

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE: AN INTRODUCTION



The Bible contains 66 books, written in three languages over 1,500 years by dozens of authors writing in numerous genres for diverse audiences. Scripture is clear enough that anyone can grasp the essentials of the faith. At the same time, extensive reading leads to riddles: Why does Moses apparently condone polygamy and slavery? What is a denarius? Who is Apollyon? Why do the apostles care about meat that is offered to idols?

The Requirements for Interpretation

Skill in interpretation is needed to gain the most from the Bible. When Scriptures are read in the church, leaders can answer questions and orient listeners to its great themes. Still, people rightly desire to read and understand the Bible for themselves (Jer. 31:31–34; 1 John 2:27).

Interpretation of the Bible requires technical skill and spiritual receptivity. Though all God's people have a significant ability to read and understand the great teachings of the Bible in their own language (see Deut. 6:6–7; Ps. 1:1–2; 19: 7; 119:130; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 3:4; Col. 4:16), there also remain more detailed and precise questions about meaning that sometimes require technical knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, as well as of Scripture's historical, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds. Here interpretation resembles the reading of dense poetry or constitutional documents. Interpretation is also an art, mastered not by rigid adherence to procedures but by long practice conducted under tutors. Interpretation is also a spiritual task. To read the Bible is not to dissect a lifeless text that only contains marks on a page. As people read Scripture, Scripture reads them, questions them, reveals their thoughts (Heb. 4:12)—and it leads to a Person, not just truths. All Scripture points to Jesus' death and resurrection, to forgiveness, and to personal knowledge of God through him.

To profit from Scripture, one must take the right posture. At one extreme, the skeptic questions and judges whatever he or she reads. At the other, the overconfident believer, convinced that he has mastered biblical or systematic theology, ignores or explains away whatever fails to support his system. Interpreters should come to Scripture humbly, expecting to learn and be corrected, willing to observe Scripture closely and accept whatever they find. All Scripture is breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16), so every word counts. If a biblical narrator mentions something as seemingly insignificant as a character's hair, this detail will probably be important—as the hair of Esau, Samson, and Absalom shows!

Interpreters also need skills. The remainder of this article explains the skills necessary to read the Bible in context, to find the main point of a passage, to develop a theme, and to apply Scripture.

Knowing the Context

It is a truism that one must read the Bible in context, but the truism hides a distinction. "Context" can refer to the historical or the literary context. The *literary context* includes the words, sentences, and paragraphs preceding and following a passage. The literary context locates a passage within the larger purposes of a book. Readers should ask why a particular passage is *here* and not elsewhere, how it builds upon prior passages, and how it prepares for the next. The disciples once said to Jesus, "Increase our faith" (Luke 17:5). Absent a context, it seems like a godly request (which it may be in some contexts). But here the disciples say it after they hear a difficult command and before Jesus tells them they merely need the faith of a mustard seed. Considering this context, some interpreters have seen "Increase our faith" as an excuse, not a godly request.

One should also locate a passage in *the context of its entire book*. Paul's statement "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God . . ." (Rom. 12:1) stands at a hinge in Romans. Paul had just finished recounting God's mercies in Romans 3–11. His "therefore" summons readers to see that God's abundant mercies lead them into heartfelt service.

The *historical context* includes knowledge of the culture, economy, geography, climate, agriculture, architecture, family life, morals, and social structure of the Bible's actors, authors, and readers. Over the centuries, climate and topography hardly vary, but other factors shift more. For example, Israel was poor and weak under Samuel and Saul, strong and rich under David and Solomon.

Historical contexts help readers make sense of passages like Deuteronomy 22:8, which says a builder "shall make a parapet" around the roof of a new home, lest someone fall from it and "bring the guilt of blood" upon the house. A parapet is a retaining wall around the edge of a flat roof. Since Israelites worked, ate, and slept on their roofs, parapets kept reckless boys and restless sleepers from tumbling off. The law taught Israel how to preserve life and to love neighbors.

Again, in Luke 11:27–28 a woman called out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed." The woman's mind-set explains her odd-sounding speech. In antiquity, women gained honor by marrying a great man or bearing great children. The woman praised Jesus by praising his mother—only a great woman could bear such a great son. Jesus nudges her in another direction: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." In other words, a woman finds greatness in discipleship more than in matrimony or maternity.

Interpreters must read carefully to recognize both obvious and hidden riddles. Some matters are less clear than

they seem. Do contemporary readers know precisely what judges, elders, and talents are? Study resources include a study Bible, and also, in increasing depth, a Bible dictionary, an encyclopedia, and scholarly commentaries. The quality of sources, not the quantity, is paramount.

Background studies permit more accurate study of a text's line of thought. The genre of the passage must be noted, since narrative, law, prophecy, visions, wisdom literature, and epistles all have distinct modes of operation, with subtypes within each genre. To simplify, however, the most basic distinction in terms of genre is between *narrative* and *discourse*.

Interpreting Narratives

Narratives can be long or short, complex or simple. They can be distinguished as speech stories, reports, and dramatic narratives. A speech story sets up a significant teaching, usually delivered near the end. Consider Jesus' encounters with a centurion (Matt. 8:5–13) and with Zachaeus (Luke 19:1–10). Reports briefly describe battles, travels, or minor kings. They lack drama and reveal their secrets through patterns. For example, taken together, the reports of Solomon's reign show gold slowly becoming more prominent, and more highly valued, than wisdom. Solomon spent more on his palace than on the temple, and his adherence to the law steadily declined (1 Kings 4–11). Readers can draw conclusions as they read the reports in canonical perspective.

Many narratives feature complex characters and dramatic tension. To interpret narrative, one must note the story's time and place, its characters, and their interests. Soon conflict develops, leading to a crisis, then resolution. The reader should enter the story as if he or she were there, especially at the dramatic climax—when Abraham's knife is poised, when David strides toward Goliath. The resolution follows—the angel calls out, the stone finds its mark. Narratives convey moral, spiritual, and theological truths (1 Cor. 10:11), but one must first look for God's action. He is the prime character in biblical narratives. Readers should ask therefore how God reveals himself, and how he fulfills his covenant promises, in this or that particular story.

The main point of a narrative typically appears in the climax-resolution nexus. The narrator or a character in the story will often reveal that central truth. Dialogue discloses character and motivation (e.g., Luke 15:28–32). In the Abraham-Isaac account, both Abraham and the narrator say that the Lord will provide, and he does (Gen. 22:8, 14). In the David-Goliath narrative, David says, "The battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand," and he does (1 Sam. 17:45–49). The main point in these narratives is not "Abraham obeyed a hard command and believers should, too," or "David was brave and Christians should be, too." The lessons are that "the Lord provides" and "the battle is the Lord's" (and then, also, that he is certainly worthy of trust!). The stories' characters go on quests, face choices, and respond to God faithfully or unfaithfully—but the Lord is the main agent, and believers, unbelievers, and bystanders are always responding to him. In the process they show how people tend to respond, for good or ill, and Bible readers should imitate their good responses and avoid their mistakes.

Interpreting Discourse

In discourse, which is the other main type of text in the Bible, the search for the main point (not necessarily

the point that most interests the reader) remains central as well. This is true whether the text is poetry, prophecy, or an epistle. The point commonly appears first or last in a passage. (Whole books also have themes that are stated first or last; see Matt. 28:18–20 and Rom. 1:16–17.) Many Psalms reveal their theme at once: "Bless the LORD, O my soul" (103:1; cf. 42:1; 107:1). Passages in the Epistles sometimes start with the main point and then elaborate on it. James, for instance, says straight off that not many should aspire to be teachers (3:1a) because they face stricter judgment (3:1b) and because the tongue is beyond control (3:2–8). Other passages build to a climax, as in Jesus' teaching on the law, "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). On numerous occasions, writers repeat the main point. The author of Judges says twice that "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25). Paul tells the Corinthians three times to be content in their assigned calling (1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 24). Careful students of Scripture will reread a passage, both to find the main point and to observe the way the biblical authors think. Illustrations, elaborations, and answers to foes are best understood by seeing how they serve the principal lesson.

This is not to say that the main point should be considered the only point or the only important point. For example, though Romans 1:16–17 is the overall theme of Romans, literally hundreds of other theological and ethical truths are taught throughout the pages of this letter. The individual parts are best understood in light of how they contribute to the whole.

Tracing Specific Themes throughout the Bible

Interpreters also need to learn how to search through Scripture to collect its comprehensive teaching on various specific themes. Students can start topical studies by reading passages listed in their Bibles' cross-references. Concordances are valuable, but they can mislead if readers simply limit their scope to verses that use a particular word. Students of the Bible must locate concepts, not just words, to develop a theme. For example, a concordance search on "pray/prayer/praying" would turn up only one verse in John's Gospel (John 17:9), but several other verses tell how to "ask" God for various things, and those verses also teach a number of particular lessons about prayer. Ideas also unfold progressively within the OT, into the NT, and sometimes even within a single book. Wise interpreters still locate every verse in its context and ask how the original audience understood it. For great topics such as work, marriage, or the love of God, it helps to note what the Bible says within the frame of each of the four great epochs: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Applying God's Word

Biblical application chiefly requires careful prayer and meditation, but one must realize that application is more than following commands. Applying Scripture means accepting and fulfilling God-given duties, seeking a godly character, pursuing goals that the Lord blesses, and seeing the world his way. This produces four questions readers can ask themselves that often lead to helpful application: What should I do? Who should I be (or who should I realize that I am, in Christ)? Where should I go? How can I see?

People also apply the Bible when they let it lead them to Christ. After the fall, the Lord promised a redeemer.

Every good prophet, priest, king, and judge points to one who would perfectly fulfill their roles, and every false leader causes the reader to cry out for one who would be true. (For further development of this idea throughout the OT, see *The History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ*, pp. 2635–2661.) From the start of the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as Son of God and Son of Man. Each phase in the

Gospel accounts leads toward the climax in the crucifixion and its resolution in the resurrection. Each epistle interprets that great event until Scripture ends in Revelation's songs of praise to the Lamb and the Lion, the King of kings and Lord of lords, contemplated, trusted, and adored. Thus interpretative skills must lead beyond conceptual knowledge to a Person, and a vital relationship with him. ◀