

Reading through the Arabic Bible:

A sampling of realistic reading schedules

By *Basheer Abdulfadi**

No argument needs to be given for the importance to church planters in Arabic speaking countries of reading through the Arabic Bible. However, because it is a daunting task, many workers have not yet read the Arabic Bible in its entirety. The lack of a realistic plan may be the primary hurdle. The purpose of this brief article is to discuss realistic schedules for reading through the Arabic Bible in one, two, three, or four years. One of the schedules, a two-year plan that is currently being followed by two persons (near completion), is specifically tailored to help the average-level reader of Arabic advance by beginning with easy books and building up to the more difficult books.

Introductory comments

Any desire to read through the Arabic Bible must be accompanied by a firm resolve and a plan. A well-conceived schedule for reading can help to strengthen resolve. A realistic schedule should reflect your current level in Arabic and your schedule. The plans given here may not be suitable for everyone. It is my hope, however, that these plans can be readily adapted to meet your need.

A realistic, suitable plan is not the only ingredient for resolution and perseverance. If you can find someone who will

embark on a reading plan with you, the venture will more likely be successful.

All of the plans include the reading of the Old Testament. There is nothing wrong with beginning with the New Testament, but I deliberately want to appeal for reading the complete Bible. Many sound reasons can be given for this, among them the unity of the two testaments, the example of Christ in memorizing and preaching from the Old Testament (e.g., Matthew 5:17-20, Luke 20:17-18, 41-44), and the recognition of the authority of the Old Testament by Christ (Luke 24:25-27, 44-49) and the apostles (Acts 1:15-20, II Timothy 3:14-17, II Peter 3:15-18).

A one-year and a three-year reading plan

The one-year and three-year plans are both based on the reading plan of Robert Murray M'Cheyne which is available from the Banner of Truth Trust in pamphlet form for a nominal fee (see the references below).

The plan in its intended form includes two listed readings per day to be read in family worship as well as two "secret" or private readings per day. Both the family and private readings include a passage from the Old Testament and one from the New. If you follow this plan completely, you will read through the New Testament and Psalms twice,

* The author is a Western church planter working as a tentmaker in the peninsula.

and the Old Testament once in a year. The selections in the first three columns will take you through the whole Bible once in the year.

Obviously, by reading only one column a year, you have a ready-made plan for reading through the Bible in three years. If this plan is followed, I recommend beginning with the New Testament column in the first year, and progressing to the Old Testament columns in the last two years. Most certainly, the column beginning with Genesis should be read before the last column, which includes the post-exilic historical books, the wisdom literature, and the prophets. The poetic portions in the wisdom literature and the prophets are the most difficult to read. Reading through the New Testament and the historical books of the Old Testament before tackling the wisdom literature and the prophets is advisable.

The one-year plan is probably not realistic for those who have been reading Arabic for less than seven years or for tentmakers with busy jobs and young families. The three-year plan (reading one column per year) is eminently realistic for those who have been reading Arabic for three or four years.

The advantage of using M'Cheyne's plan is its clear, simple format. There are some disadvantages associated with the order of the books and their relative difficulty in terms of vocabulary and grammar. However, if your level is sufficient to maintain the pace, the disadvantages are not that great.

Completing the gospels and Acts provides a good foundation for the rest of the New Testament, and that in turn will provide a good vocabulary basis for the Old Testament.

A two-year and four-year reading plan

For me, the one-year plan was simply too demanding. However, I wanted to complete the Bible in less than three years. For this reason I wrote a two-year reading schedule based on the following desiderata:

1. Completion of the whole Bible in two years.
2. Easier books (narrative accounts, historical books, and familiar passages) should be read before harder books (poetic books, prophetic books) so as to build vocabulary and comprehension.
3. One day off per week, not to leave off reading God's word, but in order to "catch up" or perhaps to set aside some time for reading the Bible in your mother tongue.
4. Some slowing down for acclimation to the vocabulary and style when beginning a new genre. An example of a genre would be Pauline epistles. Although there is great diversity in Paul's writings, there is still a basic vocabulary and style that is traceable (unless the translation tilts severely towards dynamic equivalence, in which case the resulting style is usually far more uniform).
5. An attempt to reflect something of the priority of the task of proclamation in the order of reading. (There

is great potential for disagreement on the relative importance of say, Genesis and Romans. I have followed the editor of Seedbed in placing a high priority on some parts of the Old Testament.) When there was conflict between this desideratum and the second one, the plan fell on the side of reading easier books before harder books.

The plan thus conceived does not perfectly realize all of the above. The first three desiderata are achieved in the main. For the first year, there are usually two readings per day in both the New and Old Testaments, but with one day off each week. Sometimes there is only one reading per day in order to permit extra work on the vocabulary of a new genre. The New Testament is completed by the end of the first year. This means that the readings in the second year are entirely from the Old Testament.

At the time of writing, a friend and I have nearly completed the two-year plan, and have found the plan to be realistic and beneficial. The plan is most suited for those who can read the beginning books (the plan begins with the Gospel of John and the book of Genesis) without the need to look up words in every verse. Anyone who has finished a two-year, intensive course of Arabic and has continued to progress since completion of the course should be able to follow the plan as written, at least for the first year. The real test (and the most linguistic benefit) will come in the second year in the reading of the poetic and prophetic books.

A simple adjustment—reading only one column per day—will cover the whole Bible in four years.

Getting the most out of the reading

1. Choose one translation and do not switch around. You might consider using the translation that has the greatest currency in your area.
2. Choose a Bible with a hard cover (if possible) and clear print. Keep bookmarks at the current place.
3. Keep a notebook to record vocabulary and notes. Much could be said about vocabulary. You do want to increase your vocabulary, but at the same time, you do not want this to become a purely academic exercise. I usually jot down the vocabulary in the notebook to look up later. Exception is made if vocabulary is obstructing the entire meaning of the sentence.
4. Don't hesitate to use your English Bible to get the sense of the passage. In fact, it is sometimes useful to skim through the English passage before the Arabic passage. This is especially true if the genre or the subject is new.
5. Read for your spiritual benefit. If we do not grow spiritually from our reading of the word, the exercise will be of little benefit to us, and therefore of little benefit to our unbelieving friends and our brothers and sisters in Christ. This requires constant vigilance. *Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.*

Seedbed XV

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.

References

1. The detailed two-year plan is included with this issue of *Seedbed*. It can also be obtained from Seedbed Editor, PO Box 4006, Worthing BN13 1AP, England.

2. A copy of the M'Cheyne reading plan is included with this issue of *Seedbed*. It can also be obtained from *Banner of Truth Trust*, PO Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013 (USA), or 3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh EH12 6EL, Scotland. The ISBN number is 0 85151 401 4. There is a minimum order of 10 (about \$1.00), but you can give extra copies to your friends.