g.

- a) photos,
- b) illustrations,
- c) maps,
- d) labelled diagrams,
- e) timelines.

How does the Good News Colour Reference edition help me?

- I find it easier to take in information through **pictures** than through words.
- I find it easier to take in information through words when they are **complemented by pictures**.
- If I fail to take in something I read in print, a **visual back-up** of the content means I can still take in the meaning.

Progress

So far I have reached Job. That has taken me about 3 years. It's been hard going at times. I hardly know any of the OT and some of it is extremely dry, e.g. long lists of names or detailed descriptions of buildings or procedures. But even the stories can be quite difficult to follow. In some cases, this is because they are not told in a particularly clear way.

Approaches

For me, the chapters of the OT fall into 3 categories:

- 1) Chapters that I can follow using an 8-step multi-sensory approach I've devised, without any additional strategies;
- 2) Chapters that I need to use other strategies for, in addition to my 8-step approach; and
- 3) Chapters that don't tell stories e.g. lists of names or procedures

I take a different approach with each of these categories as follows:

Category	Approach
Chapters that I just need to use my 8-step approach for, without any additional strategies	My 8-step multi-sensory approach
Chapters that I need another set of	My 8-step approach + additional

strategies for, in addition to my 8-step approach	strategies
Chapters that don't tell stories	Role-playing and not attempting to remember the content

The rest of this article discusses each of these three approaches in turn.

1) My 8-step multi-sensory approach (for chapters I can follow without using any additional strategies)

In this section, I'm going to tell you:

- a) How my 8-step approach is multi-sensory;
- b) A few things about how I use this 8-step multi-sensory approach; and
- c) The 8 steps of my 8-step multi-sensory approach

a) How my approach is multi-sensory

- My approach is multi-sensory in that it uses seeing, hearing and doing:
 1. reading the chapter in print;
 2. listening to the chapter whilst squeezing a stress ball;
 3. saying out loud what I can remember of the chapter;
 4. dramatising the chapter; and
 5. discussing the chapter.

b) A few things about how I use my 8-step multisensory approach

- I engage with one chapter per session
- I use the approach each time although I use it flexibly - sometimes I just use some of the steps, rather than all 8
- I work with the support of a study partner who has a good knowledge of the Bible. I think I'd struggle without this support.
- My approach is always subject to review and alteration. For example, I suspect that incorporating the following techniques into it might help me further:
 1. Skimming the chapter before I read it / listen to it;
 2. Formulating some questions about the chapter based on my skimming of it;
 3. Reading the chapter answering those questions

c) The progress I make using this approach / motivation

It usually takes my study partner and me about half an hour to engage with a chapter using this approach. We aspire to do a chapter every evening. However, I struggle to motivate myself because the OT is so long and I don't have an overview of it, or any deadlines. This means that in practice our Bible study is very erratic. This makes it all the more difficult, because we are not benefitting from any momentum. I am planning to improve my motivation by:

- thinking of the OT as a series of books rather than one continuous one;
- gaining an overview of the OT; and
- setting myself a deadline for each book

d) The 8 steps

Here are the 8 steps to my multisensory approach then. I use this approach when it provides sufficient support for me to take in the content of a chapter. It acronyms - though not very memorably! - to:

L - listen

S - say

R - read

SR - say & revisit

D - dramatise

D - discuss

L - listen

R - remember

1 - Listen to an audio recording of the chapter

I listen to the chapter on podbible. Most of the accents are New Zealand ones, which is good because it means I really have to focus my listening. But I also keep my CEV open at the chapter in case there are any words that I can't make out. Many of the people who read for the recordings sound like ordinary members of the congregation, not clergy or actors. This makes it feel more **accessible** to me, as if I am sitting in church listening to someone read out a lesson whom I might chat to after the service.

Most of the recordings are **distinct**. There is no echo or background noise.

Another thing that is good about listening to a **recording** of the Bible for me, rather than listening to someone reading it live, is that I take in more that way. I am just using one type of processing (auditory),

rather than two (auditory and visual). One set of sensory data is enough for my processing capacity, whereas two sets overload it.

When I listen I **squeeze a stress ball** to keep my listening focussed.

2 - Say out loud what you remember

I say out loud what I remember of the chapter (without referring to the print version). My recall varies a lot: sometimes I have the gist and remember the details. Other times I can only recall one thing. No matter how much or little I remember **I just say whatever I can remember**. The objective is to make a start on the process by establishing what I have taken in at this stage. Then I can build on that in the subsequent steps.

3 - Read the chapter

I read the chapter in print from the CEV. I find listening first really helps because I tend to **take in content much better by ear** than by reading text. It also **takes the pressure off** me when I read. As my mind is not so absorbed in decoding the text (because the content is already familiar), I am better able to take in what I read.

4 - Say out loud what you remember and revisit the chapter

I say out loud what I remember of the chapter. I can usually remember a bit more here than in step 2. I revisit the chapter in print to fill in any gaps in my recall. I **keep doing this until I can tell the story** of the chapter, as if I am telling it to another person.

5 - Dramatise the story using props and movement

This is the fun bit! Now that I have the story in my mind, I reinforce / consolidate it by dramatising it. I don't role play the characters myself. **I use a small team of 'actors'**: 2 sand animals, a soft toy (which is a seal) and a pen. That is generally enough. I use the pen for prophets. I cast the other 'actors' depending on what makes sense to me, e.g. if a character's 1st name begins with an 'S' I use the seal. Sometimes my animals / pen represent an army or nation, rather than an individual. If you don't have any soft toys, just use whatever you do have e.g. wooden spoons, bottles, or create paper cut-outs - anything you can imagine as a person or group of people.

I sit on my sofa. I use the closed Bible as the 'home base' of the story i.e. the city / town that features most. I use the floor and different parts of the sofa as the different locations in the chapter. I **enact the story using these props**, moving the characters about, using their arms to signify their emotions, laying them on their back if they die and so on. At the end of the dramatisation, the characters all line up on a cushion, hold hands and take a bow.

I find that holding these objects in my hand and moving them about makes me feel as if I am taking ownership of the story. It also makes the story palpable and physical for me, not just mental. In terms of sensory learning styles, acting out a story is **kinaesthetic** ('doing') learning. It complements my visual learning (reading text / looking at pictures) and auditory learning (listening). In fact, **all 3 sensory learning styles** - visual, auditory and kinaesthetic - **complement each other.**

You could make video recordings of your dramatisations and watch them later to remind yourself of the story.

6 - Discuss the chapter

Now that I have a firm grasp of the story, I feel ready to talk about it. In this step I discuss with my study partner the **themes** and **compare** the chapter to other chapters in the same book or elsewhere in the Bible. We **ask questions, comment, and apply it to a 21st-century context.** Then we read a **commentary** to extend our understanding - either Scripture Union's 'Daily Bread' reading guides or Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. It's always reassuring when we find that even the authors of these resources are sometimes stumped by aspects of a chapter that we've found difficult to understand!

7 - Listen to a recording of the chapter again

If I am feeling especially keen, I listen to the chapter again on podbible.

8 - See how much you can remember the next day

The final step is to see how much of the story I can remember the next day. I use a few 'spare' minutes for this, for example if I am doing some housework, walking somewhere, waiting in a queue, or travelling on a bus or train. I **think through the dramatization as a prompt.** I find it helps me remember the story if I imagine myself sitting in the same place I used initially (my sofa), and using the same props I used. **The more times I go over the story in my mind, the more it sticks.** It's like memorising anything - the more you practise it in your mind, the stronger the memory of it will be.

2) Additional strategies

Sometimes my 8-step approach isn't enough. So I need to use other strategies to complement it. Think of them as a set of power tools which I employ for the really tough jobs. Here are these strategies then that I select from when I need to. I don't abandon my 8-step approach if I use them - I just use both approaches flexibly - whatever works:

a) Draw an annotated family tree

I found Chapter 22 in 2 Chronicles (which is about Athaliah and Joash) pretty much impossible to follow. For it my study partner and I used a big piece of paper to draw a family tree and annotated it with **details** to remember each character by. For example,

- we drew a **crow** over any kings' / queens' names;
- we noted **relationships** (e.g. half-sister, auntie, uncle), and identifications (e.g. despot, baby);
- we used **speech bubbles**, e.g. for instructions from God.

We then **pointed with a pen** to each character as we spoke through the story (step 5 of my 8-step approach). I had to work through the story a few times, prompted by my study partner, before I was able to retell it without help.

b) Use pictures for things that are described in detail

If something is described in a lot of detail, or would be easier to see in picture form than read in words, I look in the Good News Bible Colour Reference edition for a visual presentation of it. I find these really helpful in 'getting to grips' with the story because they give me an image in my mind. I can 'see' what the chapter is talking about, which can be difficult to imagine. A classic example is **Solomon's temple**. There is an **architect's reconstruction** of this in the GNCRE, based on the measurements and description given in the Bible. Another source of visual representations of information from the Bible is the internet, e.g. search google images.

c) Use film

Another source of visual presentation of the Bible is film, e.g.

- **The Pitch**. The Pitch is an annual film competition supported by the Bible Society. The films submitted tell Bible stories from a range of perspectives and are available to watch at <http://www.enterthepitch.com>
- **'The Bible'** mini-series that was broadcast on Channel 5 over December 2013 and is available on DVD. Scripture Union has created 2 accompanying resources: an e-book, 'Walking with the Bible eBook' and an App, 'The Bible Bank', that gives over 100 ideas for activities.
- **'Jesus of Nazareth'** directed by Franco Zeffirelli starring Robert Powell and **'Noah'** directed by Darren Aronofsky starring Russell Crowe

d) Use animation

- There are animations of the Bible online, ranging from home-made ones using lego to cartoons. I find the ones with **still images better** than motion ones. The motion ones give me too much visual information to process along with the narration. Try searching on Youtube and vimeo.

- There are also **dramatisations** online done by real people e.g. youth groups.

e) Use music

Oratorio

There are lots of oratorios written by classical composers. An oratorio is a musical dramatisation of a religious story. For example,

- Handel: the 'Messiah', 'Jephthah', 'Solomon', 'Israel in Egypt'
- Mendelssohn: 'Elijah'
- Berlioz: 'L'enfance du Christ'

I familiarise myself with Bible stories through the musical settings of them, either by singing them or listening to them. The music gives **rhythm, harmony and melody** to the words, which makes them **easy to remember**. Sometimes the stories are set very **dramatically or beautifully**, which also makes them vivid in my memory.

Other settings

There are also musical settings of biblical texts which aren't from oratorios. For example, the Scottish songwriter **Ian White** has done contemporary settings of the Psalms. English composer **Michael Hurd** also wrote some 'pop' cantatas for children which tell Bible stories: 'Jonah-Man Jazz', 'Swingin' Samson' and 'Prodigal'.

You will find many settings of **psalms** in contemporary English e.g. 'As the deer' which is a setting of Psalm 42 verses 1-2 by Martin Nystrom, published in 'Songs and Hymns of Fellowship'.

If you can't find a musical setting of a passage composed by someone else, you could **make up one of your own**. Engage with stories from the Bible through whichever style of music you enjoy.

f) Read the Bible in electronic print

One thing I would use an electronic print version of the Bible for would be to **search for keywords**, e.g. if I wanted to find the temple but couldn't remember it was Solomon's. Short-term memory is a common difficulty in dyslexia so my recall is often patchy. This means I need to be able to search using whatever I can remember.

3) Chapters that don't tell stories

Finally, I find the following strategies helpful for chapters that don't tell stories:

a) Role playing

For example, in Job, I pretend I'm Job or whoever is speaking in that chapter and paraphrase the chapter from their perspective. This seems much **easier** as it avoids having to convert the first-person narrative of the original into the third person.

b) Don't try to recall a chapter if it is a list of names

If the chapter is a list of names, rather than try to recall them, I **read the commentary**.

The Old and New Testaments: two other versions that might help dyslexics

As well as the versions I've discussed above, there are two others that might help dyslexics.

1. The Bible Society's dyslexia-friendly editions of the Good News Bible

In 2015, the Bible Society published a dyslexia-friendly edition of the Good News Bible version of Mark's Gospel and the Psalms. These are easier to read *physically* than the CEV in the following ways:

- 1) They are printed on opaque paper
- 2) The font is bigger
- 3) The size of book is A5 (and therefore bigger than the CEV pocket edition)

Obviously, these features do not change the *translation*, which remains exactly the same as in any other edition of the GNB. Perhaps the physical layout is more important to you than the translation or vice versa. Try them both out and compare how you find them.

2. 'The Message'

The Message is a paraphrased version of the entire Bible in contemporary English. It aims to 'engage people in the reading process and help them understand what they read'³. *The Message* gives me the 'gist' of a Bible chapter, and a version that I can understand. Having the gist and prior understanding help me when I engage with a literal or free translation e.g. the CEV. Furthermore, *The Message* is available free in electronic print, with options to customise the formatting, and in human-read audio. The only reason I haven't used *The Message* yet is I've only just discovered it.

Conclusion

In this article I've explained how adopting a multi-sensory, flexible approach, tailored to my own needs and abilities, helps me to engage with the Bible. Do you find the Bible difficult to engage with? Whether you are dyslexic or not, I hope that this article has let you see that engaging with the Bible can be a creative, skilful process and there are lots of things that can make it easier. May that inspire you to try out some approaches and strategies and find out what makes the Bible more accessible for you.

Three final tips for engaging with the Bible:

- 1) **Try out different versions, approaches and strategies** until you find what works for you
- 2) **Be flexible** in your approach

Be prepared to use whichever strategies work, in any combination, and change approach as required. Some chapters will only need you to strategize a little, others a bit more and others a lot.

- 3) Feel free to **adapt the ideas** above and **devise your own strategies and approaches** as you go along.

Footnotes

Footnote 1 [from middle of page 2]

See the factsheet 'What is dyslexia?' under the subheading 'General' at <http://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/links-and-resources> (available in print and audio)

Footnote 2 [from top of page 5]

"The CEV differs from all other English Bibles - past and present - in that it takes into consideration the needs of the hearer, as well as those of the reader, who may not be familiar with traditional biblical language."

Page v, CEV Thomas Nelson edition.

Footnote 3 [from middle of page 13]

<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Message-MSG-Bible/#vinfo>

References

Versions of the Bible

The Bible Contemporary English Version

1) HarperCollins compact editions

- All in UK English
- Each page is smaller than A5
 - a) Compact Blue Hardback published in 2000 ISBN: 000 220 2220
 - b) Compact paperback ISBN 000 220 2204
 - c) Compact hardback ISBN 000 710 9083
 - d) Compact white gift hardback ISBN 000 710 2992

2) Thomas Nelson edition

- In USA English (relatively few words differ from the HarperCollins edition)
- Each page is around A5 size
- Hardback published in 1995
- ISBN 9780 8407 1958 4

3) Podbible

- A free audio recording of the Thomas Nelson edition of the CEV
- Read in New Zealand by volunteers
- <http://podbible.com/podcast>

4) CEV New Testament in audio format

- An audio dramatisation of the CEV of the NT
- Produced by the Bible Society in the UK
- Performed by Riding Lights Theatre Company [professional actors]
- <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/new-testament>
- Available from the Bible Society
 - a) In MP3 format for £15:
<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/new-testament>
 - b) On CD for £25:
<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/9780564010974>

The Good News Bible

1) Holy Bible Good News Colour Reference edition

- Bible Society, 1976
- Each page is between A5 and A4 size
 - a) Paperback ISBN 0564 00821 4
 - b) Hardback ISBN 0564 00831 1
 - c) Art. Leather ISBN 0564 00841 9

2) Dyslexia-friendly edition

- a) Mark's Gospel
ISBN 978 056 405 0475
Published by the Bible Society in the UK, October 2015
<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/9780564050475>
- b) Psalms
ISBN 978 056 405 0376
Published by the Bible Society in the UK, November 2015
<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/9780564050376>

***The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene Petersen**

Published from 1993 to 2002.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Message-MSG-Bible>

Other resources

Songs and Hymns of Fellowship

- Kingsway Publications, 1987
- ISBN 0860 65528 8

TV Miniseries 'The Bible'

- Available on DVD
- Complementary eBook and App by Scripture Union:
- <http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/TheBibleTVSeries/3512942.id>

Webpage 'Resources to help you with your Bible reading'

- Digital resources listed in 4 categories: mobile, audio, visual and text

- <http://www.biblesociety.org.nz/get-resources/for-individuals/helpful-resources>

Webpage 'How to start reading the Bible'

- Advice from the Christian Enquiry Agency Ltd.
- <http://christianity.org.uk/index.php/a/how-to-start-reading-the-bible.php>

Scripture Union's Multi-Sensory Series

- Books that provide creative and practical ideas for Bible engagement
- <http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/Shop/Churchandministryresources/Multi-SensorySeries/67063.id>

Bible Reading guides produced by Scripture Union

- Daily Bread, Encounter with God, Essential 100 and Word Live (digital)
- <http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/Shop/Biblereadingguides/164493.id>

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