

# INTERPRETATION



WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The unfolding of your words gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple.

- PSALM 119:130 -

## WHY DO WE NEED TO INTERPRET?

As we begin looking into the topic of interpretation it is important to remember some preliminary points about the nature and role of interpretation. Consider the following:

1. **BECAUSE WE ALREADY INTERPRET** – The process of interpretation begins with us having to acknowledge that we already interpret the scripture. There is this illusion we can have that we somehow come to the Bible openly without any influences in our lives. This is not true. Every time we open the Bible and read, every time we say “this is what the Word says,” every time we hear a sermon applying the Word to our lives, every time we read a devotional, we are interpreting and/or receiving an interpretation of the Bible. We come to the text with preconceptions and ideas that are shaped by:
  - **Our culture** – We are western, American, individualistic, and materialistic. We are also a culture shaped by science, technology, healthcare services, Walmart, and McDonalds.
  - **Our tradition** – We have grown up in specific nations, in specific states, to specific families, with specific customs. We go to specific churches, with specific traditions, and specific ways of worship and belief.
  - **Our person** – We are each an individual. We view the world through the lens of our age, sex, personality, education, career, tastes, and life experiences.

Until you acknowledge this as a reality then you will never be able to separate yourself (to the best that it can be accomplished) from your own prejudices in order to understand the Word of God.

It is not a matter of IF you interpret the Bible, it is a matter of if you interpret the Bible well.

Most of the time we come to the Bible seeking to find golden nuggets of self-help in our lives. We insert ourselves and present situations into the meaning of a text. We often will have Bible studies where we go around the room and ask, “What does this verse *mean* to you?” But this is a dangerous thing. Can a text mean anything? When we ask this kind of question, we are dealing with the topic of the nature of meaning itself. Where does meaning reside? Now I don’t want to get too technical here but it is important to realize some general points about the nature of meaning. Consider this diagram:

READER → THE TEXT ← THE AUTHOR

Where does meaning reside?<sup>1</sup> Does it reside in the author or in the reader?

The reason this needs to be brought up is because we can subtly ingest the idea that meaning resides in us. We as the reader decide what the text means. That is dangerous. Now we may say that only a green-haired flaming wokist liberal would do something like that, but those who are also orthodox, Bible believing, Spirit lead people can do this as well.

If the Word of God is true then it must be objective, and if it is objective then our personal opinions matter little when we come to it. If the Word of God is True then we have to come to it on its terms and not our own.

To not take seriously is to ignore the public nature of Truth.<sup>2</sup> We tend to make the Bible become an encyclopedia of golden nuggets of self-help truths. It becomes an *anthology of anthropology* focused excessively upon us. Prominent biblical scholar, missionary, and teacher of our age, **Walt Russell** (1948-2022) put it this way,

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<sup>1</sup> Consider the following sources on this topic: Walt Russell, *Playing With Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000), pg. 46-48; Ray Lubeck does in *Read the Bible For A Change* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), pg. 37-55. Also, the diagrams are inspired by Walt Russell and Ray Lubeck’s sections. Also consider J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays’ chapter “Who Controls the Meaning?” is *Grasping God’s Word*, pg. 191-201

<sup>2</sup> Walt Russell speaks of this when he says, “The fundamental of communication [is it is a] public creation.... Communication is dipping into the common pool of words, genres, and ideas and using these shared, reproducible, public instruments to express our personal, individual intentions....[By] thinking that we can somehow privatize interpretation, we undercut the appeal of the general, ‘public’ authority of the Bible.” (pg. 47-48).

“When we read a biblical passage primarily in terms of ‘what it means to me,’ we ignore the public, corporate meaning of the words and ideas, as well as God’s original intentions in His inspiration of the text... Without much information about the meaning of text, we are then free to read it subjectively and thereby privatize interpretation.”<sup>3</sup>

The Word of God is not our personal Play-Doh. We don’t get to morph and make it mean what we feel like it means. The Word of God means one thing. There is only one correct interpretation. Period. There are multiple applications of that one Truth but there is, at the end of the day, only one Truth being conveyed.

First goal of Biblical interpretation is to understand God’s message to His original readers. To do this requires us to understand obstacles:

- Cultural obstacles
- Literary obstacles
- Communication obstacles

**2. BECAUSE OBSERVATION IS NOT ALWAYS ENOUGH TO GRASP MEANING** – Sometimes just opening our eyes and observing is enough to interpret the meaning of a passage of text. As one person has rightly said, “The quality of your interpretation will always depend on the quality of your observation.”<sup>4</sup> For example, consider,

Multitudes, multitudes  
in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the LORD is near  
in the valley of decision.  
Joel 3:14 (ESV)

Many good-minded people have used this verse in referring to reaching the lost or declaring that there are many people who are lost “in the valley of decision.” They post it to social media, they put it on church billboards, they use it as the theme for their revivals, they display it on banners for missionary and evangelism conferences and all the rest. The problem is the verse has absolutely nothing to do with reaching the lost or evangelism.

The immediate context around the passage shows us that the “valley of decision” is the valley of judgement. It is the Valley of Jehoshaphat – literally translated “Yahweh Judges” (Joel 3:2). The godless pagan nations are called forth to war and are brought to the valley for their judgement and destruction. The “decision” in 3:14 is God’s (Yahweh’s) decision to doll out judgement and wrath upon these nations which inevitably leads to their demise.

So, what is the deal? Are people in the wrong for using such a verse for evangelism purposes. I think it can be argued yes. What people are doing, even without ill-will, is abusing the meaning of this verse. They do so when they rip it out of context for their own purposes. Even though they are innocently trying to reach people and truly do believe in the Word of God the fact is they are not accurately or “rightly dividing” the Word of God. In the end, to be frank, this does violence to God’s Word and it doesn’t matter how innocent of a reason may be given.

This all said, there are times when observation is not enough. While the Word of God is sufficiently clear (The Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture) not all parts are equally clear. Because of this we must tread lightly, thoughtfully, and intentionally as we read the Word of God. At this stage someone may say, “Just read the text!”

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<sup>3</sup> Walt Russell, *ibid*, pg. 49-50

<sup>4</sup> Howard Hendricks, *ibid*, pg. 202

Stop making it so complicated!" But it isn't always that easy and the answers aren't always that clear. Take for example 1 Corinthians 11 on the issue of head coverings,

<sup>2</sup> Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. <sup>3</sup> But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. <sup>4</sup> Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, <sup>5</sup> but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. <sup>6</sup> For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. <sup>7</sup> For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. <sup>8</sup> For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. <sup>9</sup> Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. <sup>10</sup> That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. <sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; <sup>12</sup> for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.

<sup>13</sup> Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? <sup>14</sup> Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, <sup>15</sup> but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. <sup>16</sup> If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

### 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (ESV)

Based off this passage and even within the surrounding context no amount of observation will tell us what is going on here. Are women to set down, shut up, and cover their heads in church services? Are men really disobeying God if they have their heads covered in church? We simply cannot know by **Observation** "What Does It Say?" what this passage *means*. It requires further steps in the process of interpretation, such as looking at background information culturally and historically which help to illuminate the passage (more on these later on).

- 3. BECAUSE WE NEED TO KNOW WHY WE BELIEVE WHAT WE BELIEVE** – This may sound like an apologetics argument born out of 1 Peter 3:15 and in some ways it is. The fact is our beliefs about what the Bible says is grounded in how we in fact are interpreting what the Bible says. So a question comes up: How are we getting our interpretation? We may claim, "Well the Holy Spirit told me!" But then you run into the problem of what happens when the other guy says the same thing? Who is right? Is God speaking out both sides of His mouth?
- 4. BECAUSE THE PRECURSOR TO AUTHENTIC TRANSFORMATION IS TRUTH** – If we desire to be changed by the Word of God, to experience the living power of the God of the Word, then we have to take seriously the Truth He has given us. There are some people who can live lies and not know they are living lies. These people are naïve. Then there are people who can live lies and know they are living lies. These people are hypocrites. In both cases the detachment of Truth from Lifestyle inevitably leads to insecurity, anxiousness, hatred, and an unfulfilled life.

God calls us to more.

For the Christian there should be an alignment between the Truth and our Lives.<sup>5</sup> The Christian philosopher and theologian **Francis Schaffer** (1912-1984) spoke of the importance of "true Truth" and our living up to it like this,

Christianity is not just a series of truths but Truth – Truth about all of reality. And the holding to that Truth...and then in some poor way living upon that Truth, the Truth of what is....<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Chip Ingram has an excellent discussion on this topic in *The Miracle of Life Change* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003), pg. 86-95

<sup>6</sup> Schaffer, Francis. *The Abolition of Truth and Morality*. (<http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42393&columnid=4545>)

What Schaffer says here is poignant. If Christianity is *really* True, if the Word upon which the Christian Faith is built is True, then we must have, in some poor way, an alignment of our lives to it. Schaffer echoes our Savior who before He was betrayed and went to the cross prayed earnestly for His disciples saying,

<sup>14</sup>I have given them Your *word*, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>15</sup>I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them in the *truth, your word is truth*. <sup>18</sup>As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in *truth*.  
**John 17:14-19 (ESV)**

Jesus prayed that His disciples become sanctified, that is become a people like Him; that they imitate the union of the Father and the Son; that they be set apart from the world. How was this to be accomplished? By the Truth. And what is the Truth? God's Word. What is the implication then? *That we cannot be the people God desires us to be without the Word of God in us*. And how is the Word of God in us? By knowing it. And how do we know it? By understanding it. And how do we understand it? By studying it. This is only accomplished by taking the Word of God seriously.

Taking seriously the Truth God has given us means taking seriously not only what He has given us (the words of sacred scripture) but also the ways in which He has given that Truth (the historical, cultural, and literary richness and nuances of the Word). In other words, you cannot live by the Truth if you do not rightly understand the Truth given and rightly understanding the Truth requires rightly interpreting it. The Apostle Paul would say it this way,

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the word of truth*.  
**2 Timothy 2:15 (NKJV)**

The wording "rightly dividing" means "to cut properly" or "cutting a straight line" as in handling a plow correctly by cutting straight lines to plant seed.<sup>7</sup> It has the implication of skill, craft, meticulousness, attentiveness with the goal to accurately preserve or reveal.

*What all of this means is that there is, in a very real sense, a corollary between interpretive study of the Word of God and the transformational power of that Word in our lives.* New Testament scholar (and charismatic) **Gordon Fee** (1934-2022) put it this way,

"[E]ven though the first task of the exegete is the historical one (to determine the biblical authors intended meaning), this first task is not the ultimate one. The ultimate task...is the Spiritual one, to hear the text in such a way that it leads the reader/hearer into the worship of God and into conformity to God and his ways... [This] task is not to be separate from the historical one, or added onto it at the end. Rather, determining the Spiritual intent of the text...belongs legitimately – indeed, necessarily – to the historical task itself."<sup>8</sup>

Another prominent biblical scholar, missionary, and teacher of our age, **Walt Russell** (1948-2022), put it concisely,

"[We] need to mobilize accurate information about the biblical text for potent spiritual growth through the text."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Discussions on the use of the phrase "rightly dividing" in 2 Timothy 2:15: <https://www.gotquestions.org/rightly-dividing-the-word-of-truth.html>;  
[https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2\\_timothy/2-15.htm](https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_timothy/2-15.htm);

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pg 11

<sup>9</sup> Walt Russell, *ibid*, pg. 56



# KEY PRINCIPLES TO INTERPRET **THE BIBLE**

Interpretation needs to exist for no other reason than because there are a lot of bad interpretations out in the world.

<sup>14</sup>Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. <sup>15</sup>And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, <sup>16</sup>as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. <sup>17</sup>You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. <sup>18</sup>But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

### 2 Peter 3:14-18 (ESV)

We are not exegeting this entire passage but it is interesting to note that Peter affirms that some things in Paul's writings are hard to understand. This is coming from the Apostle Peter who literally wrote scripture, planted churches, and healed through miracles. Here he is asserting that it is hard to understand or interpret what Paul has written at times. He also gives us insight into the types of people who tend to twist or distort the Scriptures: (a) *ignorant people* and (b) *unstable people*. So ignorance is a means of distorting or twisting Scripture just as much as instability is.

Here are some core principles:

## A A TEXT CANNOT MEAN WHAT IT NEVER MEANT

In Lewis Carol's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) there is an exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty that is quite insightful. It goes like this,

"There are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents—"

"Certainly," said Alice.

"And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."<sup>10</sup>

We may have heard the phrase, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." This phrase implies that the value or concept of beauty is based on the personal preferences of people. I like the painting you don't – just like you like certain ice-cream flavors and I don't. This idea can be applied to how we interpret texts.

There are some who argue that the meaning of a text resides within the reader of the text, much like "beauty" lies within the eye of the beholder meaning resides in the "eye of the beholder." The problem with this is it leads to epistemological relativism. Applied to the Bible it means that everyone is left up to their own choices to determine the meaning of what the Bible says. So, you get a thousand people in a room to look at Bible verses and you get a thousand interpretations that are considered "legitimate" precisely because the meaning of those passages comes from each persons experiences and beliefs.

This understanding of meaning is disastrous.

Good interpretation is grounded in the original intent of the author not in the reader of that author. It doesn't matter how we feel about a passage of Scripture it matters what the author meant to convey in the passage they gave. "Meaning' is not our subjective thoughts read into the text but God's objective truth read out of the text."<sup>11</sup>

Conveying a message comes through a variety of filters – through language, through style of communication, through life situations, and so forth.

What this all means is that if we wish to interpret the Word of God faithfully we have to take seriously the Word of God on its own terms.

God worked in History to accomplish His revelation. When He spoke His *timelessly transcendent Word* into space and time, He did so through human authors, with all their personalities and styles. When He revealed His transcendent Truth, He did so to Bronze and Iron Age Jews and Gentiles who spoke and wrote Hebrew, Aramaic, and koine Greek. When He decided to reveal His eternal will and ways to Mankind He did so through the immediate historical processes and circumstances of ancient customs, idioms, social-cultural structures, and value systems. He chose to do it that way, and that was His prerogative. The author of Hebrews makes this point right from the beginning,

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12/12-h/12-h.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Howard Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By The Book* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007), pg. 201



Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets...  
Hebrews 1:1 (ESV)

God chose to give His revelation at different times and in different ways.

What is the implication of all this for interpretation? Necessarily this means *we must consider the original world into which God gave His revelation if we are wanting to be faithful to the message it proclaims for us today.*

*Good interpretation means understanding the original world and ways into which the Bible was given.*<sup>12</sup> Why do we need to do this? Isn't highlighting words and "feeling" what the text means in our personal devotion time good enough? No, it isn't. We need to do this because, as one set of authors put it,

"Each passage [of the Bible] was God's Word to other people before it became God's Word to us."<sup>13</sup>

Full stop. Read that again. While God is speaking to us through the Bible, we cannot forget that He specifically spoke to people at the time the Bible was originally written. The original audience is not to be left out of the equation of the spiritual intention of the Bible's message any more than people living in 1000 A.D. or 2000 A.D. should be.

**You have got to understand: The Bible was written for us, but not exclusively to us.**<sup>14</sup> Get this drilled into your mind. We modern American Christians love to centralize the Bible on ourselves – that it is speaking to us and us alone at the expense of the whole body of believers throughout the history of The Church. It doesn't work that way. The Bible wasn't written in modern English and it wasn't written with our modern socio-cultural values, ideas, or idioms.

**REMEMBER: *The Bible is timeless Truth given in a timely manner.***

Fee and Douglas Stuart have said it this way in their popular *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (which is perhaps the most popular book on how to study the Bible ever written),

"[The] only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found *in the original intent of the biblical text...*[otherwise] biblical texts can be made to mean whatever they might mean to any given reader.... *A text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers.* Or to put it in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken or written. This is the starting point."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, God is a God of history, and because of this He is a God of continuity and consistency Who doesn't talk out both sides of His mouth. **There is therefore no dual spirituality with God's Word.** There is one Faith, one Lord, one Baptism (Ephesians 4), Christ is not divided (1 Corinthians 1), and God does not and cannot contradict Himself (Hebrews 6:18). Therefore, there isn't a 21<sup>st</sup> Century "spiritual meaning" to the Bible and a Bronze Age "spiritual meaning" to the Bible. What it meant then is what it means always. What the Bible meant for people fifty years ago is what it meant three hundred years ago is what it meant two-thousand years ago. *The only difference is how that timeless "meaning" plays itself out in the immediate timely contexts from one audience to the next across space and time.* It therefore can be said we **only "hear" what God is saying to us when we understand what God said to them.**

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<sup>12</sup> Consider the story of how David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) is always taught! 1) David chose five smooth stones when he faced Goliath, 2) God has given you Five Smooth Stones to face giants in your own life, 3) If you use these stones, you too will be victorious. Problem? Where is Jesus in all this? <https://www.1517.org/articles/david-vs-goliath-were-teaching-the-story-all-wrong>; <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/david-goliath-and-you/>; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/july/david-and-goliath-christ-centered-preaching.html>

<sup>13</sup> William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), pg. 312

<sup>14</sup> Dan Kimball, *How (Not) To Read The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), pg. 25-38

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pg. 33-34

What this all means is when we are studying the Bible, to go deeper and to get the true authentic meaning of its text, requires that we study the literary and historical context undergirding its words, sentences, paragraphs, and books. This is what we are going to turn to next. Walt Russell said it this way,

“We must understand what God said to the original recipients of an epistle in light of their specific historical context because the applications the readers were to make are part of what God intended to communicate. In other words, applications are not totally free choices that we make as readers. Rather, *they are a part of the meaning of the passage*. As readers, we must work within the intentions or boundaries established by the author.”<sup>16</sup>

“[Every] book has a group of readers in mind. These original readers are no longer available to the ‘real reader’ (the personal actually reading it today), and so the text yields only an ‘implied reader’ behind the intended message. The actual reader is called on by the text to read it from the standpoint of these implied readers and to identify with the problems and message intended for them. This process will help the actual readers to associate with the feelings and responses indicated by the text rather than with the meanings that they might read into the text... [In] the act of reading a text [you must] allow the text to determine [your] response by submitting to its internal dynamics and reordering [your] own life accordingly.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Walt Russell, *Playing With Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000), pg. 234-235

<sup>17</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), pg. 211-212

## B MEANING COMES FROM THE TOP DOWN

Here is a fundamental truth about interpretation: “meaning comes from the top down, not from the bottom up, from the larger units of Scripture to the smaller units.”<sup>18</sup> What is meant by this? It means that the meaning of particular words or phrases only happens within a context. In other words, this is a call to make sure that when we are considering what any particular verse in the Bible means we consider where it is within its context.

“Words are contoured, shaped, limited, or expanded by the immediate context (by the unit of thought) in which they are embedded.”<sup>19</sup> To put it another way,

“Words have meaning only in sentences; sentences have meaning only in relationship to other sentences in a paragraph (or some other unit of thought); and paragraphs have meaning in relationship to other paragraphs.”<sup>20</sup>

What this all means is we have to take seriously CONTEXT. Walt Russell said it this way,

“[We] tend to interpret verses or biblical stories primarily as free-standing units of truth...rather than as parts of the broader whole of a specific biblical book. This ignoring of both genre and context greatly hampers the transforming work of God’s Word in our souls!... [M]eaning comes from the top down, not from the bottom up, from the larger units of Scripture to the smaller units... Grasping this basic principle should be life-changing for our reading of God’s Word... If the goal is reading the Bible more meaningfully for spiritual formation, then seeing how the broader context profoundly affects our souls should also encourage us to embrace better reading practices.”<sup>21</sup>

Once the large literary blocks have been isolated, then the smaller units can be identified and summarized. These smaller units of thought may be several paragraphs or even a chapter or more. In most literary genres the paragraph is a key (Liefeld 1984, 90) to interpretation. One should never attempt to interpret less than a paragraph. As a sentence forms the context for words, paragraphs form the context for sentences. The basic unit of purposeful writing is the paragraph. In high school we were taught how to isolate the topical sentence of a paragraph. This same principle will help us tremendously in biblical interpretation. Every paragraph has one major purpose in the author’s overall presentation of truth. If we can isolate this purpose and summarize its truth in one simple, declarative sentence, we can complete our outline of the author’s structure. If our interpretation is alien to the purpose or thrust of the original author, we are abusing the Bible and have no biblical authority!

You may have heard: **a text without a context leads to a pretext.**<sup>22</sup> What does this mean? It means it is easy to assume a verse or passage or a saying means something or another when there is no clear knowledge of the background surrounding it. In other words, you can make anyone, or anything say anything you wish, how you wish, to the degree you wish if you choose to care nothing for the various levels of context that exist around that saying. Our news and social media world does this all the time with celebrities and politicians.

None of us like to be taken “out of context” do we? We will say, “You misunderstood what I meant,” or “That isn’t what I was saying,” or “You don’t have all the facts,” so on and so forth. What are we getting at? We are saying that people are not considering *all the surrounding variables* to be able to make a meaningful judgments on what has been said or done or written. What we are doing is *appealing to context*.

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<sup>18</sup> Walt Russell, *ibid*, pg. 65

<sup>19</sup> Walt Russell, *ibid*, pg. 71

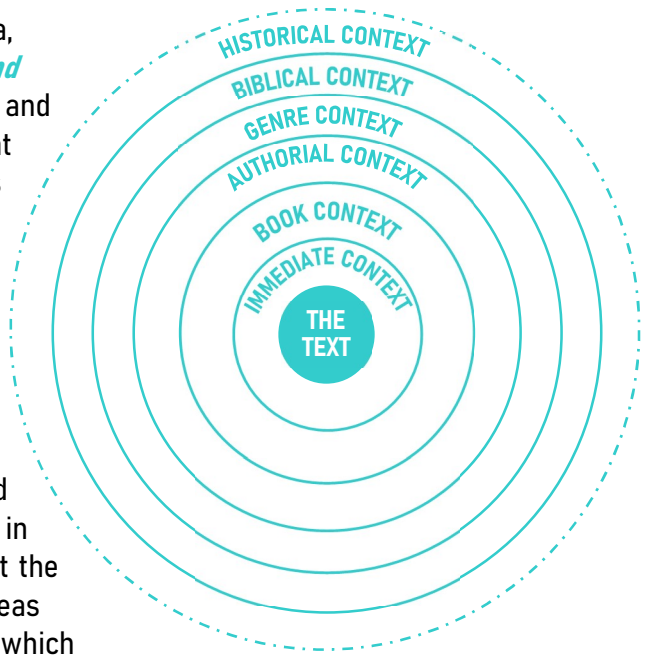
<sup>20</sup> Gordon Fee, “History As Context for Interpretation” in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pg. 20

<sup>21</sup> Walt Russell, *Playing With Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000), pg. 65-67

<sup>22</sup> William Klein, et.al, *ibid*, pg. 299

The context is the circumstances that surround a statement, idea, text, or event – it involves all the *whose, whats, whens, whys, and hows* of a particular situation. Until these questions are asked and answered we cannot in confidence affirm we have grasped what is going on. This applies to the Bible. The Bible has various levels of context that need to be respected if we are going to understand its message to us. *Consider the graph to the right.*

In the graph you will see that there are various levels of context that surround the text you are reading. When you are wanting to understand what a text is in fact meaning, then you need to take seriously the **immediate context** (the words and sentences surrounding it), the **book** in which you find those words and sentences, the additional writings or sayings from that **author** in other works they have done, the type of **genre** of literature that the author is writing in, the **whole Bible's** way of talking about the ideas in the text you are looking at, and also the **historical** setting into which those ideas have been given. All of this is part of the process of coming to understand *what the text means*.



*We do not treat any other book like we do the Bible.* With no other book do we randomly open it and start reading. With no other book do we flip to the end of one chapter to read a little bit, only to flip back to another chapter to pull out some random nugget of esoteric wisdom. We don't do this with magazines, textbooks, car manuals, or mystery novels. Then why do we take such a cavalier approach to the Holy Word of God? We must do better than this.

**NOTE:** *We do violence to the Word of God when we treat it cavalierly.*

We need to take as much diligence in how we are processing the Bible's text as we do with the various other readings we consume in our lives. This necessarily means coming to *understand the original world and ways into which the Bible was given*. Why do we need to do this? Isn't highlighting words and "feeling" what the text means in our personal devotion time good enough? No, it isn't. We need to do this because, as one set of authors put it,

"Each passage [of the Bible] was God's Word to other people before it became God's Word to us."<sup>23</sup>

Full stop. Read that again. While God is speaking to us through the Bible, we cannot forget that He specifically spoke to people at the time the Bible was originally written. The original audience is not to be left out of the equation of the spiritual intention of the Bible's message any more than people living in 1000 A.D. or 2000 A.D. should be.

**You have got to understand: The Bible was written for us, but not exclusively to us.**<sup>24</sup> Get this drilled into your mind. We modern American Christians love to centralize the Bible on ourselves – that it is speaking to us and us alone at the expense of the whole body of believers throughout the history of The Church. It doesn't work that way. The Bible wasn't written in modern English and it wasn't written with our modern socio-cultural values, ideas, or idioms.

**REMEMBER:** *The Bible is timeless Truth given in a timely manner.*

God worked in History to accomplish His revelation. When He spoke His *timelessly transcendent Word* into space and time, He did so through human authors, with all their personalities and styles. When He revealed His transcendent Truth, He did so to Bronze and Iron Age Jews and Gentiles who spoke and wrote Hebrew, Aramaic, and koine Greek.

<sup>23</sup> William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), pg. 312

<sup>24</sup> Dan Kimball, *How (Not) To Read The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), pg. 25-38

When He decided to reveal His eternal will and ways to Mankind He did so through the immediate historical processes and circumstances of ancient customs, idioms, social-cultural structures, and value systems. He chose to do it that way, and that was His prerogative. Necessarily this means *we must consider the original world into which God gave His revelation if we are wanting to be faithful to the message it proclaims for us today.*

Now let me interject. *Do not misunderstand what is being said.* There is no question that the Bible was written *for* our time. It was. It is a living Word not a dead letter. The Bible is not a dusty historical document or mere fanciful archaic literature – it is the active, cutting, cauterizing, transformative Sword of Truth (2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12). In fact, the biblical authors make it clear that what they wrote transcended their historically particular moment:

- ✓ The Apostle Paul, when quoting from the Book of Psalms to the Christians in Rome said,

*“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”*  
**Romans 15:4**

Clearly Paul is affirming that what was written in the Old Testament was not just written *to* the original Israelite peoples, but was written *for* the Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) living in his time.

- ✓ The Apostle Peter, when writing to encourage the persecuted Christians of his day affirmed,

*<sup>10</sup>Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>11</sup>inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>12</sup>It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.*  
**1 Peter 1:10-12**

In short, Peter affirms that the Old Testament prophets who prophesied were, to some degree and in some ways, aware that their prophesies concerned Christ, and that they were somewhat aware that what they prophesied and taught was for future audiences and not exclusively for their immediate audiences.

That all said, **the point is two-fold:** (a) The authors of Scripture were aware that they were writing to more than their immediate time and place – that in some way they were writing truths that transcended the moment they were in. BUT, at the same time, (b) the timeless Truth they communicated happened through the languages, geography, literary styles, socio-cultural situations, and religious and political circumstances of their times. Consider the illustration below:



God, in His providential way, worked **through the Biblical authors** to reveal **to the original audience** His **timeless truth** by means of addressing their immediate socio-cultural setting. That timeless truth is also **for future audiences** (like us) by means of understanding the way in which that truth was communicated to the original audience. In other words, **the timeless truths that are living and active within the Bible are coming to us through the filter of the original historical setting into which God spoke it.** Fee and Douglas Stuart have said it this way in their popular *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (which is perhaps the most popular book on how to study the Bible ever written),

*"[The] only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text...[otherwise] biblical texts can be made to mean whatever they might mean to any given reader.... A text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers. Or to put it in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken or written. This is the starting point."<sup>25</sup>*

In other words, God is a God of history, and because of this He is a God of continuity and consistency Who doesn't talk out both sides of His mouth. **There is therefore no dual spirituality with God's Word.** There is one Faith, one Lord, one Baptism (**Ephesians 4**), Christ is not divided (1 **Corinthians 1**), and God does not and cannot contradict Himself (**Hebrews 6:18**). Therefore, there isn't a 21<sup>st</sup> Century "spiritual meaning" to the Bible and a Bronze Age "spiritual meaning" to the Bible. What it meant then is what it means always. What the Bible meant for people fifty years ago is what it meant three hundred years ago is what it meant two-thousand years ago. *The only difference is how that timeless "meaning" plays itself out in the immediate timely contexts from one audience to the next across space and time.* It therefore can be said we **only "hear" what God is saying to us when we understand what God said to them.**

**Think of this additional analogy to help solidify what all this means:** It is like communicating astrophysics to an elementary student compared to a high school student compared to a third-year college student. How you are communicating the Truth of astrophysics is different in each situation (you use different words, different inflection, different examples...ect) and how those students process and apply that information is different, but the substance, or intended meaning, and the fundamental principles within astrophysics, are the same. This is the same way with the Biblical text. **Meaning is timeless while application is timely and situational.**

It is important to realize that "the smaller the passage being studied, the greater the chance of error."<sup>26</sup>

Consider some examples.

- **"Greet one another with a holy kiss":** the French do it, Arab believers do it, but by and large we do not. Are we therefore unbiblical? Why do we "disobey" that plain injunction, yet obey his injunction regarding the Lord's Table (**"This do, in remembrance of me"**)? If we find reasons to be flexible about the **"holy kiss"** (**GOG, 19**), how flexible may we be in other domains?
- Should we as a nation, on the assumption that God graciously grants widespread revival and reformation, pass laws to execute adulterers by stoning? If not, why not?
- Is the injunction for women to keep silent in the church absolute (1 Cor. 14:33-36)? If not, why not?
- Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again if he is to enter the kingdom; he tells the rich young man that he is to sell all that he has and give it to the poor. Why do we make the former demand absolute for all persons, and apparently fudge a little on the second?
- Similarly, when Jesus insists that if anyone is to become his disciple, he must hate his parents (Lk. 14:26), we must not think Jesus is sanctioning raw hatred of family members. What is at

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pg. 33-34

<sup>26</sup> William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), pg. 299

issue is that the claims of Jesus are more urgent and binding than even the most precious and prized human relationships (as the parallel in Mt. 10:37 makes clear).

The point of these examples is that context is what matters.

Various levels of context. For the immediate context consider these three points:<sup>27</sup>

- a) **Be sure to find the boundaries of the literary unit** – For a verse this is the surrounding verses, for paragraphs this is the surrounding paragraphs, for larger literary units this is the other literary units around it. To accurately get the immediate context you need to know where one literary unit begins and ends. The best way to do this is to consider change in theme, thought, argument, scenery, and such between paragraphs. How will you know? By reading and reading again. By observing and observing again the text. Be sure to look at the various observations of key connector words and transition words.
- b) **Try and determine the theme of each literary unit** – Once you have determined the boundaries of each literary unit you need to determine a theme for each of them. This may be a paragraph, or it may be a few paragraphs. So, as you are writing and highlighting in your Bible and/or notebook chunk it paragraph or group of paragraphs around various themes. The temptation will be for you to use the ones already given in your Study Bible but keep from this temptation! It is so much more rewarding to work through the text yourself than to have others spoon-feed you!
- c) **Determine how this literary unit relates to others around it** – What this means is tracking the flow and interconnectedness between paragraphs and larger groups of paragraphs. In other words, how does the story, argument, prophecy, or parable move along and connect with other sections within the book you are studying. *What you are doing is pulling back and looking at patterns within the text.* How does this connect to this? How does that relate to that? What is this here as opposed to there?

These three points are very helpful in getting you to take seriously the surrounding immediate context of the book or section of text you are studying. Again, it needs to be stressed we are not doing this to be complicated or to look smart! On the contrary, we are doing this precisely because we are humbling ourselves before the text. We are coming to the text on its terms. We are coming to the text with the desire for it to speak to us, and for it to do so requires that we take seriously how the text is organized and flows. *By recognizing how God organized the text we are going to hear God speak in the text.*

## Biblical Context

This is also an important part of interpretation. It is important to take seriously where in the Bible is this portion of text or book? Where in the history of revelation and salvation is this book located? There is a linear and progressive nature to God's revelation to Mankind.<sup>28</sup> As one set of authors have put it,

*“The linear nature of God's historical self-revelation infers that the written Word should follow a similar linear pattern of revelation. When reading Scripture, it's always important to determine at what point in revelation history a text is located. Considering the revelation-historical context of a passage in Scripture is based on the progressive principle, Scripture wasn't revealed all at once, and the various authors of Scripture didn't all possess the same degree of knowledge of God. As a general principle, notwithstanding the omniscient authorship of God the Holy Spirit, a human author couldn't have intended that which he couldn't possibly have*

<sup>27</sup> These steps are adapted from the following two sources: J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), pg. 159-161 and Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Inductive Bible Study* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), pg. 198-199

<sup>28</sup> Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Köstenberger make this point powerfully when they state: “Interpreting Scripture according to this developmental pattern additionally infers that there's a trajectory of theological development in Scripture. A nuanced consideration of revelation-historical context will accommodate the fact that even when incomplete, there's a movement in Scripture that is (and was) orchestrated by an omniscient God. Thus, even while revelation is progressive, it was always on the track of leading to the full revelation of truth in the completed canon of Scripture” (pg. 209)

known (in other words, that which was revealed later in time; cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12). If authorial intent means anything to interpretation, then the words of the biblical text must align with the time in revelation history in which biblical author lived."<sup>29</sup>

Now that we have looked at some of the fundamental principles of interpretation let us look at some skills.<sup>30</sup> These skills are not exhaustive but are helpful in honing and guiding you through the process of interpretation.

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *ibid*, pg. 209

<sup>30</sup> <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-6-principles-biblical-interpretation>; <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/exegesis/>;  
<https://lifecoach4god.life/2012/06/14/dr-d-a-carson-on-12-principles-of-biblical-interpretation/>





**KEY SKILLS TO INTERPRET**  
**THE BIBLE**

# 1 INTERPRET IN CONTEXT

To gain an awareness of the fullness of MEANING in a text requires that we understand the context of the text. This is the #1 skill. This means taking seriously the history, culture, languages, words, and literary styles that emanate from the Bible. There are three levels of context for our purposes: HISTORICAL, LITERARY, & GRAMMATICAL. Consider:

## A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When you read the Bible you come to realize just how great the chasm of difference is between our world and the world in which it was originally written. It is a foreign and strange world. The chasm is one of spatial distance (it's events took place in the Middle East and Mediterranean World), temporal distance (it's events took place over 2,000 to 4,000 years ago), and cultural distance (it's events took place in a culture that was tribal, collective, pre-scientific, agrarian, and hierarchical). These are not easy things to get past. If we do not recognize the chasm of difference between ourselves and the World of The Bible we will never be able to accurately interpret it.

Consider this quote on the subject of history and the bible,

“Historical realities are communicated through a text, and by its nature, a text is selective in what it records. For this reason, no full history of every incident exists. Rather, the biblical authors recorded the most significant historical events for understanding who God is, what he is doing in the world, and what he calls humanity to do in response. Thus, the biblical text provides the interpretive framework for understanding human history. What is more, the biblical story line focuses particularly on salvation history, that is, the record of God's mission in carrying out his plan of redemption for sinful humanity in and through the Messiah.”<sup>31</sup>

There are several areas that need to be considered with Historical Context in the Bible. Consider:<sup>32</sup>

- **GEOGRAPHY** – Where you live shapes how you live.
  - For example: Understand the process of the Conquest of Canaan geographically helps us understand what was really going on. Or understanding why Jesus chose Capernaum as the location of his Galilean Ministry considering it was along the “Great Trunk Road” which was the central trade artery in the entire region, where immense diversity occurred.
- **TIME** – When you live shapes how you live. Knowing when something happened in relation to other events is important. Was this before or after the Exodus? Before or after David? Before or after Pentecost?
- **POLITICS** – For example the prophets wrote within the context of a larger political arena. Israel was stuck within a trifecta of political battles in the Near East between Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. Each of these empires took over the region. Each of their styles of rule shaped the responses of the particular prophets Yahweh rose up to address His people. Or consider the political tensions in Israel between the Zealots, Sadducees, Pharisees, and Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. The very political tension in context between these groups was a major catalyst to the trial and execution of Jesus.
- **ECONOMICS** – Consider the economic success of the city of Laodicea or Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) compared to Smyrna. The wealth and prosperity were the catalysts by which the spiritual decay of the churches in those cities began to take effect.

<sup>31</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2021), pg. 85

<sup>32</sup> The following list with descriptions is but a summary. For a more thorough discussion on most of them consider: Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), pg. 161-167

- **MILITARY & WAR** – Consider all the wars that Israel was in. Understanding the people groups and why they fought is important. Consider Abraham defeated four kings with an army of only 318 men (Genesis 14). While yes God intervened in this do not forget the fact that he was located in Mount Hermon near Damascus ('Dan' in Genesis 14:14). Why such a detail? That is a canyon area with narrow confines in which a much smaller military force could defeat larger forces. Or consider the Canaan conquest.
- **CULTURAL PRACTICES** – There is so much in this area from family customs to marriage, to sexuality, to athletics, to everyday practices, to music and art. For example, the “Go up ye old bald head” (2 Kings 2:23) of kids making fun of Elisha and him bringing forth bears that devoured the kids is odd and strange to our ears. But culturally speaking pagans (Greeks and Romans) tended to shave, Jews let their beards grow but had to trim them, younger men wore them long and curled them with a sense of pride in thick abundant hair (Song 5:11; 2 Samuel 14:25-26). Baldness led to suspicion of leprosy which was considered a curse thus the mockery was more than mockery it was cursing upon the prophet.
- **RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS** – Now the food and materials offered up in these numerous sacrificial services had to go somewhere. What happened to it? Usually one of two things:<sup>33</sup>
  - (a) it would be sold in the marketplace after the ceremony was over
  - (b) it would be taken to the banquet tables for various within the temples where friends and families could dine

So, the question became, can a Christian partake of any of this stuff without compromising their spiritual authenticity?

Sounds piddly to us but it wasn't. The food was not just food. The food has theological. It held a deep spiritual meaning.

It was understood by the apostles and New Testament writers that the food given in the markets was able to be eaten because it was not in any sense connected to the ceremony or worship of pagan deities. It was just market food sold to all and anybody, indistinguishable from other food.

The historical context includes understanding the geography, social, political, religious, and economical contexts of the people, places, and events from that time period.

Why is this so important? It is important because we all too often compartmentalize the biblical stories in our minds from flesh and blood history. We may not do this purposefully but there is sometimes this idea of speaking of the Bible as if it is somehow its “own world” detached from our world. It isn't. The Bible is grounded in the flesh, blood, sweat, and conflict of the world we inhabit. The events that are described by it are not relegated to an island called “Bible-land” as opposed to “History-land.” The Bible is historical and thus it is objective.

To be a little provocative let it be said: To not be a person who takes Bible history seriously is to be a person that doesn't take the Bible itself seriously. You cannot be a person who loves the Bible and yet doesn't care to understand the world into which it was written. Full stop.

The Bible was written almost 2,000 years ago, and over 3,000 years for parts of the Old Testament. The language, values, mores, conflicts, technologies, analogies, nomenclature, and socio-cultural concerns in our world have changed in the past 30 to 50 years drastically. Now expand that to include different ethnicities, languages, geographies, and so forth separated from us by over 20 to 30 centuries.

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<sup>33</sup> Craig S. Keener, *NIV Application Commentary: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), pg. 124-125; Jefferey A.D. Weima, *The Sermons to the Seven Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pg.103-106

This is why it is so foolish for us today to spend countless hours reading books and listening to sermons that are self-helpism that cherry-pick scriptures to make us feel better with no care to understand the original world into which those very scriptures were written.

As one author has stated,

“God, the ultimate source, speaks through the human writers of Scripture (the immediate source) within the diverse cultures of their day. The receptors or recipients of that message interpret it from within other cultures. Therefore, the task of the receptor in the modern cultural framework is to recapture the total framework within which the sacred writer communicated and to transfer that message to our own day. The cultural aspects presupposed in the passage help interpreters get behind the words to the underlying message, understood by the original readers but hidden to the modern reader. This becomes a necessary prelude to the application of the text to current situations.... The cultural background not only deepens our understanding of the original text but also provides a bridge to the current significance of the text (see chap. 17). A delineation of the customs presupposed or addressed in the text enable us to separate the underlying principles (the doctrines used to address the original context) from the surface commands (the contextualization of the deeper principles from the original situation).”<sup>34</sup>

You do not have to be a professional historian of Greco-Roman culture or Ancient Near East civilization to do this. What you can do is read the openings of your Bible, look at the maps, read the timelines, always read the footnotes. Also get yourself a Bible dictionary and/or encyclopedia and/or concordance. There are higher level ones and intermediate level and beginner level. I will mention a few beginners:

There are also online resources to help give context historically as well as literarily:

- <https://bibleproject.com>
- <https://www.blueletterbible.org/resources/timelines.cfm>
- <https://www.biblestudytools.com/library/>
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/>
- <https://bible.org/>
- <https://biblehub.com/>
- <https://www.gotquestions.org/>

It almost goes without saying that *we suffer from an embarrassment of riches* in regard to the resources available for us to learn God’s Word. Also, understand that you do not have to know every minute detail about the past in

<sup>34</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 166-167

order to understand, but it is foolish, and downright ignorant and arrogant, to think and presume that you can understand a world separate from you by 2,000 years without any need to reference what that world was like at the time.

I will say it plainly and forcefully: *You cannot be a Bible student and have no desire to be a student of Bible history.* Examples of where historical context matters would be:

**Jonah and the Whale** – Jonah didn't go to Nineveh. If you don't know about Assyria you miss the power of the story. You miss the meaning. The Assyrians were a vicious people. The fundamental principle of Jonah is not the whale. The fundamental principle is God's grace shown to people unworthy of it, even the most unlikely and most vicious people.

I will say it again and again: If we want to have any hope of understanding what God is saying to us we need to understand how God said what He said and the only way to understand this is to understand the original intention in which He said what He said which means understanding the context.<sup>35</sup>

“Unless we maintain that the Bible fell down from Heaven on a parachute, inscribed by a celestial pen in a peculiar Heavenly language uniquely suited as a vehicle for a divine revelation, or that the Bible was dictated directly and immediately by God without reference to any local custom, style or perspective, we are going to have to face the cultural gap. That is, the Bible reflects the culture of its day.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pg. 25-35; William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), pg. 312-324

<sup>36</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), pg. 115

## LITERARY STRUCTURE: OLD &amp; NEW TESTAMENTS

- a. **THE OLD TESTAMENT:** In ancient Jewish tradition these 39 books were all on separate scrolls and were conceived of as a unified collection of sacred writings known as the TANAKH. Tanakh is literally an old acronym comprised of the first letters of this three-part division of Hebrew scriptures (consider the chart below with more detail):<sup>37</sup>
- TORAH** – The Law. This encompassed the Pentateuch which is the first five books of the Hebrew and Christian Bible. These books are the foundational sacred writings attributed to Moses, thus sometimes called “The Books of Moses.”
  - NEVI’IM** – The Prophets. “Nevi’im” literally translated as “spokesperson.” A collection of books with two sub-divisions: Former Prophet and Latter Prophets.
  - KETUVIM** – The Writings. In Greek they are called the ‘Hagiographa’ or ‘writings.’

OLD TESTAMENT			
TORAH	NEVI’IM		KETUVIM
Bereshit / Genesis Shemot / Exodus VaYikra / Leviticus BaMidbar / Numbers Devarim / Deuteronomy	<b>FORMER PROPHETS</b> Yehoshua / Joshua Shoftim / Judges Shmuel A and B / 1–2 Samuel Melachim A and B / 1–2 Kings Yishiyah / Isaiah Yermiyah / Jeremiah Yechezchial / Ezekiel Daniyel / Daniel	<b>LATTER PROPHETS</b> Hoshea / Hosea Yoel / Joel Amos / Amos Ovadiyah / Obadiah Yonah / Jonah Michah / Micah Nachum / Nahum Habakuk / Habakkuk Tzefaniyah / Zephaniah Haggi / Haggai Zechariyah / Zechariah Malachi / Malachi	Tehilim / Psalms Mishlei / Proverbs Eyov / Job Shir HaShirim / Song of Songs Ruth / Ruth Eichah / Lamentations Keholet / Ecclesiastes Esther / Esther Ezra / Ezra Nechemiyah / Nehemiah Divrei Yamim A and B / 1–2 Chronicles

- b. **THE NEW TESTAMENT:** There are 27 books that comprise the New Testament.<sup>38</sup>

NEW TESTAMENT				
GOSPELS	ACTS OF THE APOSTLES	THE EPISTLES		THE REVELATION
MATTHEW MARK LUKE JOHN	THE BOOK OF ACTS	<b>PAULINE</b> Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon	<b>GENERAL</b> James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude Hebrews	THE BOOK OF REVELATION

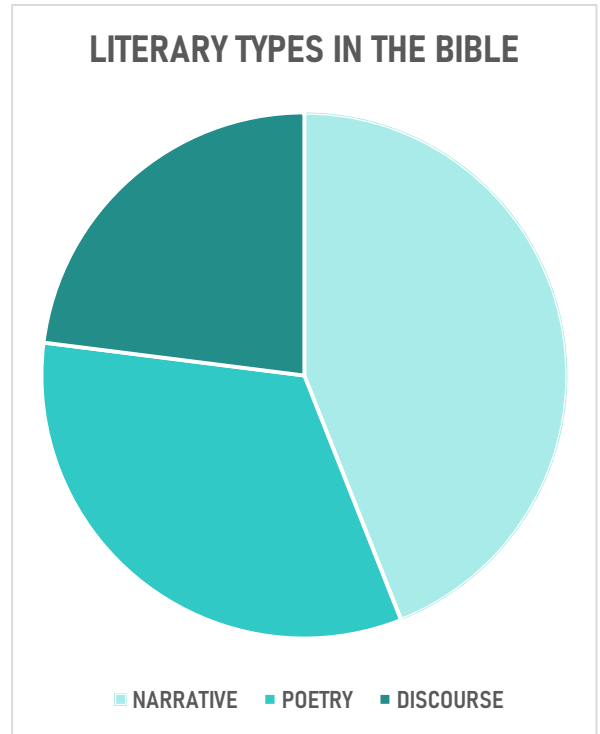
<sup>37</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/learn/tanak-old-testament/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/learn/new-testament-overview/>

## LITERARY TYPES IN THE BIBLE

A literary type is just an approach of writing that is distinguished from another – it is a mega-category of literature. The Bible has three broad types of literature that exist within it.<sup>39</sup> Those three are:

- a. **NARRATIVE** – Narrative makes up roughly 43% of the Bible. This type of writing tells a story of events in a sequence (introduction, climax, resolution) with characters, plots, and settings with the purpose to teach a lesson or explain the significance of the events within that sequence. The subject matter of narrative is far more focused on human experience rather than abstract ideas. If it is addressing abstract ideas it does so through human experiences.<sup>40</sup>
- b. **POETRY** – Poetry makes up roughly 33% of the Bible. This type of writing is full of dense creative language that links images with the purpose to ignite the imagination and challenge the readers view of the world often times through symbols, rhythm, and/or metaphors.
- c. **DISCOURSE** – Discourse makes up roughly 23% of the Bible. This type of writing is usually speeches, essays, or letters crafted with the purpose to present a rational sequence of ideas or thoughts or arguments in either a formal or informal way.



<sup>39</sup> I am making the distinction between *types* and *genres* as Ray Lubeck does in *Read the Bible For A Change* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), pg. 13-16. Also consider: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a996ff53917ee1a00704d88/t/5d6956b828d8080001cfc2d1/1567184579034/TBP\\_LiteraryStylesinth eBook\\_StudyNotes.pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a996ff53917ee1a00704d88/t/5d6956b828d8080001cfc2d1/1567184579034/TBP_LiteraryStylesinth eBook_StudyNotes.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Leland Ryken discusses this very well in *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), pg. 17-22. Ryken says powerfully, "It is commonplace that the subject of literature is human experience – not abstract ideas or propositions, but experience. The knowledge or truth that literature gives us is an awareness of reality or truth as it is actually experienced. Literature, in other words, *shows* human experience instead of *telling about* it. It is incarnational. It enacts rather than states. Instead of giving us abstract propositions about virtue or vice, for example, literature presents stories of good or evil characters in action. The tendency of literature is to embody human experience, not to formulate ideas in intellectual propositions" (17-18).

## GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVE, POETRY, & DISCOURSE

To understand the differences between these three Literary Types, consider an example: The Red Sea Crossing. We get a historical narrative account of the Red Sea crossing in Exodus 14,

<sup>19</sup>Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, <sup>20</sup>coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night<sup>Ⓜ</sup> without one coming near the other all night.

<sup>21</sup>Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. <sup>22</sup>And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. <sup>23</sup>The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. <sup>24</sup>And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, <sup>25</sup>clogging<sup>Ⓜ</sup> their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians."

<sup>26</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." <sup>27</sup>So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw<sup>Ⓜ</sup> the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. <sup>28</sup>The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. <sup>29</sup>But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.  
**Exodus 14:19-29 (ESV)**

Here we see a straightforward historical narrative account of what happened in the Red Sea Crossing. It is describing what happened to the people. But then in the next chapter, Exodus 15, we get a poetic song by Moses and the Israelites about the events that had just transpired,

<sup>8</sup>The waters heaped up at the blast of Your nostrils;  
the currents stood firm like a dam.  
The watery depths congealed in the heart of the sea.

<sup>9</sup>The enemy said:  
"I will pursue, I will overtake,  
I will divide the spoil.  
My desire will be gratified at their expense.  
I will draw my sword;  
my hand will destroy them."

<sup>10</sup>But You blew with Your breath,  
and the sea covered them.  
They sank like lead  
in the mighty waters.  
**Exodus 15:8-10 (ESV)**

There are several other places where there is a poetic text referring to the Red Sea Crossing. Consider just one more example from the Psalms,



<sup>16</sup>When the waters saw you, O God,  
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
indeed, the deep trembled.  
<sup>17</sup>The clouds poured out water;  
the skies gave forth thunder;  
your arrows flashed on every side.  
<sup>18</sup>The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lighted up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.  
<sup>19</sup>Your way was through the sea,  
your path through the great waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.  
<sup>20</sup>You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.  
**Psalm 77:16-20 (ESV)**

Stop and consider the differences and similarities between the Narrative and the Poetic. They are both about the same event but they are NOT the same. They are communicating Truth differently.

The **Narrative** text of Exodus 14 is structured like a historical narrative entry in a textbook. It is telling you WHAT happened in the Red Sea Crossing. Notice that the Narrative is much more informational as opposed to emotional. By contrast, the **Poetic** texts of Exodus 15 and Psalm 77 can say a lot in a very limited amount of space as they ignite your imagination with vivid imagery and emotional language.

Also, notice the anthropomorphized language about God, the human emotion attached to nature, and the universal and hyperbolic language that is used. None of this language is historically cataloged in the narrative account in Exodus 14.

Now consider the Red Sea account in a **Discourse**. Consider 1 Corinthians 10,

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup>and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup>and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup>and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup>Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup>Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup>Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." <sup>8</sup>We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup>We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, <sup>10</sup>nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. <sup>11</sup>Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup>Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. <sup>13</sup>No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

**1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (ESV)**

The 1 Corinthians 10 passage is discourse. It is theological argumentation using the Red Sea and the Exodus to make a point about the nature of Christian living in Christ in light of the sacrament of baptism.<sup>41</sup> This portion of text is nestled within a larger and multifaceted theological argument Paul is making stretching back to Chapter 8 where he begins discussing foods offered to idols, respecting weaker vessels who are our brothers and sisters, his apostolic authority (Chapter 9), his living in freedom from the law yet being all things to all people (Chapter 9), and so forth. He then brings up the nature of us participating “in Christ” through baptism before concluding in Chapter 10 on food offered to idols. What is the point of this? The point is to see how the Red Sea Crossing functions differently within Paul’s discourse. Here we see the focus of the Red Sea Crossing is not on its historical or emotional level but upon its theological implications. The Red Sea Crossing becomes a theological type, a shadow, of something deeper – baptism for New Testament believers. Notice also that the discourse is far more cerebral, that is it is far more abstract as it addresses ideas rather than a focus upon people. This is a distinctive mark of discourse.

C.S. Lewis celebrated the power of distinct literary styles when he wrote, People who have been readers all their lives seldom fully realise the enormous extension of their being which they owe to authors. We realise it best when we talk with children who haven’t lived long or read widely. They are full of goodness but they inhabit a tiny world. How sad is the adult who is content to remain in that world. It’s virtually a prison. My own eyes are not enough for me, I must see through the eyes of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I must see what others have invented as well. I regret that the animals cannot write books. Very gladly would I learn what face things present to a mouse or a bee; more gladly still would I perceive the world of smells that is charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog... In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do. AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM C.S. LEWIS

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<sup>41</sup> <https://endofthematter.com/2022/08/what-does-being-baptized-into-moses-mean-1-corinthians-10/>; <https://apologeticspress.org/does-baptism-into-moses-justify-infant-baptism-1060/>; <https://www.biblestudytools.com/1-corinthians/10-2.html>



## GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

### ■ WHAT IS THIS TYPE OF LITERATURE?

- **STRUCTURE:** A story or drama type of literature structured in a sequence of events with characters, plots, & settings.
- **PURPOSE:** To communicate what happened and explain why it happened. It focuses on illustrating human experiences with each other and GOD and ultimately demonstrating His power & promises.

As one author put it, "In every sense biblical narrative is theology seen in living relationships and enacted in story form."<sup>42</sup>

- This type of writing tells a story of events in a sequence (introduction, climax, resolution) with characters, plots, and settings with the purpose to teach a lesson or explain the significance of the events within that sequence. The subject matter of narrative is far more focused on human experience rather than abstract ideas. If it is addressing abstract ideas, it does so through human experiences. It can involve fact or fiction, it can be historical or fictional.

### ■ WHAT BOOKS OF THE BIBLE ARE NARRATIVE?

- MAJORITY OF THE TORAH
- THE OT HISTORICAL BOOKS
- PARTS OF THE PROPHETS
- THE GOSPELS
- THE BOOK OF ACTS

### ■ WHY THIS TYPE OF WRITING?

#### Why narrative?<sup>43</sup>

- Interesting to both old and young
- Pulls us into the action
- Depicts real life and thus easy to relate
- Portrays ambiguities and complexities of life
- Easy to remember
- God teaches us about Himself in
- Struggle and resolution
- Relates short incidents to bigger story

We universally resonate with stories. Stories tell and they teach.

Every worldview is grounded in a fundamental narrative account of the world. Biblical narratives are theological history. In other words, their primary purpose is not moral instruction, but worldview and identity formation for those whose story is told. Large-scale epic narratives address five ultimate questions which every worldview attempts to answer.

**DEEPLY HUMAN:** Story is a powerful medium to communicate to the deepest parts of our human experiences. Life itself is a story.

<sup>42</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *ibid*, pg. 220

<sup>43</sup> Grasping God's Word, need pages

WORLDVIEW & IDENTITY: Biblical narratives are “theological history” that address the ultimate questions of life: Origin, Meaning, Morality, & Destiny.

## ■ SOME KEY FEATURES

- **SELECTIVE & PURPOSEFUL:** Ancient narratives are focused on communicating big ideas & meanings, not merely telling the reader information.
- **STORY STRUCTURE:** Narratives have a structure of settings, plots, & characters with conflicts & resolutions.
- **REPETITION & SPACE:** To direct readers to what is most important, ancient narratives utilized repetition and textual space to emphasize central ideas.
- Ancient historical narrative is not like we do modern history. It is important to realize this when trying to interpret it. Ancient history is far more focused upon the significance of events that just retelling the events in a systematic and chronological way. Ancient history is far more thematic, far more psychological, and far more religious than modern history.

## ■ SOME KEY INTERPRETIVE GUIDELINES

- **OBSERVE SETTINGS, CHARACTERS, & PLOTS** – These are key. Consider:
  - **SETTING:** This is both **physical, temporal, and cultural** in nature.<sup>44</sup> It establishes atmosphere and tone, and is usually symbolic and thematic. They can often be **symbolic or thematic** of something far grander happening.

Physical places are often not just there to give you a geographic outlay of the land, it is thematic and symbolic of something far deeper and richer.

- **For example,** Egypt, Moab, or Babylon. These are physical places that are also deeply symbolic of sin and separation and enslavement. Likewise, mountains, rivers, and valleys can also be indicative of something deeper.
- **For example:** In the Bible, “the east” represents the human spiral of sin and selfishness as people moved from the garden of Eden to Babylon. Adam and Eve are banished “to the east” in Genesis 3. Adam’s son Cain is banished “to the East” in Genesis 4, and people move “to the east” to build the city of Babylon in Genesis 11:1-2. Eventually, Babylon becomes a superpower in the story that comes back to take over the family of Abraham when the Israelite people are exiled to the east in Babylon (2 Chron. 36:15-20).
- **For example:** The number 40 is a meaningful time period in biblical narrative that represents a period of waiting and testing. Noah spends 40 days and nights on the ark, Moses spends 40 days on the top of Mount Sinai, and the Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years (Num. 14:34) as punishment for rebelling after the Israelite spies investigate the promised land for 40 days (Num. 13). And because we have become familiar with this idea of 40 days as a time of patience and testing, when Jesus is tested in the desert for 40 days and overcomes the test, he reverses our expectations.

**How do we know if it is something deeper or just a tidbit of physical geography?**

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<sup>44</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*, pg. 35

The answer will be **repetition, elaboration, and biblical breadth**. In other words, if the physical description is repeated often, then there is something far more significant the author is trying to get across. If the author keeps elaboration of the physical description we can rest assured there is a deeper purpose going on. Finally, if those same physical descriptions are found across the breadth of the Bible, in history, in poetry, in apocalyptic literature, rest assured there is something theological at play.

- **CHARACTERS: *Actively be aware of the characters of a biblical story.*** This is obvious but still worth saying. We need to actively read about the characters of the bible in a way that is faithful. The characters drive the story forward as they unravel the intended purposes of God. The characters are key in several ways:
  - o Descriptions of people is significant
  - o Names of people gives insight into their nature
  - o Words and actions help reveal their motives and leave us to judge their behavior by seeing the consequences of their actions.
  - o You are not being called to be the characters.

O'Conner said it powerfully long ago, "Any character...is supposed to carry a burden of meaning larger than himself." What does this mean? It means that characters in stories are not just individual people but are representative of people in general.<sup>45</sup>

- **PLOT: *Actively be aware of the arrangement of the events within the story.*** You need to take seriously story layout. As questions: Why is this happening when it is happening? Why is this happening where it is happening? What happened before it and what comes after it?

Pay attention when the characters fail and choose radical trust in God and what exactly had to take place before they did so. It is at this point in the narrative when we are seeing the character of God displayed not only to that person but revealed to us now.

- **PAY ATTENTION TO BEGINNINGS & ENDS** - What gave rise to this narrative? What came before it and what comes after it? The interpretive unit for a story/narrative is "the scene" or the episode. You want to ask how this scene comes in and how it goes out. You want to pay special attention to its end or conclusion. You should look upon the "conclusion of a story as an implied evaluation of the characters and events that the story has presented. The outcome of an action is an implied evaluation of it."<sup>46</sup> Stories are about SHOWING over TELLING you theological and moral Truth. You are called to set back and think about what you have read. Why is this good? Why is this bad? How do I know? One central way is the outcomes of people's actions.
  - **For example**, the story of Lot and Abraham (Genesis 12-25). In Chapter 13 Abraham and Lot separate and Lot takes the cities, Abraham the country. There is an interplay for several chapters of Abraham being blessed because of his faithfulness and Lot continually making bad choices. It culminates with Chapter 19 where Lot's own

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<sup>45</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), pg. 83

<sup>46</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), pg. 86

daughters have incestuous relations with him and this gives birth to Moab and Ben-ammi the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites.

- **NOTICE REPETITION & TEXTUAL SPACE** - If an author keeps elaborating on a point, that is something to take note of. What do these details reveal about the character, the setting, the plot & the message? As one author has stated, “the most reliable guide to what a story is about is the principle of repetition. What keeps getting repeated in a story invariably becomes the central focus—the thing toward which everything points.”<sup>47</sup>
  - **For example**, consider the story of Gideon. Almost every incident in Judges 6-7 deals with Gideon’s sense of inadequacy. At the beginning (6:11) Gideon is beating out wheat in secret to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon for the first time as says “The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor” (6:12) Gideon gives a defeatist reply. When God affirms He will be with Gideon (6:16) that isn’t enough for Gideon and so he asks for a sign (6:17-18). Later the Lord calls for Gideon to tear down the altars of Baal and erect an altar to Him, Gideon does so but does so at night because he was afraid of his family and the people in the town (6:25-27).
  - **For example**, the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand... (Book of Judges)
  - **For example**, consider the Gospel of Luke and its repeated talk of the Spirit of God in the life and ministry of Jesus. Unusually repetitive talk of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of Luke. The Spirit is involved in the birth of John the Baptist (1:15), and Jesus’ conception (1:35). The Spirit “bears witness of Jesus” when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary (1:41-45). At His baptism the Spirit descends (3:22). Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit” and led into the wilderness (4:1). When Jesus gives His first sermon He was “in the power of the Spirit” and declares the spirit is upon Him (4:14-18). What is the point? The Spirit of God is overtly prevalent more so in the Gospel of Luke than in any other Gospel. Why? Consider Luke’s second volume, the Book of Acts. This book begins with Pentecost and centrally is about the Spirit of God, which was in Christ Jesus, working in His church continuing His ministry.
- **OBSERVE THE ROLE OF GOD IN THE STORY** - This a crucial point to understand. When reading stories, it is important to understand how one particular episode relates to the larger narrative at play. We cannot afford to be atomistic. We cannot isolate one aspect or episode of a story in isolation to the overall framework of the narrative. When you are reading a section of text, when you are trying to look at the characters you must keep in mind the presence of God in the narrative.<sup>48</sup> There is no more important character than God in the narrative. Where is God at? How does God react? What did God mean? What was God’s purpose?
  - **For example**, consider the ABSENCE OF GOD in the three rape narratives cataloged in the Bible. Genesis 34 (rape of Dinah by Shechem), Judges 19 (rape and dismemberment of a Levites’ concubine), and 2 Samuel 13 (incestuous rape of Tamar by Absalom).

<sup>47</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*, pg. 59

<sup>48</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *ibid*, pg. 103

- **RESIST MORALIZING OR PERSONALIZING** - A big problem we tend to have as modern Americans is making everything about us. We want to obsessively sing about how we feel about God, how powerful we are in God, how we can slay our giants, and so forth. This is not the functional purpose of biblical stories. As some authors have said,

“Narratives are precious to us because they do vividly demonstrate God’s involvement in the world and illustrate his principles and calling. They thus teach us a lot – but what they directly teach us does not systematically include personal ethics. For this area of life, we must turn elsewhere in the Scripture – to the various places where personal ethics are actually taught categorically and explicitly.”<sup>49</sup>

- **GRASP THE UNITS IN LIGHT OF THE WHOLE** - A big problem we tend to have as modern Americans is making everything about us. We want to obsessively sing about how we feel about God, how powerful we are in God, how we can slay our giants, and so forth. This is not the functional purpose of biblical stories. As one author has stated,

“The story is the meaning. The Intermixture of characters, events, realism, and archetypes add up to a picture of human fascination with evil and divine judgment against it.... [The] Bible is a subversive book. It draws us into its stories in such a way that we see into the dark corners of our own souls. But of course the world of biblical narrative is a world of light as well as shadow. If there is destruction, there is also rescue. Biblical narrative is simultaneously an encounter with evil and an invitation to participate in a great rescue.”<sup>50</sup>

- **READ IMAGINATIVELY:** When a biblical author takes the time to give details in a story that is an indicator you are being called to look more closely at what you are reading. You are being called to engage with narrative experientially.<sup>51</sup> This means we need to be actively engaged in the story, become part of it, visualize it, feel it, imagine it, in order to experience the Truth that is being taught. The Truth, the eternal Truth, being given through the story is only understood if the story is experienced within the reader themselves.
- **ALWAYS ASK: WHY RECORD THIS?:** You need to be asking what is the point? Why is this recorded in the first place? Keep asking this because the Truth is not always clearly stated in narrative. It is important to realize the “rule of significance” in trying to understand narratives.<sup>52</sup> This states that what the writer wrote is intended to communicate something. We need to remember this. They are writing what they are writing because they are communicating something significant about reality and human experience.
- **CONSIDER OTHER SCRIPTURE FOR CONTEXT:** Biblical Authors Assume you know other scripture. This really applies to all literary genres but especially to historical narrative. The narratives assume you know the stories that came before and the stories that come after. The stories you are reading are building on Truths from other narratives. Examples of this would be knowing 1 and 2 Samuel in order to understand 1 and 2 Kings. Kings shows trends in the royal family and in the nation of Israel that are alluded to in 1 and 2 Samuel.

<sup>49</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *ibid*, pg. 110

<sup>50</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), pg. 88-89

<sup>51</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*, pg. 34

<sup>52</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), pg. 82



## GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING POETRY

### ■ WHAT IS THIS TYPE OF LITERATURE?

- **STRUCTURE:** A type of literature using dense imaginative language that has a pattern and uses imagery, metaphor, and/or rhythm to communicate Truth.
- **PURPOSE:** To communicate Truth in creative, concrete, emotional, & symbolic ways. It stretches ordinary language to ignite imagination, emotion, and thought in the reader.
- Poetry makes up roughly 33% of the Bible. This type of writing is full of dense creative language that links images with the purpose to ignite the imagination and challenge the readers view of the world often times through symbols, rhythm, and/or metaphors. “a kind of literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of one’s experience or emotions by means of well-crafted language that is chosen for its meaning, sound, and rhythm.” Poetry is a kind of human language that says more, and says it more intensely than does ordinary language. SOUND AND SENSE: AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY LAURENCE PERRINE

### ■ WHAT BOOKS OF THE BIBLE ARE POETIC?

- MAJORITY OF THE PROPHETS
- THE PSALMS
- THE WISDOM BOOKS
- PARTS OF THE OLD & NEW TESTAMENT HISTORICAL BOOKS
- THE BOOK OF REVELATION

### ■ WHY THIS TYPE OF WRITING?

- **LANGUAGE OF IMAGES:** Poetry has the power to communicate deep Truth in a concise way using concrete images that help ignite the readers imagination and emotions to that Truth.
- **PROMOTES THE EXPERIENTIAL:** Poetry touches the human soul by calling the reader to not just think about what they are reading but to meditate on and experience it.

### ■ SOME KEY FEATURES

- **FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:** Poetic writing (broadly speaking poetry, wisdom, prophecy, or apocalyptic) employs heavy doses of imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and exaggeration to communicate Truth. In fact this is the hallmark distinction of poetic writing compared to Narrative and Discourse. Consider:

<sup>15</sup>The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous  
and his ears toward their cry.

<sup>16</sup>The face of the LORD is against those who do evil,  
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

**Psalms 34:15-16**

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

<sup>2</sup>I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust.”

<sup>3</sup>For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence.



<sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

**Psalm 91:1-4**

<sup>10</sup> The name of the LORD is a strong tower;  
the righteous man runs into it and is safe.

<sup>11</sup> A rich man's wealth is his strong city,  
and like a high wall in his imagination.

**Proverbs 18:10-11**

<sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,  
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

<sup>7</sup> And he will swallow up on this mountain  
the covering that is cast over all peoples,  
the veil that is spread over all nations.

<sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death forever;  
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,  
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the LORD has spoken.

**Isaiah 25:6-8**

<sup>8</sup> Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD?  
Was your anger against the rivers,  
or your indignation against the sea,  
when you rode on your horses,  
on your chariot of salvation?

<sup>9</sup> You stripped the sheath from your bow,  
calling for many arrows. *Selah*  
You split the earth with rivers.

<sup>10</sup> The mountains saw you and writhed;  
the raging waters swept on;  
the deep gave forth its voice;  
it lifted its hands on high.

<sup>11</sup> The sun and moon stood still in their place  
at the light of your arrows as they sped,  
at the flash of your glittering spear.

<sup>12</sup> You marched through the earth in fury;  
you threshed the nations in anger.

**Habakkuk 3:8-12**

<sup>22</sup> And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup> And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup> By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, <sup>25</sup> and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.

**Revelation 21:22-25**

- **PARALLELISM:** A verse form of writing where two ideas or concepts are presented next to each other to show their relation. The first line states a principle and the follow up lines further define, specify, expand, intensify, or contrast the first. It is kind of like a set of binoculars. As has been well stated,

“Parallelism focuses the message on itself but its vision is binocular. Like human vision it superimposes two slightly different views of the same object and from their convergence it produces a sense of depth.”<sup>53</sup>

Consider some of the following types of parallelisms that exist (this is not exhaustive):<sup>54</sup>

- **Synonymous Parallelism:** This is a form of parallelism where the second line repeats or echoes the first line with little or no added meaning. For example:

Therefore the wicked will not *stand in the judgment*,  
nor sinners in the *congregation of the righteous*,  
**Psalms 1:5**

But let justice *roll down like waters*,  
and righteousness like an *ever-flowing stream*.  
**Amos 5:24**

- **Contrast Parallelism:** This is a form of parallelism where the second line contrasts to the first line either by inverting the words or making stark distinctions. For example:

Whoever guards his mouth **preserves** his life;  
he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.  
**Proverbs 13:3**

Whoever goes about slandering **reveals secrets**,  
But he who is trustworthy in spirit **keeps a thing covered**.  
**Proverbs 11:13**

- **Intensification Parallelism:** This is a form of parallelism where the successive lines of the stanza build in intensity towards a climax. For example:

A Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
B according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
A Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
B and cleanse me from my sin!  
A For I know my transgressions,  
B and my sin is ever before me.  
**Psalms 51:1-3**

<sup>53</sup> Adele Berlin as quoted in William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), pg. 374

<sup>54</sup> There are many more forms of parallelism in biblical poetry but these three are sufficient for beginning study. For further depth on the nature of these types as well as additional types consider: Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 225-230; Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, pg. 180-188

- **CHIASM:** A way of structuring poetic verse where lines of the poem parallel each other in a mirror-image or reverse order. The reason for such an odd way of writing was for several reasons. One it made it easier to memorize large units of information for a predominately oral culture.

Second it was a beautiful use of language with the purpose of directing one's mind towards the central Truth or point being made. When you come to the center of the chiasm you have entered the realm of the deep meaning the author is getting across.

It is by looking at, studying, and meditating upon that center point that the surrounding context becomes more understandable. Here are some examples:

- Simple Chiasm Example:
  - (a) I got up this morning
  - (b) got dressed
  - (c) and drove into town
  - (d) I worked hard all day
  - (c) returned home
  - (b) put on my PJ's
  - (a) and went to bed
- Biblical Chiasm of Verses (Psalm 51):
  - (a) Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!
  - (b) Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
  - (c) **for you judge the peoples justly**
  - (b) and guide the nations upon earth.
  - (a) Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!

**PSALM 51:1-3**
- Biblical Chiasm of Part of a Book (Revelation 1-3):
  - (a) Ephesus – Loveless Lawyers Losing Identity
  - (b) Smyrna – Persecuted, Loved, & Enduring
  - (c) Pergamum – Compromised & Complacent
  - (d) **Thyatira – Idolatrous & Sensual**
  - (c) Sardis – Compromised & Dead
  - (b) Philadelphia – Persecuted & Loved
  - (a) Laodicea – Loveless & Lukewarm Losing Identity

Overcome by False Teaching & Compromise
- Biblical Chiasm of a Whole Book (Leviticus):
  - A. Ritual (Lev 1-7)
  - B. Priesthood (Lev 8-10)
  - C. Purity (Lev 11-15)
  - D. Day of Atonement (Lev 16)
  - C. Purity (Lev 17-20)
  - B. Priesthood (Lev 21-22)
  - A. Ritual (Lev 23-27)

## ■ SOME KEY INTERPRETIVE GUIDELINES

- **LINK YOUR EXPERIENCE & THINKING:** What this means is when you read poetic types of books, such as psalms, wisdom literature, prophecy, or apocalyptic writings you need to enter into the heart and mind of the author by experiencing emotionally and visually the images, metaphors, and symbols the author has brought forth in the writing. Just think of the powerful imagery of Psalm 23<sup>55</sup> and how it evokes such emotion and depth through its words,

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup>He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil

for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff

they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>Thou preparest a table before me

in the presence of mine enemies;

thou anointest my head with oil;

my cup runneth over.

<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

**Psalm 23:1-6 (KJV)**

You are called to feel this, see this, meditate on this, and be changed by it. There are green pastures, still waters, valleys of death, tables filled with bounty, and all the rest to be experienced in order that you may understand what Truth they are communicating. You see these things in your head and experience the power of the Truth. But if that imagery and experience are taken to a wooden literalistic level it destroys that Truth being taught here.

- **READ SLOWLY:** Even though poetry touches the emotions and imagination do not be deceived into thinking it is easily grasped. It isn't. Poetry doesn't wear its emotions on its sleeve. It calls us to deepness. Poetry is dense and requires us to read it slowly and analytically. This makes it very different from Narrative or Discourse which tend to carry their meanings more clearly (although even here there is an overgeneralization). Poetry requires thinking and meditation, two things in our McDonaldized Tik-Tok culture we frankly are not good at.

Speedreading poetry isn't a virtue it is a vice. Checking off that you read through Psalms or Revelation in a week doesn't show that you really understand what you read. This applies to all the types of writing in Scripture but especially to Poetry. Poetry calls for more. Poetry calls for feeling, chunking, chewing, reflecting, and thinking through. Because Poetry embodies its meaning through images and figures of speech it requires us to uncover and unpack them methodically and meditatively which means slowing down. This brings up the next point.

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<sup>55</sup> An excellent analysis of Psalm 1 for practice can be found in Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, pg. 169-176

- **THINK OUT THE LOGIC OF THE IMAGES:**<sup>56</sup> A very important question to ask yourself when reading poetry is, “Can I think out the logic of this image (metaphor, simile...etc.)?” There are two things happening with poetry: the language of imagery and the MEANING of that imagery to the Truth being communicated. The connection between the image and the meaning being communicated is NOT arbitrary! You have to get this out of your head. You cannot make the image mean whatever you want it to mean. There is no “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” with poetry. Rather there is a valid analysis or logic to the use of images (metaphors and similes). We need to recognize this and respect it.

To do this requires that you take seriously the imagery that is given and step back, think, and meditate upon the images and how they are communicating moral, spiritual, & theological Truth.<sup>57</sup>

So how do we go about unlocking the meaning of images? First, we need to break down our thinking between images and the meaning of those images. Ask questions like this:

- What is this image?* To understand images, you need to visualize and experience them. This is vitally important in order to unlock their meaning.
- What is this image trying to connote?* In other words, what is the image implying or suggesting as you think about the image. For a *practical example* think about the word “home.” Home denotes a place where people live, but it is much more than this isn’t it? Home connotes other things. It connotes family, security, provision, love, and so forth. For a *biblical example* consider: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalm 91:1). Shelter implies safety, protection, provision, and so forth. Shadows denote protection and safety.
- What emotions does this image bring up?* This isn’t a minor thing. In poetry emotions are a means of attaining the Truth. The poet wants you to feel Truth, thus feeling Truth means trying to pinpoint the type of emotion the image gets across. Are you called to lament, to fear, to rejoice, to praise when you consider the image? These are important questions to ask and answer.
- Why is this image used here?* In other words, in what way is this image suitable to the context of the poem itself? Why this image as opposed to something else?

We can also go beyond asking these questions by studying internal and external information about the images being used. Consider:

*First*, you need to see if the symbol/imagery is found within Scripture.

*Second*, you need to see if the symbol has historical background to it in extra-biblical sources.

Another important question to ask as you think out the logic of the images is to ask yourself:

*Why do I take some things figuratively and others literally?*

<sup>56</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, pg. 159-176; Leland Ryken, *Learning the Lyrics of God: How to Read Biblical Poetry*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/learning-the-lyrics-of-god>. An excellent quote from this article that summarizes the three-pronged questioning of imagery in poetry: “First, an image requires us to determine its connotations, either universally or in the specific context of the poem where the image appears. Abiding in a shelter or house (Psalm 91:1) embodies connotations of safety, protection, provision, proximity to others living in the same house, and loving relationship. Second, images usually evoke feelings. Naming the feelings evoked by an image — determining its affective meanings — is an entirely legitimate and helpful form of commentary. Third, we need to explore the logic of an image. Logic involves making accurate connections between two things. To explore the logic of a poetic image means determining why the poet chose a particular image for the experience that is being presented.”

<sup>57</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*, pg. 95-96

Asking yourself this question is a means of making you have to slow down and reflect on the logic of images used in poetic writings. It also makes you have to challenge yourself on your reasonings for believing what you believe. Put another way such a questions makes you have to think about the lenses you have that shape your hermeneutical choices.

For example, consider the logical comparison of “tongues” to “sharp arrows” in Psalm 57:4.<sup>58</sup> Both are inflicted in secrecy, over distance, but still are damaging. Both render the victim defenseless. Both destroy. There is even physical similarity of an arrow head to a tongue. What correspondence is there between them?

- **TRY TO GRASP STRUCTURE & MOOD:** This means trying to understand the literary limits of the unit of poetry you are studying.

Broadly speaking for Psalms this means the stanza, for Proverbs, this is the single sentence, for Prophecy it could be several verses thematically linked.

Try and read poetic books by carefully taking note where one structure of writing ends and another begins. Where does this particular hymn, psalm, prophecy begin and where does it end? How will you know? You will know by looking for parallelism, chiasm, inclusion, and repetition.<sup>59</sup>

When reading poetic literature like this it is vitally important to read the parts in light of the whole.<sup>60</sup>

- **TRY TO ASCERTAIN THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:** This is not always possible, especially with large portions of the Psalms or Proverbs, but if possible, try and understand the historical background of the book so that you may gain an understanding of the context that gave rise to the poetic writing in the first place. Also, it is important to study out the background of ancient and biblical metaphors and imagery.

**PRACTICE:** Try and take the stuff you have learned about poetry and apply it to Psalm 1.<sup>61</sup>

1 Blessed is the man  
    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law he meditates day and night.  
3 He is like a tree  
    planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
    and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.  
4 The wicked are not so,  
    but are like chaff that the wind drives away.  
5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
    nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
    but the way of the wicked will perish.

<sup>58</sup> A good example is discussed by Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*, pg. 95

<sup>59</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 238-239

<sup>60</sup> Grant Osborne discusses this in relation to Psalms but it does apply to all poetic style writing. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 240-241

<sup>61</sup> An excellent analysis of Psalm 1 for practice can be found in Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, pg. 211-215



## GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING DISCOURSES

### ■ WHAT IS THIS TYPE OF LITERATURE?

- **STRUCTURE:** Discourse makes up roughly 23% of the Bible. A type of writing that is usually a speech, sermon, or letter crafted in a logical and linear development of thought that uses straightforward language.

Discourse builds its arguments through logical development of thought. These movements of thought are connected by words such as: *like, and, therefore, because, so that, as a result, etc.*

- **PURPOSE:** Discourse is prose writing with the purpose to communicate Truth by presenting it in a rational sequence of ideas or thoughts or arguments in either a formal or informal way. By using logic and reasoning, discourse seeks to build an argument and then persuade the listener to change their behavior.

### ■ WHAT BOOKS OF THE BIBLE ARE DISCOURSE?

- LARGE PORTIONS OF THE LAW BOOKS
- PARTS OF WISDOM BOOKS
- NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES

### ■ WHY THIS TYPE OF WRITING?

- **APPEAL TO REASON:** Discourse writing appeals to the left side of the brain calling you to think rationally and logically about the Truths of Faith.
- **THINK THROUGH FAITH:** Discourse writings force you to come to terms with beliefs by making you think deeply about Truth and how it is to be lived out practically through the contexts of life.

### ■ SOME KEY FEATURES

- **SITUATIONAL WRITING:** Discourses are writings utilizing timeless theological and moral truths to address particular situations and contexts of the original audiences.

They are situational and thus intentional. In other words, the author is speaking to a particular audience that is in a particular situation and needs a particular encouragement or correction. For example, in the book of Romans Paul is speaking to the Christian community in Rome which is struggling with internal conflict because of all its differences regarding Jews and Gentiles. So, he writes a letter giving dense theology and then practical application of that theological truth in the life of that church. The whole first half of the letter is showing that Jesus is the center of the community, and it is Jesus that binds everyone together, and because of that, the Christian community can be wildly diverse and yet radically united. Paul wants the community to come together in the midst of all their differences.

- **MOTIVATIONAL:** Discourses are a call to action. They persuade someone to do something. Every speech, sermon, and letter was spoken and written to persuade someone to do something. This form of writing is meant to: (a) inform, (b) persuade, (c) command, (d) comfort, & (e) challenge or warn the reader and/or hearer. Because of this you need to ask, *“What is being asked of the audience in this text?”*

■ **SOME KEY INTERPRETIVE GUIDELINES**

There is so much that could be said here, but for the sake of time, consider but a handful of points:

- **READ AS A WHOLE** - Discourses are either speeches, sermons, or letters. You do not listen to nor read parts of a speech, sermon, or letter to understand it. You do not skip around at different points within the discourse to get little nuggets you want. To get understanding requires taking the discourse as a unified whole. The baseline skill in reading discourses (i.e. speeches, sermons, or epistles) is to *read them as a unified whole*.

*Read The Whole In One Setting If At All Possible.*<sup>62</sup> While this may sound strange it is highly recommended that as you are trying to study discourses you try and read the whole of the discourse in one continuous sitting. Discourses are different than Narratives and Poetry in this regard. To understand Narrative you have to read whole scenes and in Poetry you have to read whole stanzas or complete prophecies, but in Discourses you can only grasp the parts in light of the whole thrust of the speech, sermon, or letter.

*Speeches, sermons, and letters were given in one continuance communicative act.* Because of this, we need to start respecting them as one continuous communicative act. This means reading them as wholes and if at all possible in one sitting. This will be hard at first and can be daunting with our ever-shrinking attention spans but *try your very best* to read the entire discourse in a single setting and do so multiple times throughout your study. *This helps you see the forest for the trees so to speak.* You will be able to make connections between parts of the discourse you would otherwise lose if you only analyzed small chunks or nuggets.

Now this “reading as a whole” brings up another important connected point.

- **THINK IN PARAGRAPHS** – Another essential point when reading discourse writings is to think in paragraphs.<sup>63</sup> What this means is to understand the meaning of the text you need to understand the central point or theme of each paragraph. The theme of the paragraph shapes the interpretative framework for the sentences and words within that paragraph. The smallest unit of interpretation for a discourse should be THE PARAGRAPH! Take that to the bank. You need to read each paragraph as a unit of thought in itself and ask three subsequent questions:
  - a. What is the point of this unit of thought?
  - b. Why is that point being made here?
  - c. How does this point play into the larger argument/position being made?

And these questions bring up another important point.

- **FIND LOGICAL CONNECTORS** – Paragraphs are marked by a complete unit of thought that begins and ends with a “logical” connector. Some logical connectors would include but not be limited to: for this reason – because – therefore – and – now – so then – finally – if/then. Now consider some examples:
  - **General Example:**

POINT 1	Logical Connector	POINT 2	Logical Connector	POINT 3
Feeling healthy is great	“And”	Taking vitamins improves health	“Therefore”	I should go get some vitamins

<sup>62</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), pg. 156

<sup>63</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), pg. 67-70



- **Biblical Example:**

<sup>12</sup>“If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. <sup>13</sup>And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. <sup>14</sup>You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. <sup>15</sup>You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; **therefore** I command you this today. <sup>16</sup>**But if** he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, <sup>17</sup>**then** you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. **And** to your female slave you shall do the same. <sup>18</sup>It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. **So** the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.

**Deuteronomy 15:12-18**

- **Biblical Example:**

<sup>1</sup>I appeal to you **therefore**, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

**Romans 12:1-2**

- **CONSIDER THE SITUATIONAL CONTEXT** – This is applicable to all genres, but it cannot be stressed enough how important socio-cultural and historical context is to understanding discourses. Remember we said that discourses are situational and motivational – they are addressing particular issues going on in the lives of the original audiences and then are calling that original audience to be motivated to do something. The problem is we aren’t the original audience and we simply will miss the socio-cultural assumptions the author makes as he speaks or writes to the original hearers.

*Discourse writings have a very heavy assumption weight in them.* They will speak about events going on at the time and social and cultural traits of the hearers without giving an explanation about those things. This makes us, who are not Bronze and Iron Age Jews and Gentiles, have to try and understand clearly what the original writer and audience simply and naturally assumed.

Just as an aside it is important to realize this isn’t special pleading for biblical discourse, this applies to any and all types of historical discourse writing. You **MUST** know situational context to understand and interpret what you are reading. To get this across consider a few examples:<sup>64</sup>

- **“Letter from Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King Jr (April 16, 1963)** – What does this letter talk about? You cannot know unless you know history and read closely.

My Dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas ... But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your

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<sup>64</sup> As you pass out these excerpts DO NOT let the students know who wrote the speech or letter nor what time it is from. Ask them to see if they can figure out what the historical context is behind the writing. Letter from Birmingham Jail, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/letter-from-birmingham-jail>; Declaration of Independence, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>; Against the Infidels, [http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/against\\_the\\_infidels.htm](http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/against_the_infidels.htm)

criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms....

The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, "Get rid of your discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action....

- **The Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776) – What does this mean? You cannot know unless you know history and read closely.**

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

- **"Against the Infidels" speech by Pope Urban II (Nov 27, 1095) – What does the speech mean? You cannot know unless you know history and read closely.**

Most Beloved Brethren,

Urged by necessity, I, Urban, by the permission of God chief bishop and prelate over the whole world, have come into these parts as an ambassador with a divine admonition to you, the servants of God....

You must apply the strength of your righteousness to [a] matter which concerns you as well as God. For your brethren who live in the east are in urgent need of your help, and you must hasten to give them the aid which has often been promised them.

For, as the most of you have heard, the Turks and Arabs have attacked them and have conquered the territory of Romania as far west as the shore of the Mediterranean and the Hellespont, which is called the Arm of St. George.

They have occupied more and more of the lands of those Christians, and have overcome them in seven battles. They have killed and captured many, and have destroyed the churches and

devastated the empire. If you permit them to continue thus for awhile with impurity, the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them.

Notice what you can pick up and not pick up from reading these excerpts. Notice how looking for internal clues and needing to know the socio-cultural and historical background is vital to understanding these passages. Notice how the further back we keep going to less familiar eras of time the harder it becomes. *The same is with the biblical texts!*

*Biblical discourses require taking background seriously.* If you don't take it seriously good luck ever truly understanding or applying accurately and effectively what God has communicated. This means we need to start asking questions like: What gave rise to the need to declare or write this discourse (speech, command, essay, letter)? What is the socio-cultural and historical situation of this book? To answer these consider doing the following:

- o **READ CONTINUALLY & CLOSELY FOR INTERNAL CLUES** – You need to read a lot and keep reading. Pour over the discourse repetitiously. This helps you begin to get a sense of what exactly is going on with the situation behind the text. Repetitive reading will help illuminate your mind to the major ideas, concepts, and themes popping up in the book.

Three clues to look for in helping you understand the situation behind the book are: tone, frequency, and direct statements. Consider:

- a. **Tone:** What is the tone of the writing? Is it commanding, is it emphasizing, is it correcting, is it urgent? Tone can give insight into the situation.

- i. **Example:** <sup>10</sup>I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. <sup>11</sup>For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup>What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." <sup>13</sup>Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup>I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup>so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup>(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup>For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

**1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

- ii. **Example:** <sup>3</sup>I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup>always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, <sup>5</sup>because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace,<sup>8</sup> both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

**Philippians 1:3-7**

- b. **Frequency:** What theme or idea or issue is repeated often throughout the writing? This gives you insight into the situation behind the text.

- i. **Example:** Philippians repeatedly uses the word joy (some 20 times) throughout the entire book. Paul keeps calling the Philippian Christians to have joy even in the face of adversity.

<sup>18</sup> What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.... <sup>25</sup> I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup> so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

**Philippians 1:18-19 & 25-26**

- c. **Direct Statement:** What does the author say at the opening and the closing of the writing? Openings and closings of writings can give you insight into the situation behind the text.

- i. **Example:** <sup>6</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— <sup>7</sup>not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup>But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup>As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. <sup>10</sup>For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant<sup>Ⓜ</sup> of Christ.

**Galatians 1:6-10**

- ii. **Example:** <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

**1 Peter 1:6-7**

- o **READ CULTURAL-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND** – This cannot be overstated. You and I are not ancient Bronze-Age Israelites or First Century Gentiles. We do NOT know the details of what was going on at the time Leviticus or Deuteronomy or Romans was written. We *must learn* about the culture to understand the socio-cultural and historical situation surrounding the text. We cannot simply sit in a dark room and waiting for the Holy Spirit to “teach us” 10<sup>th</sup> Century Near East history. We need to work. We need to study.

Again, the role of the Holy Spirit in “teaching us” doesn’t mean He is going to be your English or History teacher. His role isn’t to teach us what the Greek genitive case is nor what phylacteries means. His role is to “illumine” the Word of God to our spirit; to awaken our spirits to be tenderized and transformed by the Word. His role is to enliven the Word of God in our lives to see its beauty and apply it to our lives. Consider some examples where such background is vital:

- a. **Biblical Example of Discourse - Levitical Laws:**

<sup>23</sup> “When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. <sup>24</sup> And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to

the LORD. <sup>25</sup> But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, to increase its yield for you: I am the LORD your God.

<sup>26</sup> “You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. <sup>27</sup> You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. <sup>28</sup> You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.

<sup>29</sup> “Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity. <sup>30</sup> You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.

**Leviticus 19:23-30**

Context is key here. You cannot hope to understand what is going on here without understanding socio-cultural and historical background to the discourse.<sup>65</sup> Consider:

- i. **Forbidden Fruit:** This was practical horticultural practice in the ancient world that comes to us today. There is a cyclical nature to the fertilization and production process of fruit trees in which within the first several years that a tree is planted its fruit should be allowed to stay on its limbs and fall off. This creates a process where the rotten fruit fertilizes and nourishes the tree. After 3-4 years the yield is far more abundant. God is here literally teaching these people horticulture to have future abundance.
- ii. **Eating Blood:** Eating blood was a practice in many ancient pagan cultic ceremonies, divinations and soothsaying rituals. Sacrifices were performed many times to offer blood to the gods of the underworld. Also, blood was always associated as the life force given by the gods and even God (Leviticus 17:11). Thus, in a sense, ingesting it was a magical rite of passage of “ingesting divine power into one’s body.” Therefore, such practice was forbidden.
- iii. **Soothsaying:** This involved trying to use animal entrails, some inanimate object, or observing nature (stars or clouds...etc.) to determine the what would happen. Divination and sorcery were widespread in the ancient Near East, particularly in Mesopotamia and Egypt. It was an attempt to circumvent the power of the gods and thus, biblically speaking, a means of trying to undermine the sovereignty and providence of God.
- iv. **Hair Cutting:** Is God against haircuts and beard trims? No. In ancient times hair cutting could determine social status (i.e. slavery), emotional status (i.e. grief and suffering [Isa. 15; Ezra 9; Ambos 8; Job 1], as well as religious devotion (i.e. pagan temple worship, ritual purification [Lev. 14], and Nazarite vow [Num 6]).

The religious aspect is in view here. Ancient people would offer hair to their deities, they would cut off their head and consecrate themselves to the gods. Particularly in Egypt, from where Israel journeyed from, there where cultic practice where people would shave the sides of their heads and cut their beards into square shapes to subordinate themselves to deities.

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<sup>65</sup> Information for this is coming from: Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Le. 19:23-29; James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 156-157; W.J. Houston, “Clean and Unclean Foods,” ed. Desmon Alexander & David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pg. 330-331; David Seal, “Hair,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/leviticus-19/>

- v. **Cutting The Flesh & Tattoos:** These were also pagan practices God wanted Israel to be separated from. The trimming of the hair, the beard, cutting, and tattoos were all connected with pagan rites of mourning as well as designed to protect the wearer from spirits. They were also used to indicate one's allegiance to a particular deity or cultic temple practice. It was also customary to make gashes in your flesh during burial rituals and mourning (as Arab, Hindu, and Asiatic peoples do even today). In some cases such gash making was in order to provide life blood for the spirit of the dead person as they made their journey in the afterlife.
  - vi. **Daughter Prostitution:** Prostitution brought in income just like it does today. When families became pressed for financial assistance it was tempting for a father to turn his daughter over to prostitution to make money. Furthermore, in some ancient cultural settings prostitution was an honorable and pious profession as in ritual prostitution at a pagan temple. Thus, parents would be proud to offer their children over to these temples, seeing it as the spiritual and patriotic thing to do. In both situations God is forbidding such practice.
- b. **Additional Biblical Examples** where socio-cultural and historical context are key to interpreting and applying discourses:
- i. Head Coverings and Women's Silence in Church (1 Corinthians)
  - ii. Meats Offered to Idols (Acts 15, Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8 and 10)
  - iii. Emergence of early Syncretistic Heresies (Colossians)
  - iv. The Emergence of Judaizers (Galatians and Hebrews)
  - v. The Rise of Gnosticism (1 John)

These are all examples where understanding the background knowledge culturally and religiously is key to understanding the book as a whole. Not understanding these things locks you out of the Truth God is communicating in these books and thus aborts your ability to faithfully apply what they teach to your life in an effective God-honoring way.

## LITERARY GENRES IN THE BIBLE

Apart from the three broad literary types there are **genres of literature** that exist within each one. The word “genre” is a fancy French word meaning “form” or “kind.” So “literary genre” means a style of written expression that has distinct recognizable characteristics that separates it from other styles.<sup>66</sup> As one author has put it, “Genre is the ‘rhetorical eco-system’ that provides the conventions and contexts for how an authors uses a text to communicate to readers.”<sup>67</sup> Each book of the Bible has a primary type of literature it is and a primary genre that it is. This said one needs to realize that multiple biblical genres can be found within various sections of the same book at times. Furthermore, there are times when more than one literary type can be found within the same book.

Why so many literary forms in the Bible? We cannot presume to know the mind of the Almighty but a good point has been made by literary and Bible scholar Leland Ryken (1942-present) when he writes,

“The Bible appeals to our imagination and emotions as well as to our reason and intellect. It conveys more than abstract ideas because its aim is to express the whole of reality. The Bible recognizes that a person’s world view consists of images and symbols as well as ideas and propositions.”<sup>68</sup>

It is vitally important to remember that “meaning is communicated through form.”<sup>69</sup> The Bible has several kinds of literary genre within it.<sup>70</sup> Consider the following simplified graphic on the genres within each of the three broad types of literature:



Let’s consider a brief discussion about each genre below.

<sup>66</sup> Again, I am making the distinction between *types* and *genres* as Ray Lubeck does in *Read the Bible For A Change* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), pg. 16-20

<sup>67</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament in It’s World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), pg. 682

<sup>68</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), pg. 21

<sup>69</sup> Leland Ryken, *ibid*, pg. 28

<sup>70</sup> Be aware that this list of genres is not definitive. The literature on “Biblical genres” organizes them differently from author to author. All of the following resources organize “genres” differently: Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible For A Change* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004); Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, revised and expanded (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009); J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014); William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017). I would also highly recommend availing yourself to BIBLE PROJECT’s videos on “How to Read the Bible” available at <https://bibleproject.com/explore/>

## NARRATIVE

- **HISTORY** – A narrative type of writing that tells events in a sequence (introduction, climax, resolution) with characters, plots, and settings with the purpose to teach a lesson or explain the significance of the events within that sequence.
- **GOSPEL** – A narrative type of writing that is in a biographical style but with a central theological focus towards revealing the meanings of the life, teachings, and miracles of Jesus of Nazareth by means of eye-witness testimony and theological reflection.
- **PARABLE** – A narrative type of writing in either pros or verse that focuses on illustrating one or more instructive lessons or principles through the use of characters, plots, and settings.

## POETRY

- **PSALM** – A poetic type of writing that is usually in a lyrical prayer-based form that seeks to declare, lament, or worship in light of God's action in the world through the use of highly stylized metaphors, symbols, and hyperbolic language.
- **PROPHECY** – A poetic type of writing that is in an oracle style focused on declaring and predicting the present and future relationship of God to His people by affirming blessings and curses often through highly metaphorical and symbolic language.
- **WISDOM** – A poetic type of writing that is either didactic or poetic in nature that focuses on instructive insights and memorable principles on how to live one's life in light of God's truth revealed in His creative order.
- **APOCALYPTIC** – A poetic type of writing that is highly symbolic and metaphorical form of writing that tends to concern various visions or dreams that seek to unveil the meaning of earthly circumstances past, present, and/or future.

## DISCOURSE

- **LAW** – A discourse type of writing that is in formal legal code style with a set of prescriptive principles or commands for what moral, ceremonial, and civil practices are acceptable and not acceptable.
- **EPISTLE** – A discourse type of writing that is laid out like a letter or essay that is geared towards addressing specific situational drama and relations by means of teaching theological truths and ethical applications.

Each one of these genres can be studied for their unique styles of communicating Truth as well as the unique ways but which they are to be read and interpreted. However, to keep this study simpler we will not go into each one individually.

If you are interested in this then go to the end of the lecture notes and look at Genre Specific Interpretative Skills.





## GRAMMATICAL CONTEXT

I am not going to say much in this section but suffice it to say that grammar is important when you are studying the Word of God. The reason I am not going to spend much time here is because when we did Observation we covered a lot of the basic grammar information.

Just be reminded that it is important to take seriously word constructions. Be aware of nouns and pronouns, adjectives, verbs. Also look at tenses – is it past, present, or future. Also take seriously if something is continually repeated. Again, we are not going to rehash old information. Be sure to go back and take a look at the information we learned under Observation.

## 2 INTERPRET THE NATURAL SENSE OF THE TEXT

We now come to the #2 skill in how to interpret the Bible. We need to be sure that when we read and interpret the Bible, we do so with the purpose of *interpreting the natural sense of the text*.<sup>71</sup> This means that when we read the Bible we need to keep in mind the natural functions of language of literary style.

### A READ THE BIBLE LIKE A NORMAL BOOK

Interpreting the natural sense of the text of Scripture means that *we need to read the bible like any other book*. The Bible *is* a book and should therefore be read like any other book. It is a book originating with God but utilizes the vocabular, culture, language, and education of man. This doesn't mean we are devaluing the Bible when we say this, rather we are recognizing and respecting what the Bible actually is. The Bible *is* the WORD OF GOD, but those words use the regular conventions of human language and we need to remember this. Nouns are still nouns, verbs are still verbs, adjectives are still adjectives, prepositions are still prepositions both in the Bible and outside of the Bible. Regular language does not go out the window when we begin interpreting the Bible!

This understanding means that when we are reading the Bible we need to grasp the type of writing we are reading and studying. WHAT we are reading fundamentally shapes HOW we are naturally interpreting. For example, when we read a newspaper that says, "The DOW Jones dropped ten points today," or we read an excerpt from a Fairy Tale like Hansel and Gretel we understand that we read those two things in their natural way of language. The former is a newspaper and so is communicating surface-level truths along the lines of discourse (i.e. literal). The later, by contrast, is a fairy tale and thus I know that as I read I interpret it through the natural lens of fairy tales (i.e. figurative and symbolic). The same is with the Bible. Knowing the literary context is a central sharpening stone for shaping our reading and interpretation skills of that literature.

We need to read and understand Narrative in the natural sense narrative is to be read and understood. We need to read and understand Poetry in the natural sense poetry is to be read and understood. We need to read and understand Discourse in the natural sense discourse is to be read and understood.

### B STOP SEEKING ESOTERIC NUGGETS

Another subpoint dovetails on what has been said. Because we need to interpret the natural sense of the text, and this means we need to read the Bible like a normal book, this also means we need to *stop trying to always find some secret mystical meaning to every Narrative, Poem, and Discourse we read!* There isn't some "deep" mystical meaning or secret knowledge within the Bible that requires a tuning fork or our heads to be cocked to the side before we can "get what it is really saying." That is a Gnostic view, not a Christian one.

This means that we need to be highly cautious about over-spiritualizing and over-allegorizing every event, person, object, or action in the Bible to the degree that it always becomes some hyper-personal and applicational "truth" just for us. Doing this makes the meaning of the text become a subjective experience rather than an objective reality.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pg. 193-194

Now don't get this wrong! This doesn't mean there isn't personal application from the Word of God. Rather it means we need to be thoughtfully cautious and just allow the natural wording of the text to determine the Truth of the text so we can personally apply that Truth to our lives.

So when we listen to a sermon, read a devotional, listen to a teaching, that declares "X is in the Bible and X symbolizes/represents/means Y," we need to stop, listen, think, and ask this question:

*Is there something in the text that clearly indicates a legitimate non-literal interpretation or is the connection arbitrary and originating from personal opinion?*

If words in a text can mean anything, then they mean nothing. Since we know words mean SOMETHING we need to be asking what exactly they mean and what is grounding their meaning.

If the passage for example is talking about rocks and water are the rocks and water just rocks and water or are we supposed to "see" the rocks and water as something else, i.e., a spiritual or allegorical or typological symbol? To get this across consider some examples:

Example: Saul and the Witch of Endor ([1 Samuel 28:20-25](#)).<sup>72</sup> If you read this passage

Example: Parable of The Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). "In Augustine's rendering, there is a man (Adam) traveling a road. Having been stripped (of immortality) and beaten (or persuaded to sin) by robbers (the devil), he is ignored by a priest (the Law) and a Levite (the Prophets) before being attended to by a Samaritan (Jesus Christ). The Samaritan takes him to the inn (or the Church) where two denarii (the promises of this life and the life to come) are paid to the innkeeper (the Apostle Paul), to take care of the man."<sup>73</sup>

The question one should ask is on what basis did Augustine come up with this elaborate interpretation? Plainly, that is not what the text states. Of course, the answer is he used his own imagination to allegorize the parable

We need to allow Scripture itself to tell us when we should be taking something literally or non-literally, rather than trying to make everything mean something arbitrary just for the purposes of feel-good-ism or crafting effective sermons or devotional studies.

In the supernatural approach...

- The interpreter seeks to reveal a hidden meaning.
- Hidden meaning rules in the author's approach to interpreting the Scripture
- This method at first glance looks and sounds quite "spiritual"
- The problem is that the obvious (literal) meaning of the passage is often ignored and thus the interpreter does not take the Author's meaning and purpose seriously

The upshot of this approach is that the Bible is not allowed to be its own authority but the authority rests in the hands of the interpreter and unfortunately the result is that the interpretation "adds" to God's intended meaning of the passage.

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<sup>72</sup> This example is used by <https://www.9marks.org/article/allegorical-interpretation-finding-the-line-before-you-cross-it/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.9marks.org/article/allegorical-interpretation-finding-the-line-before-you-cross-it/>

“When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.”<sup>74</sup>

This doesn't mean there aren't other senses of scripture:

- Literal sense – John 3. As Moses lifted up the serpent so the Son of Man must be lifted up. Judas went out and hanged himself.

The fallacy of letterism: when you take a passage and push it to an absolute literal meaning. God has feet, has arms, has nostrils, and so forth. (Mormonism)

- Moral sense –
- Anagogical (Spiritual) sense – 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe.” (John 6)

When a person uses a wrong method to arrive at a true conclusion, he opens himself to being deceived by that same method on other occasions. For example, Acts 28 related how Paul was miraculously healed after being bitten by a poisonous viper. Someone spiritualizing this account might say, “The serpent, who is the devil, always attacks righteous men, but is always defeated.” This conclusion may be true and may be taught elsewhere in Scripture, but Acts 28 does not teach this conclusion. This is an erroneous handling of God's Word.

<sup>13</sup> The LORD looks down from heaven;  
he sees all the children of man;  
<sup>14</sup> from where he sits enthroned he looks out  
on all the inhabitants of the earth,  
Psalm 33:13-14 (ESV)

He will cover you with his [feathers],  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.  
Psalm 91:4 (ESV)

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”  
John 6:35 (ESV)

## DISTINGUISH THE LITERAL & FIGURATIVE

How do we know if a passage or phrase is to be interpreted literally or figuratively? Well, for simplicities sake consider some of the following guidelines:<sup>75</sup>

- Take a text literally *unless* there is good textual reason not to
  - **Example:** Some words are said by the author to be figurative; John 2:18-22; 7:37-39; and Galatians 4:24 are examples of this. Note if there is an explanation in the context indicating that an expression is to be taken figuratively.

<sup>74</sup> As quoted in Howard Hendricks

<sup>75</sup> These points are a composite taken from several sources: Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), pg. 146; Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By The Book* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007), pg. 265-270; Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009), pg. 189-207; Robert Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishing, 2010), pg. 219-232; <https://christiancourier.com/articles/how-do-i-distinguish-the-literal-from-the-figurative>

- **Example:** Sometimes a figurative word or phrase will be accompanied by another word or phrase which indicates that it is not to be taken literally.
- Take a text literally *unless* the literal sense would involve an impossibility.
  - **Example:** A word must be figurative when the literal meaning is illogical or impossible, as in Matthew 20:22-23; 1 Corinthians 3:2; and Psalm 58:3.
- Take a text literally *unless* the literal sense results in an absurdity.
  - **Example:** A word must be figurative when the literal meaning is illogical or impossible, as in Matthew 20:22-23; 1 Corinthians 3:2; and Psalm 58:3.
- Take a text literally *unless* the literal sense contradicts other scripture.
  - **Example:** John 11:26, Jesus said, "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die," which cannot literally mean physical death, or it would contradict Hebrews 9:27, which says it is appointed for man to die once, then the judgement.
- Take a text literally *unless* the literal sense demands immoral action.
  - **Example:** Matthew 5:29-30 (plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand) is not to be taken literally

### 3 INTERPRET THE OBSCURE IN LIGHT OF THE CLEAR

Another way to say it is interpreting the implicit in light of the explicit.<sup>76</sup> When you are trying to understand the meaning of a passage, larger text, or book, it is important to consider the clarity of what is taught. Any kind of esoteric, secretive interpretation that comes into tension or direct conflict with what is clearly taught in other passages of scripture, must be rejected. This also applies to be sure that you do not build large-scale theological truths or principles based on obscure, difficult, or singular sections of text as opposed to the larger and more explicit sections of text and teaching.

That is why the famous *“baptism for the dead”* passage (1 Cor.15:29) is not unpacked at length and made a major plank in, say, the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Confession. Over forty interpretations of that passage have been offered in the history of the church. Mormons are quite sure what it means, of course, but the reason why they are sure is because they are reading it in the context of other books that they claim are inspired and authoritative.

**The point being made is this:** if you find yourself face to face with a difficult and/or confusing portion of text, you need to be sure to interpret it in light of the clearer passages that speak on the topic in question.

If there is one verse or two verses of a particular practice, principle, or idea and you try building an entire theological house out of it, that is an indication you are on dangerous ground.

Allow the scripture to scream where it screams and whisper where it whispers.

Stop creating one verse theology syndrome. Stop doing obscure verse theology syndrome.

Or consider something like *“The Roots of the Federal Reserve: Tracing the Nephilim from Noah to the US Dollar”* which has sold thousands on Amazon. The description for the book says,

By following known history, archeology and symbolism, The Roots of the Federal Reserve will trace the Nephilim bloodline through the lineage of Ham and reveal the Nephilim agenda concealed for ages, operating insidiously, since the Seed war in Genesis 3.

Ultimately, our journey will lead to Jekyll Island, the birthplace of the Federal Reserve and the players who participated in its creation. .

This book excavates the bedrock of slavery that keeps us in bondage to debt, it reveals the domination of the “Titans,” and unmask the destructive repercussions our monetary system has on the lives of everyday people.<sup>77</sup>

This is about a book with over 400-pages based on a topic mentioned *two times* in Scripture (Genesis 6:1-4 and Exodus 13:33) and only implied in a handful of others.<sup>78</sup> How can you build a 400-page book on something so obscure!? This is ludicrous.

<sup>76</sup> R. C. Sproul has insightful thoughts on this point in *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), pg. 83-87

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Roots-Federal-Reserve-Tracing-Nephilim/dp/1942790198>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/who-are-the-nephilim/>; <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/who-were-the-nephilim/>

## 4 INTERPRET SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE

A.W. Tozer said this,

Truths that are compelled to stand alone never stand straight and are not likely to stand long. Truth is one but truths are many. Scriptural truths are interlocking and interdependent. A truth is rarely valid in isolation. A statement may be true in its relation to other truths and less than true when separated from them.<sup>79</sup>

This means that whenever we are trying to understand the fundamental meaning/purpose/teaching of any passage we need to be asking: **DOES THIS UNDERSTANDING ALIGN WITH THE GREATER COUNCIL OF GOD'S WORD?** In other words, is what you are thinking the text means here confirmed elsewhere in the Word of God or is it coming into conflict or tension, or confusion with the Word elsewhere? If it is then red flags should go off that you are in fact on shaky grounds and potential error and heresy.

Be very hesitant if you are reading a portion of text and the “truth” you are finding within it is not found anywhere else in the scripture.

### A READ CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF PARALLEL PASSAGES

You should consider:<sup>80</sup>

1. **Parallel Passages** – What other places in the Bible have to say about the particular truth you are studying in the passage you are in.

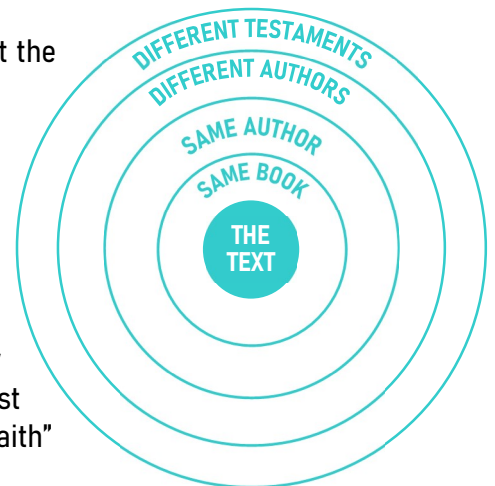
A. *Parallel Passages in the Same Book* – To understand what words and sentences within a particular book mean you need to study where the thoughts, themes, and topics are found elsewhere within that same book.

- **For Example:** What does the Book of James mean by “saving faith” in 2:14? Well, to answer this you must first read all references to the topic of “saving faith” elsewhere within the book (1:3; 5-8; 2:1; 5:15).

B. *Parallel Passages of the Same Author* – The first place to begin is to see what the same author has to say about the same truth in other sections of the same book. From there you then ask, “Does this author mention this same truth in other books they have written?”

- **For Example:** What does Paul mean by the word “faith” in Romans 3:22? To understand this we need to not just see what Romans says about faith but what does other Pauline writings say about faith (ex: Galatians 2:16; 3:8-11, 24).

C. *Parallel Passages by Different Authors* – This means looking at what other authors of Scripture have said about the same topic/theme within the specific voice, style, and genre that they communicated.



<sup>79</sup> A.W. Tozer, *That Incredible Christian*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Material here is heavily influenced by Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009), pg. 235-245. It also is a composite of information found in: William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), pg. 305-312

- **For Example:** What is the relationship of James' meaning of "saving faith" to that of Paul's meaning of the word? Are they the same concept/ Are they nuanced? Are they different?

We are moving from the magnifying glass to the telescope.

If these are true, then the best way to understand a passage is the contextual concentric circles of inspired writings.

1. the same topic or term in the same immediate context (paragraph or literary unit)
2. the same topic or terms in the same biblical book
3. the same topic or terms by the same author
4. the same topic or terms in the same period, genre, or Testament
5. the same topic or terms in the Bible as a whole<sup>81</sup>

**TAKE NOTE:** It is important to understand that proof-texting is not doing parallel passages. Finding parallels isn't good enough when you line up a list of scriptures because the same English word is being used across passages. This is why you need to know the context.

*For example:* Consider the word "hand."<sup>82</sup> What does this word mean? Does it mean what is attached to a human arm? Or does it mean the dial of a clock? Or does it mean a set of cards you have in a card game? Or does it mean a request to help out (i.e. "give me a hand" or "all hands on deck")? The point is just looking up the definition of hand or listing everywhere hand is used doesn't help you interpret what it means. Your parallel passages need to be truly parallel in that the words used are used within the same types of contexts, otherwise, you will distort meanings.

*For example:* Consider the biblical word "Elohim." What does this word mean? Well, it depends on the context. You cannot just look up all passages and then say, "This is what 'elohim' means in all instances in the Bible." It doesn't work that way. What you will find is that *elohim* is a homonym type of word. It can denote multiple things based on context and whether it is singular or plural. It can mean God (Genesis 1:1; Deuteronomy 32:15), false gods (Exodus 20:23), angels (Psalm 8:6), and even human judges and rulers (Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34).

*For example:* Consider the word "peace" in the Bible.<sup>83</sup> Studying the theme of "peace" in the Bible takes more than lining up all the passages that have the word peace in English and then concocting an understanding of what it means. Upon looking into it you will see that the word "peace" is nuanced between Hebrew and Greek. In Hebrew it is the word "shalom" and in the Greek it is the word "eirene." They are basically the same but have a range of meaning based on context: meaning prosperity, completeness, the absence of strife, inner tranquility, and so forth. In the Upper Room Discourse Jesus promised "peace" to His disciples on multiple occasions (John 14:27; 16:33) but which one does He promise? Was it "the absence of strife" for the disciples? If so then it's a lie because what they got for proclaiming the Gospel was persecution and death. Obviously, the type of peace mentioned here is an inner tranquility.

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture means allowing the texts of the Word of God to say what they say without forcing them to say what we want them to say. As bible teacher and hermeneutics scholar, Bob Utley has said,

The Bible often presents truth in dialectical pairs. If we miss the balancing truth (paradox) we have perverted the overarching biblical message. Unbalanced presentation of truth is what characterizes modern denominations. We must allow the biblical authors to speak, but also the Bible as a whole (other inspired authors). At this stage of interpretation a relevant parallel passage, either confirming, modifying, or seemingly contradicting, is extremely helpful. It must be emphatically stated that it is as damaging to add to

<sup>81</sup> Listing comes from Bob Utley, Bible Interpretation Seminar, Seminar Textbook, pdf, pg. 65-66, [http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/pdf/seminar\\_textbook.pdf](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org/pdf/seminar_textbook.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> This example of "hand" comes from William Klein, et.al., *ibid*, pg. 327

<sup>83</sup> This discussion on "peace" comes from William Klein, et.al., *ibid*, pg. 327-328



the Bible's message as it is to take away from it. Bible truth is presented in clear, simple statements, but the relationship between these clear statements is often quite involved. The crowning glory of interpretation is the big picture, the balanced truth.<sup>84</sup>

Consider two additional quotes on this:

“When two or more unrelated texts are treated as if they belonged together, we have the fallacy of collapsing contexts. This reading error can be especially knotty because it is the corruption of a perfectly good principle of reading: to compare Scripture with Scripture. We are responsible as good readers of the Bible to make use of every text bearing on the subject we wish to understand” (Sire 1980, 140).

And,

“What gives interpreters the right to link certain verses together and not others? The point is that all such linking eventually produces a grid that effects the interpretation of the other texts” (Carson 1984, 140).

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<sup>84</sup> <https://bible.org/seriespage/8-practical-procedures-interpretation>

## 5 INTERPRET THE OLD IN LIGHT OF THE NEW

**INTERPRET THE OLD IN LIGHT OF THE NEW:** The revelation of the Bible is a revelation that is progressive in nature. We need to be asking what this reveals about God and Christ specifically. Do not and I repeat do not immediately go to applying this personally. Stop inserting yourself into the narrative. Stop trying to dig out some personal self-help nugget of wisdom from the text. Just allow the text to speak on its own. Centrally focus upon Jesus.

**Ask:** *What does this show me about Jesus?*

## 6 INTERPRET WITH GOD-CENTERED FOCUS

It doesn't matter if a person has said "God told me what to say or preach or teach or told me what it means." It doesn't matter if the message makes you cry, gives you a shiver, or seemed to be "sound." The question that should guide all of your belief and practice is: **WHERE IS THAT IN SCRIPTURE?**

Can a text mean anything we want it to mean? Can it apply to us any way we want it to apply to us? These are vitally important questions we need to be asking ourselves. We need to be sure that we are asking, **WHAT DOES THE TEXT ACTUALLY SAY?**

The Bible is about God. It is a revelation of his character and his wise plan for creation. Certainly the Bible includes God's will for our lives, but we misunderstand the Bible if we think it is primarily about us.

Or are we left to interpret it like we want to interpret it? Are we allowed to just make a text say what we want it to say just because it sounds good or is moving or makes a good three-point sermon outline?

That is all well and good for them and they should obey what God told them but guess what, **YOU AREN'T THEM** and are therefore not bound to obey nor approve of what they say **IF IT CANNOT BE PROVED THAT IS WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS**. And do not forget, what Scripture says means taking seriously **HOW** Scripture says what it says – i.e. taking seriously the historical, cultural, literary, and grammatical context.

You aren't in their mind and you cannot know for certain that what they say is true unless you are investigating and reading and studying yourself. What God said something meant to some preacher or teacher or evangelist is not substitute for the objective universally accessibility of Scripture.

## 7 INTERPRET HUMBLY

It doesn't matter if a person has said "God told me what to say or preach or teach or told me what it means." It doesn't matter if the message makes you cry, gives you a shiver, or seemed to be "sound." The question that should guide all of your belief and practice is: **WHERE IS THAT IN SCRIPTURE?**

Can a text mean anything we want it to mean? Can it apply to us any way we want it to apply to us? These are vitally important questions we need to be asking ourselves. We need to be sure that we are asking, **WHAT DOES THE TEXT ACTUALLY SAY?**

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You aren't in their mind and you cannot know for certain that what they say is true unless you are investigating and reading and studying yourself. What God said something meant to some preacher or teacher or evangelist is not substitute for the objective universally accessibility of Scripture.

Being humble means being critical. You have got to be critical of yourself. It is the only way you grow. It is the only way you will see Truth. You will only see Truth if you are willing to acknowledge you have blinders and to shatter those blinders for the purpose of greater evaluation.

The fact is you and I are not God. Your favorite theologian, pastor, bible teacher, or evangelist is not God either. We can be wrong, and they can be wrong. We need to take this seriously. Church leaders can be wrong. Churches can be wrong. Denominations can be wrong. Therefore, we must have humility and charity with those that disagree with us.

This also means we need to be people who think critically about what we think we know and what we hear.

The most important question you should ask of yourself and others is: **WHERE IS THAT IN SCRIPTURE?**

It doesn't matter if a person has said "God told me what to say or told me what it means." It doesn't matter if the message makes you cry, gives you a shiver, That is all well and good for them and they should obey what God told them but guess what, **YOU AREN'T THEM!** You aren't in their mind and you cannot know for certain that what they say is true unless you are investigating and reading and studying yourself. What God said something meant to some preacher or teacher or evangelist is not substitute for the objective universally accessibility of Scripture.

The point of this is for us to have a spirit of humility when we interpret the Word of God. Part of that submission comes from us coming to terms with the fact we don't know everything.

Deciding to say, "I have sought the council of no man. I have sat alone with God and the Word and He has told me everything I need" is not a sign of humility, it is a sign of arrogance. It is a sign that you know it all and don't need the wisdom and richness of corporate council. To say "I don't need to learn any of this Bible study techniques. I

don't need to learn about context. I don't need to learn the history. I just need the Spirit." Isn't piety its hell-born pride masquerading as spiritualized simplicity. It's self-righteousness. It isn't humble. It's arrogant.

Submission to the Holy Spirit is not about you getting in a dark room and having Him tell you sweet nothings that no one else in the history of The Church has ever known.

["We should submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit by aligning our reading of the Bible to the contours of the biblical text that the Holy Spirit intended."](#)<sup>85</sup>

God chose to use Greek and Hebrew to reveal His will to Mankind. God chose to use narrative, poetry, and discourse to reveal his Word. He spoke through legal decrees, wisdom literature, prophecy, theological treatises, speeches, letters, apocalyptic visions, parables, laments, psalms, and all the rest to reveal His will and ways to Mankind. That is what He chose. That is how He did it. To not respect, to not learn it, to not consider that when you read His Word doesn't make you sincere and simple, it makes you an arrogant fool.

This means taking seriously the essentials and not as seriously the nonessentials.

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<sup>85</sup> Walt Russell, *ibid*, pg. 64