

Tutorial Guide: Texts, Terror and Proof-Texting – Reading the Bible Responsibly

Session Length: 1 hour

Audience: Mixed knowledge group

Facilitator Role: Guide reflection and discussion on how biblical texts can be used well or dangerously. No specialist expertise required.



Session Overview

Time	Section	Topic
0–5 min	Welcome & Introduction	What does it mean to read the Bible responsibly?
5–20 min	What is Proof-Texting?	The danger of lifting verses out of context
20–35 min	Texts of Terror	When the Bible is used to harm
35–50 min	Case Study: Slavery	How Scripture was used to justify and resist
50–60 min	Wrap-Up and Reflect	What does responsible interpretation look like?



1. Welcome & Introduction (0–5 min)

Say:

“Today we’re talking about how the Bible can be used in both life-giving and dangerous ways. We’ll look at how people have misused Scripture to justify oppression, how to avoid those pitfalls, and how to read the Bible with wisdom and care.”

Ask: - Have you ever heard a Bible verse used in a way that felt out of place, too simplistic, or even harmful? - Why do you think interpretation matters when it comes to Scripture?



2. What is Proof-Texting? (5–20 min)

Summary:

Proof-texting is the practice of pulling individual Bible verses out of their literary and historical context to support a position or argument. It often ignores the overall story, genre, audience, or ethical trajectory of the Bible. Sometimes done with good intentions, it can lead to distortion.

Examples of proof-texting: - Using Philippians 4:13 (“I can do all things...”) as a motivational slogan, without reference to its context of suffering and perseverance. - Taking 1 Timothy 2:12 as a timeless ban on women speaking, while ignoring passages that highlight women as leaders in the early church.

Discussion Prompts: - Why might someone be tempted to use Scripture this way? - What might be the risks of pulling verses out of context? - Can you think of examples where proof-texting is common in public or church life?

3. Texts of Terror (20–35 min)

Summary:

The term “texts of terror” (coined by scholar Phyllis Trible) refers to passages in Scripture that portray violence, injustice, or the marginalisation of vulnerable people, especially women. Some texts disturb us because of what they describe — others because of how they’ve been used to justify harmful behaviour.

Examples: - Judges 19 (the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine) - 2 Samuel 13 (the rape of Tamar by Amnon) - Passages about conquest and destruction (e.g. Joshua)

Discussion Prompts: - How should we read disturbing texts in the Bible? - Can Scripture be honest about human violence without endorsing it? - What would it mean to read these texts “on the side of the victim”?

4. Case Study: Slavery (35–50 min)

Summary:

The Bible has been used both to justify and to oppose slavery. For centuries, slaveholders (in various parts of the world) cited verses like Ephesians 6:5 (“slaves obey your masters”) to defend the practice. Yet others, such as William Wilberforce in Britain, saw in the Gospel a call to human dignity and fought tirelessly for abolition.

Key points: - The Bible includes texts written in cultures where slavery was normal. - Some verses appear to accept slavery as part of the social order. - The overall direction of the biblical story (especially through Christ) affirms the value and liberation of every person.

Discussion Prompts: - How do you respond to passages that seem to support slavery? - What principles help us read ethically today? - How did figures like William Wilberforce draw on the Christian story to challenge injustice?

5. Wrap-Up and Reflect (50–60 min)

Say:

The Bible is powerful. That means it can be used to bless or to harm. As readers, we are invited to approach Scripture with humility, care, and commitment to love.

Ask: - What stood out to you today? - What will you do differently when reading or quoting Scripture? - How can our communities become more faithful and just interpreters of the Bible?