

**EAST AFRICA BIBLE COLLEGE**

# **Biblical Interpretation**

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**INTERNATIONAL PENTECOSTAL HOLINESS CHURCH**

**CONFERENCE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM**

**ELDORET, KENYA**

# East Africa Bible College

## Biblical Interpretation

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### **EABC Mission Statement:**

To provide Biblical and theological training for the equipping of men and women for the work of Christian ministry.

### **EABC Vision Statement:**

To be a Christ-centered Bible college training men and women to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations of Africa.

### **EABC Motto:**

Training to Reach the Unreached

### **Course Description:**

This course will seek to give students a better understanding of the Bible in general and the basic rules for interpreting the Bible today. Biblical interpretation is an essential aspect of every ministry. Knowing how to interpret the Bible properly is a key to lasting success and effectiveness. In this course, the students will learn, understand, and apply the process of Biblical interpretation. The course will also confront presuppositions that affect interpretation. By the end of the course, students should be able to explain and correctly use the general rules and skills of interpretation for all biblical literature and well as specific rules that apply to certain genres of the Bible. At the conclusion of the course students should also be able to demonstrate how to properly use the Bible for devotional purposes, theological study and teaching, and preaching purposes.

### **Course Goals:**

At the conclusion of this course, the students will:

- A. Possess a general understanding of the nature of the Bible as literature and God's word.
- B. Be able to list, explain and apply the basic skills, rules, processes and practices for properly interpreting scripture.
- C. Be able to apply the process of Biblical interpretation to texts from the Bible and develop modern application.
- D. Construct universal principles from Biblical texts.
- E. Evaluate and determine credibility of various Biblical interpretations.
- F. Have understanding of how to properly use Biblical interpretation tools including commentaries, concordances, and dictionaries.

### **Resources Used in the Workbook:**

- A. **Primary Text:** J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
- B. **Resource Text:** Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
- C. **Resource Text:** William W. Klein, Craig L. Bloomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

# Introduction

## I. What is the Bible?

### A. 66 literary divided into two divisions

1. The Old Testament
2. The New Testament

### B. Special Revelation from God

## II. IPHC Doctrine concerning the Bible

A. Article 5 from the IPHC Articles of Faith: We believe in the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, known as the Bible, composed of sixty-six books and divided into two departments, Old and New Testaments. We believe the Bible is the Word of God, the full and complete revelation of the plan and history of redemption.

### B. Verbal and Plenary Inspiration

#### 1. Inspired

- i. Means that the Bible has supernatural origins, it is from God.
- ii. Even though it was written by humans, those humans wrote under the guidance and leadership (inspiration) of the Holy Spirit so that God's Words were communicated through human hands (2 Timothy 3:16).

#### 2. Plenary

- i. The word "plenary" means full and complete.
- ii. Plenary inspiration means that the entire Bible is inspired. The inspiration of God is not only seen in a few places, but in every portion of the Bible.

#### 3. Verbal

- i. The Holy Spirit guided each writer concerning which words to write.
- ii. Here, verbal refers more to wording than speaking.
- iii. The Bible is not just the ideas of man; it's the Word of God. The actual wording is inspired by God.

### C. Word of God

1. As suggested above, the Bible did not originate with man, it came from God. God may have used human hands to write the books and human minds to form the words; God was guiding the hands and influencing the minds of those authors to convey His message.

2. Even though Jesus is called the "Word" in John 1:1, the Bible is also the Word of God since both are special revelation from God.

### D. Full and Complete Revelation of the Plan and History of Redemption

#### 1. Revelation

- i. Special knowledge given by God which is not available through nature.

- ii. We cannot know the true character and nature of God without special revelation. The Bible serves as that special revelation. Because of the Bible we can know about God and even know God personally.

## 2. Full and Complete

- i. Since the Bible was created through verbal and plenary inspiration, it contains everything God intended for it to have.
- ii. There is not some great unknown that ultimately hinders us from knowing God, everything He intended for us to know and everything we need to know is in the Bible.

## 3. Plan and History of Redemption

- i. Redemption refers to the salvation of mankind from sin and the reconciliation of mankind with God.
- ii. All humans need redemption.
- iii. The Bible contains God's plan for redemption as far back as Genesis 3:15 and even up to the last chapter in Revelation.
- iv. The Bible then shows us redemption history, evidence that God has already set his plan of redemption into motion.

E. Summary: The Bible is a unique book. First, it is a revelation from God to man. We cannot find out what God is like by ourselves. God has shown Himself to us in the sixty-six books of the Bible. In the Bible we see God's picture. We see God at work. We hear God's voice from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. Secondly, God inspired certain men to write the books of the Bible (Mat. 5:17, 18; 1 Cor. 2:13). Thus the Bible is a God-inspired book which reveals God to man. In its original form, it is perfected, true and without errors, because God Himself inspired it. Therefore, the Bible has divine authority. We must believe what the Bible says, and obey its teachings.

## III. Bibliology

- A. Bibliology is the study of the Bible.
- B. The word "Bible" is derived from the Greek term *βιβλία* which means book.

## IV. Origins of the Bible

- A. The Bible was written over a period of 1400 to 1800 years by more than 40 different authors.
  - 1. The first Biblical books written were most likely either the Pentateuch or Job.
  - 2. The last book of the Bible to be written was most likely Revelation.
  - 3. The Bible is divided into two sections, the Old and New Testaments.
  - 4. The Bible can also be divided by genre (literary style). We will discuss more about genre later.

- B. The books of the Bible reflect both the Jewish origins of Christianity and the early church age of Christianity.
- C. The word “Testament” in the Bible means “covenant” or “promise”

#### V. The Old Testament

- A. Originally written in Hebrew with some Aramaic
- B. The books of the Old Testament were written over a long period of time and gradually accepted by the Jewish people as scripture.
- C. The Old Testament as we know it today was finalized and placed together around 250 BC.

#### VI. New Testament

- A. Originally written in Greek.
- B. The books of the New Testament were written over a period of almost 100 years and gradually accepted by the Church as scripture.
- C. The NT as we know it today was finalized and placed together around 350-450 AD.

#### VII. Finalization of the “Canon” of Scripture

##### A. What is the “Canon”

1. The English word “canon” is derived from the Greek word *κανων* which means “rule” or “measure”
2. The “Canon of Scripture” is the collection of books inspired by the Holy Spirit and accepted as genuine Holy Scripture by the truly Christian Church.

##### B. Why do we need a Canon of Scripture?

1. The Canon establishes standards of scripture
2. The Canon defends against false doctrine
3. The Canon defends against heresy

##### C. Old Testament Canon

1. The Old Testament Canon was established before the birth of Christianity by Jewish religious leaders.
2. The Protestant Church accepts as Scripture the books canonized by the Jewish religious authorities prior to the intertestamental period (the time between the New and Old Testament. The Catholic church has accepted a few Jewish books written during the intertestamental period which most protestant churches do not accept as Scripture, even though they are good books to read for learning Jewish history.

##### D. The New Testament Canon:

1. Many books and letters were written by early Christians but not all were accepted as Scripture.
2. The early church used a set of criteria to discern those writings that were inspired and genuine Scripture:

- i. Apostolic Origin - attributed to and/or based upon the preaching/teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their close companions).
- ii. Universal Acceptance
  - a. Acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the ancient world (by the end of the fourth century)
  - b. The early Church did not decide what the Canon should be but rather recognized the mind of the Christ concerning scripture.
- iii. Liturgical Use - useful for public reading, preaching/teaching, and worship when the early Christian communities gathered for the services.
- iv. Consistent Message - containing a theological outlook consistent with other accepted Christian Scripture/writings.

#### E. The Closed Canon

- 1. The early church recognized the Canon of Scripture as closed around 500 AD.
- 2. This means that no more books can be added to or taken away from the Holy Bible.

### VIII. Publication

- A. The Bible as we have it today has been in constant publication for almost 1900 years.
- B. In the early days, copies of the Bible were made by scribes who physically wrote each word onto scrolls or parchment by hand.
- C. With the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, the Bible began to be copied and produced in large quantities.
- D. Today, the Bible remains the best-selling book of all time around the world.

### IX. Survival

- A. Several attempts have been made to limit or completely destroy the Bible.
- B. The most famous incident was in 300 AD when Roman Emperor Diocletian issued a decree that every piece of Christian literature be destroyed. Only few copies of the Bible remained but God preserved His Word.
- C. God's Word has survived thousands of years of attack and opposition.

### X. Evidence that the Bible is God's Word

- A. The Unity of the Message of Scripture
  - 1. The message of the Bible is consistent.
  - 2. Even though it was written by over 40 authors within a span of 1500 years, it maintains a consistent message.
- B. The Prophecies of the Bible have been Fulfilled According to Scripture
  - 1. Some prophecies are yet to be fulfilled but for all those that have been, they have been fulfilled according to what the Bible said.
  - 2. No other religious book can claim a record like the Bible for accurate prophecy.

C. The Bible Contains Authority and Power

1. The words of the Bible convict the sinner and bless the saved.
2. It has the answers for the world and the world has recognized it.

D. The Bible is True Historically

1. The historical events described in the Bible are accurate according to other sources such as the writings of Josephus.
2. The Bible is not a book of myths but actual events.

E. The Integrity of the Authors

1. The writers of scripture were people of integrity and there is no reason to doubt their writings as truth.
2. Many were persecuted for their work but continued despite the dangers to do what they knew God wanted them to do.

F. The Making and Survival of the Bible

1. When we see the history of the Bible we must recognize the miracles that had to take place for the Bible to be written, organized, and preserved throughout history.
2. God's hand can be seen as taking care of His Word.

XI. If the Bible is God's Word it must be: (*Since the Bible is the Word of God it is:*)

- A. Infallible - Without mistake
- B. Inerrant – Without error
- C. Inspired – Originated with God
- D. Sufficient – All we need for determining God's will
- E. Revelation – The supreme source of Theology
- F. Authoritative – The supreme standard by which God's people must live
- G. Relevant – Applicable for all people at all times everywhere

# **The Importance of Biblical Interpretation**

- I. Scriptures to Consider: John 14:26 and 2 Timothy 2:15; 4:2
- II. Defining Terms
  - A. Hermeneutics
    - 1. From the Greek meaning “to interpret.”
    - 2. The theological term for the science of interpreting scripture.
  - B. Exegesis
    - 1. From the Greek meaning to bring out.
    - 2. Exegesis is the process of drawing out of the text the message or meaning that God intended to communicate.
    - 3. This is the correct way to approach the Bible.
  - C. Eisegesis
    - 1. From the Greek meaning to put in.
    - 2. Eisegesis is the act of reading into the text a meaning or message that we want to hear.
    - 3. This is the incorrect way to approach the Bible.
- III. Why Study Biblical Interpretation?
  - A. The Bible is the most important book in the world.
    - 1. John 6:68; 1 Thes. 2:13; Ephesians 6:17; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 4:12
    - 2. The Bible’s power should be recognized and ministers should learn to use it.
  - B. There are many hindrances to understanding the Bible
    - 1. The Bible was written in a different time (between 2,000 – 4,000 years ago).
    - 2. The Bible was written to different people (Jews living in Israel, Romans, Greeks).
    - 3. The Bible was written within a different culture.
    - 4. The Bible was written in different languages (Hebrew and Greek).
    - 5. The Bible was written under different circumstances (old covenants, severe persecution, war).
    - 6. These hindrances do not diminish the Bible’s authority or relevance. We can still hear the message of God through correct Biblical interpretation.
  - C. Biblical misunderstandings lead to heresy and false doctrines.
    - 1. Heresy and false doctrines are misrepresentations of God propagated by people claiming to represent God.
    - 2. Heresy and false doctrines discredit the Gospel and cause people to move away from God.
    - 3. There are many warnings in scripture about the dangers of distorting the Word of God such as Galatians 1:6-9.



- D. The Minister/Pastor is to be the expert in the community on the Word of God as seen in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus as well as Paul's ministry in Acts.
- E. There is a difference between knowing and understanding.
  - 1. Memorization of God's Word is a wonderful practice but it does not give us much help if we do not understand what we have memorized.
  - 2. Biblical interpretation takes us beyond just reading and knowing and into understanding and doing.

#### IV. The Goal of Biblical Interpretation

- A. Understanding God's Word
- B. Obeying God's Word (James 1:22-25)
- C. Communicating God's Word

#### V. Interpretative Mistakes:

- A. The literal approach
  - 1. One mistake many people when interpreting scripture is to take each passage literally and try direct application.
  - 2. While some scriptures can be properly interpreted literally, many scriptures need further study and examination before we can begin application.
  - 3. A complete literal interpretation of scripture will lead to many mistakes.
- B. The spiritualizing approach
  - 1. Some interpreters spiritualize all scripture and look for hidden meanings.
  - 2. While some scriptures are to be seen as allegories with spiritual meanings, many scriptures have a real-life, this-world meaning and application.
  - 3. Spiritualizing all scripture would cause us to neglect the message and commandments of the Bible for everyday living.
- C. The partial acceptance approach
  - 1. Many Bible readers only look for what they want to find in the scripture or only examine what they can immediately understand.
  - 2. When a passage is difficult to comprehend or not obviously relevant to their life, they ignore or neglect it.

#### VI. The Questions of Interpretation:

- A. What is the universal meaning of this passage?
- B. How do I bring this passage from the world of Biblical days to our world today?
- C. How can I apply it to my life?
- D. How can I communicate the meaning to others?

# **The Process of Biblical Interpretation**

## I. Basic Rules when Interpreting Scripture:

- A. We do not create meaning out of a text. We seek to find the meaning that is already there and intended by God.
- B. The goal of Biblical interpretation is not to find something no other person has found, but rather to find the heart and message of God in the text.
- C. We must understand that God has chosen to give us eternal truths through specific situations, people, and events.
- D. We must seek to find the “universal principle” within the text:
  1. All scripture has a universal principle behind the written text.
  2. Every passage has a universal/theological principle that applies to all people at all times everywhere (universal). That principle may not be seen in the literal reading of the passage but is often made clear after proper interpretation. It’s that universal principle that we must find, understand, obey, and preach. This is the hear of God behind the passage or text.
- E. Biblical interpretation is a journey that starts with a careful reading of the text and ends with an understanding of the text in terms of its universal principles.
  1. The authors use the term “theological principle” which is an accurate title but the term “universal principle” makes a clear point that this principle is for all people, at all times, everywhere.
  2. The process of getting from careful reading to universal principle is the remaining content of this class.

## II. The Four Steps to Biblical Interpretation:

- A. Step One: Understand what the text meant to the original audience.
- B. Step Two: Understand the differences between the original audience and us today.
- C. Step Three: Find the universal principle.
- D. Step Four: Apply that universal principle to our world today.

## III. Examining the Four Steps

- A. Step One: Understand what the text meant to the original audience.
  1. This step answers the question: What did the text mean to the Biblical audience?
  2. The “original audience” is the original recipient/reader of the letter/book/passage of scripture.
  3. When reading a passage of scripture, first ask, “What is actually happening here?”
  4. The first step of the process involves careful reading paying attention to details like grammar, sentences, words, and characters.
  5. This step also involves investigating context, both in the book and in history.

B. Step Two: Understand the differences between the original audience and us today.

1. This step answers the question: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
2. The reader today is separated from the original audience by sometimes vast differences such as culture, language, situation, time, and covenant. This is not always the case, but most of the time we are separated by the differences.
3. To properly understand the Bible we must recognize these differences.
4. We also look for unique aspects of the passage. Unique situations in scripture require extra study to determine meaning.

C. Step Three: Find the universal principle.

1. This step answers the question: What is the universal/theological principle in this text?
2. Remember, we do not create meaning, we discover the meaning intended by God in the text.
3. As God gives specific expressions to specific Biblical audiences, he is also giving universal theological teachings for all his people through the same texts.
4. Here is it sometimes helpful to look for similarities between us and the original audience.
5. The universal principle is application and relevant to all people in all places at all time.
6. In this step, we also take into consideration the whole of Scripture. We must understand each passage as both a unique text and as part of a greater work. Every universal principle will agree with the whole of scripture.
7. Universal/Theological principles drawn from the Biblical text are:
  - i. reflected in the studied text.
  - ii. timeless and not tied to a specific situation.
  - iii. not be culturally bound.
8. The universal principle should agree with the teachings of the rest of Scripture.
  1. The universal principle is relevant to both the Biblical and the modern audience.

B. Step Four: Apply that universal principle to our world today.

1. This step answers the question: How should individual Christians today apply the principle of the text to their lives?
2. This step deals with application. We must apply the principles that we discover in scripture to our lives today.

# Reading the Bible Carefully

## I. The Importance of Reading Carefully

- A. The first key to interpreting the Bible correctly is reading the Bible carefully. This is a key aspect of step one.
- B. One of the most critical skills needed in reading the Bible is the ability to see the details. Most of us read the Bible too quickly.
- C. If we believe that every part of the Bible is inspired and the Word of God, we should be people who pay attention to even the smallest details of the Bible.
- D. Duvall and Hayes write, “Our first step in grasping a biblical text is to observe as many details as possible.”
- E. Before we can interpret and apply the text, we must do careful reading and observation. Before we know what the text means we must know exactly what it says.

## II. Reading with the Right Mindset

### A. Read the Bible Slowly

1. Slowly read the passage you are studying multiple times and make notes each time as you read.
2. If you use a Study Bible, make sure to pay attention to each footnote given. This will give you insight into certain words or phrases.

### B. Reading with Objectivity

1. Reading objectively means we read the passage without placing upon the text any preunderstandings.
2. Carefully reading the Bible requires us to put aside our preconceived notions about the scripture and read the passage with a neutral and objective mind.
3. Often when reading scripture we put upon it things we have heard or believed that may not always be accurate. To truly understand the scripture to the original we must read it as if we are hearing it for the first time.
4. Three factors can hinder our careful reading and understanding of scripture:
  - i. Preunderstanding
  - ii. Familiarity
  - iii. Culture

### C. Remove Preunderstandings

1. Preunderstanding refers to all of our preconceived notions and understandings that we bring to the text, which have been created (sometimes without realizing it) before we actually study the passage in detail. Preunderstanding is basically:
2. Preunderstandings are created by many influences: some good and some bad; some accurate and some inaccurate.
  - i. Past sermons, teachings, stories, and music can influence understanding.

- ii. Personal history also influences our view of scripture. Family sayings, traditions, myths, and old mindsets can affect create preunderstandings.

3. Sometimes we can become guilty of having “overstanding” rather than understanding. That is where we stand over the Word of God and determine what it means rather than placing ourselves under the Word of God seeking to truly find God’s intended meaning.

#### D. Overcoming Familiarity

1. Familiarity with certain passages can cause us to neglect serious study.
2. Familiarity is the idea that we already know everything we can know about the passage because we have heard or read it so many times.
3. Familiarity causes us to fall into the trap of thinking that all we will see in the passage is what we saw the last time or in the past.
4. When we read the Bible, let us approach each scripture as if it was our first time reading it. This mindset will keep us from thinking that Bible study is boring and will help us maintain constant growth in our Biblical understanding.

#### E. Moving Beyond Culture

1. Cultural issues can create interpretative barriers and unnecessary baggage that hinder us from practicing proper Biblical interpretation.
2. Our culture will tempt us to distort and twist the meaning of the text to fit into our culture. Yet no matter what our relationship with culture is, it will try to influence our reading of scripture.
3. Charles Krefl writes that we all possess an “interpretational reflex” that causes us to automatically interpret scripture in terms of our culture. This pull towards culture affects our interpretation in two ways:
  - i. Our cultural baggage can add unnecessary aspects, images, or meaning to our understanding of scripture.
  - ii. Our cultural baggage can put limitations on our understanding of scripture.
4. Our cultural background can lead us to decide what is possible and not possible in for a scripture’s meaning even before we begin serious study of the text. Duvall & Hays write, “Our subconscious agenda seeks to legitimize our cultural worldview, that is, the way things are in our culture.”
5. The Bible is above every culture. We must remember that the Biblical message is from God and is therefore superior to cultural beliefs and mindsets. The challenge is to change our culture to conform to the Biblical message. But if we allow our culture to dominate our understanding of scripture, we will be closed-minded to any understanding of scripture that conflicts with our culture. We must look for

what God is saying, not what our culture is saying. Our goal is not to make the text conform to our culture but to discover the text's intended meaning.

6. Never allow culture to determine meaning. Be loyal to God and proper Biblical interpretation and application above all.

#### F. Conclusion:

1. We must be able to identify and remove our wrong preunderstandings, overcome familiarity, and move beyond culture so that we can be open to the true interpretation of Scripture and then change ourselves in accordance with that interpretation.
2. Nevertheless, there are some good presuppositions that we must carry with us into Biblical interpretation.
  - i. Presuppositions are facts that we believe to be true before reading each passage of scripture.
  - ii. Our presuppositions about scripture should include:
    - a. The Bible is the Word of God and is fully inspired by Him.
    - b. The Bible is always trustworthy and true.
    - c. God has done and can still do miracles. He worked through human history and still works through human experiences.
    - d. The Bible is not contradictory.

### III. Carefully Reading Words

- A. When you find a word in scripture that is difficult to understand or a word whose definition you may not be sure of, consult a dictionary first. Do not guess about word definitions.
- B. Reading another translation will also help you understand the meaning of a word.

### IV. Carefully Reading Sentences:

- A. Biblical verses are not always numbered according the sentence structure. Some verses contain one sentence. Some verses contain a partial sentence. Some verses may contain multiple sentences. It is better to read sentence by sentence rather than verses by verse.
- B. The Biblical writers did not write with verses and chapter numbers. These were added many years later to aid in referencing, congregational reading, and group study.
- C. We observe each word and phrase in the sentence to find the intended meaning. We also now that the whole sentence will help you define and understand individual words.
- D. Repetition of Words – words or even phrases used multiple times within a passage indicate importance.
- E. Word Modifiers
  1. Modifiers are words that describe another word. The grammatical terms are adjectives and adverbs.
  2. Pay attention to word modifiers in the sentence and identify the word they modify.

F. Contrast

1. A discussion of differences between two or more things, people, etc.
2. Look for the positive and the negative in the contrast.

G. Comparison – A discussion of similarities (what is the same between two or more things, people, etc.)

H. Lists

1. When you find a list in scripture, write it out on a piece of paper as an actual list so you can better see the individual words on the list.
2. Lists are rarely ordered by importance. Do not think that the first things on the list are the most important and the last things on in the list are least important.

I. Cause and Effect – Identify any cause and effect seen in the sentence and how the cause and effect are related.

J. Figure of Speech- A creative use of language to make or emphasize a point.

1. Overstatement

- i. To amplify a truth in such a way that the resulting statement forcefully communicates the point that is attempting to be made.
- ii. Example in Luke 14:26.
- iii. Overstatements are not to be taken literally but we must find what is the actual point of the overstatement.

2. Hyperbole

- i. To amplify a truth in such a way that the resulting statement becomes impossible to fulfill yet emphatically communicates that point that is attempting to be made.
- ii. Example in Matthew 19:23-24
- iii. Hyperbolic statements are not meant to be taken literally but we must find what is the point being made by the hyperbole.

3. Simile

- i. A comparison between two things that are essentially unlike each other and that is introduced by connective words such as “like” or “as.”
- ii. Example in Matthew 10:16
- iii. We investigate why this comparison is being made and what does it mean for the reader.

4. Metaphor

- i. A direct comparison between two essentially unlike things (without the use of “like” or “as”).
- ii. Example in John 15:5
- iii. We investigate what makes this comparison true and why is it being made.

5. Proverb - A concise saying that contains in a memorable truth.

6. Paradox

- i. Statements or phrases that appear contradictory but illustrate a truth.
- ii. Example in Mark 10:42-45

7. Question

- i. Many questions in Scripture are not asked for information but are asked to engage the audience for the purpose.
- ii. Answer the question as the author would expect.

8. Intentional Action

- i. Teaching or illustrating a point through a particular (and often non-verbal) activity. The author isn't just reporting information but using the action in the story to teach a lesson.
- ii. Example in John 13:2-5.
- iii. We investigate what lesson or truth is being taught by the action in the passage.

A. Conjunctions – words such as “but,” “and,” “for,” “therefore,” “since,” “because” that link statements, phrases, or thoughts and explain phrases or words in sentences.

B. Verbs

1. The action words within a sentence or passage. These are usually the main ideas of the sentence.
2. Pay attention to the tense of the verbs (present, past, future, etc.)

C. Pronouns – The words which give identity (he, she, it, we, you, your, our, mine, his, hers, ours, etc). Always ensure you know to whom the pronoun refers.

II. Carefully Reading Paragraphs:

A. What is a Paragraph?

1. A collection of sentences grouped together based on a common theme.
2. Not all Biblical translations include paragraphs. Some simply list the scripture verse by verse. Although the Biblical writers did not write in paragraphs, it is helpful to view the text in paragraph form and it is recommended that you use a translation of Scripture that organized the translated text into paragraphs.
3. There are several grammatical and structural issues to consider when reading scripture in paragraphs.

B. Moving from General to Specific – When an author begins a passage with a general idea and then begins to give specific examples, instructions, or descriptions.

C. Dialogue

1. A conversation between two or more people recorded in writing.
2. When you are reading dialogue, remember to answer the following questions:



- i. Why is this conversation taking place?
- ii. Who is participating in the conversation (even just listening)?
- iii. Who is speaking to whom?
- iv. What is the setting?
- v. What type of dialogue is this - argument, discussion, teaching, friendly conversation, etc?
- vi. What is the point of the dialogue?

3. Prayers and conversations between people and God are also forms of dialogue.

#### D. Purpose Statements

1. Statements or phrases that describe the reason, result, or consequences of actions.
2. These statements or phrases usually begin with words such as “that,” “in order that,” “so that,” or “to.”

#### E. Statements of Means

1. Statements or phrases that proclaim the means by which something is done.
2. These statements or phrases usually begin with words such as “by” or “through.”

#### F. Conditional Statements

1. Statements or phrases that proclaim the condition by which something happens.
2. These statements usually follow this pattern: “if . . . then. . .”
3. Pay attention to both the condition (if) and the result or consequence (then).

#### G. The Response of God to the Actions of People

1. The Bible gives us insight into how God responds when people act in certain ways.
2. When reading a passage, ask the following questions:
  - i. What does God (or individual members of the Trinity) do in this passage?
  - ii. What are the people doing in the passage?
  - iii. What is the connection between the action of God and the action of humans in this passage?

#### H. Emotional Terms

1. Terms that demonstrate the emotional feelings of the writer/speaker.
2. Such terms could include words of close connection such as “mother,” “father,” “child,” “son,” and “daughter.”
3. Emotional terms can also include verbs that convey emotion along with action.

#### I. Tone

1. The attitude, mood, or condition of the writer.
2. For example, is the tone of the passage angry, excited, sad, joyful, etc? Why?

### III. Discourses

#### A. What are discourses?

1. For the purpose of this class, a discourse is a connected passage of scripture spanning more than one paragraph.
2. Most every verse we read has a place in a larger discourse. To properly understand the verse we must also observe the entire discourse.
3. Remember, read the Bible according to the type of writing it is. Read letters as letters. Read stories as stories. The Bible was not originally written with chapter and verses. These were added later. Do not read according to chapter and verse numbers, read as large discourses.

B. What to look for in discourses:

1. Connection - How does the verse or paragraph you are studying relate to the overall discourse?
2. Major Breaks and Shifts – pay attention to when the writer changes subjects. What caused the change? What is the relation between the two discourses?
3. Interchange – subtle comparisons and contrasts within the discourse or connected discourses.
4. Parable - The process of communicating a spiritual truth through a variety or combination of literary devices that utilizes the language and cultural context of the audience. There are four kinds of parables in the Bible:
  - i. Similitude Parable - an expanded simile, the shortest form of parables such as Mark 4:26-29
  - ii. Story Parable – a message told through story such as Luke 15:11-32.
  - iii. Example Parable - a message told through giving an example such as Luke 15:8-10.
  - iv. Allegorical Parable
    - a. An extended metaphor
    - b. Usually the longest of the parables
    - c. An example is in Luke 8:4-15.
    - d. In allegorical parables, the speaker (usually Jesus) will assign a meaning to various characters or objects in the parable. Pay attention to what Jesus says the characters or objects mean.

# Understanding Context

- I. What is Context?
  - A. The historical and literary setting for a passage of scripture.
  - B. Context greatly affects understanding and interpretation.
  - C. When studying scripture, we must observe two types of context:
    1. Historical-Cultural Context
    2. Literary Context
- II. Historical-Cultural Context
  - A. Every scripture must be read within its historical-cultural context.
    1. The Bible was written at specific times to specific people.
    2. We cannot overlook the historical and culture setting of those people in that time when we read the Bible.
    3. For all passages, context is a key to understanding.
  - B. What is Historical-Cultural Context?
    1. Historical-cultural context includes information concerning the Biblical writer, original audience, historical setting, and cultural practices/elements that may be addressed by a passage.
    2. Historical-cultural context involves almost anything outside the text that helps us understand the text.
  - C. Studying Authorship
    1. Even though the Bible is inspired by God, it is extremely helpful to study the human authors of the Bible. The more we know about the author of the text, the more understanding we can have of the text.
    2. Questions to ask concerning the author of the passage you are studying:
      - i. Who wrote the passage?
      - ii. When did the author write the passage?
      - iii. Why did the author write it?
      - iv. What was the ministry/career of the writer?
      - v. Where did the author write?
      - vi. What other information about the author will help us understand the passage (family, background, experiences)?
  - D. Studying the Original Audience
    1. Just as authorship shines light on meaning, so does understanding more about the original audience.
    2. Questions to ask concerning the original audience of the passage you study:
      - i. Who is the original audience?

- ii. Where is the original audience?
- iii. What are their circumstances and conditions?
- iv. What is their history or background
- v. What was the relationship between the author and their recipients
- vi. What was the relationship between the recipients and God?

#### E. Other Historical-Cultural Elements

1. Any other information we can gather about the historical and cultural setting of the passage can help us interpret that passage.
2. Other elements of the passage to observe:
  - i. Themes: What is the overall message or theme of the author for the audience?
  - ii. Geography
    - a. Where in the world is this happening?
    - b. What is that place like?
  - iii. Social/Cultural Customs in the passage:
    - a. Is there a social custom in the text that we need to study?
    - b. What is happening culturally that is unique or different from my culture?
  - iv. Economic
    - a. What is the economic situation of the audience?
    - b. What are the economic factors seen in the passage?
  - v. Political
    - a. What is happening politically in the location of the audience?
    - b. What political factors are seen in the passage?
  - vi. Religious Issues
    - a. What is the religious background of the audience?
    - b. What religious factors are seen in the passage?
  - vii. Historical Issues
    - a. What historical events surround the writing of this passage?
    - b. What historical events affect the passage?
  - viii. Other Issues: What specifically do I need to study about this passage understand it properly

#### F. Dangers in Studying Historical-Cultural Context

1. Beware of inaccurate background information.
  - i. Check everything by a trustworthy and reliable source.
  - ii. Wrong background information will lead to wrong understanding.
2. Don't stop your study at background information.

- i. While history is vitally important to understanding the text, the meaning of the text is still the goal of Bible study.
  - ii. We do not seek to be experts in history only, but in the Word of God.
- G. Tools to Use When Studying Historical-Cultural Context – If you have access to these tools, they can help you better understand the Bible:
  - 1. Study Bible: Introductions, Notes, Articles, etc.
  - 2. Bible Handbooks
  - 3. Old Testament and New Testament Surveys
  - 4. Commentaries
  - 5. Bible Atlas and Maps (Study Bibles have many of these maps)
  - 6. Bible Dictionaries– Dictionaries that focus on defining Biblical terms and issues.
  - 7. Bible Encyclopedias– Encyclopedias that focus on in depth study of specific Biblical issues.
  - 8. Background Commentaries– Commentaries that focus on the historical and cultural background of Biblical books.
  - 9. History Books– Books that focus on the history of Old and New Testament Settings
  - 10. Internet Resources:
    - i. The following internet websites can help you study the Bible properly:
      - a. [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)
      - b. [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org)
      - c. [www.stepbible.org](http://www.stepbible.org)
    - ii. Remember to be extremely careful of internet resources. Many websites are inaccurate and have no oversight. It is always better to use proven printed material or highly recommended websites.

## II. Literary Context

### A. What is Literary Context?

- 1. Literary context is the language, text, and style of writing within and surrounding a passage that gives a passage meaning.
- 2. Duvall and Hays write, “Context determines meaning.”

### B. Genre

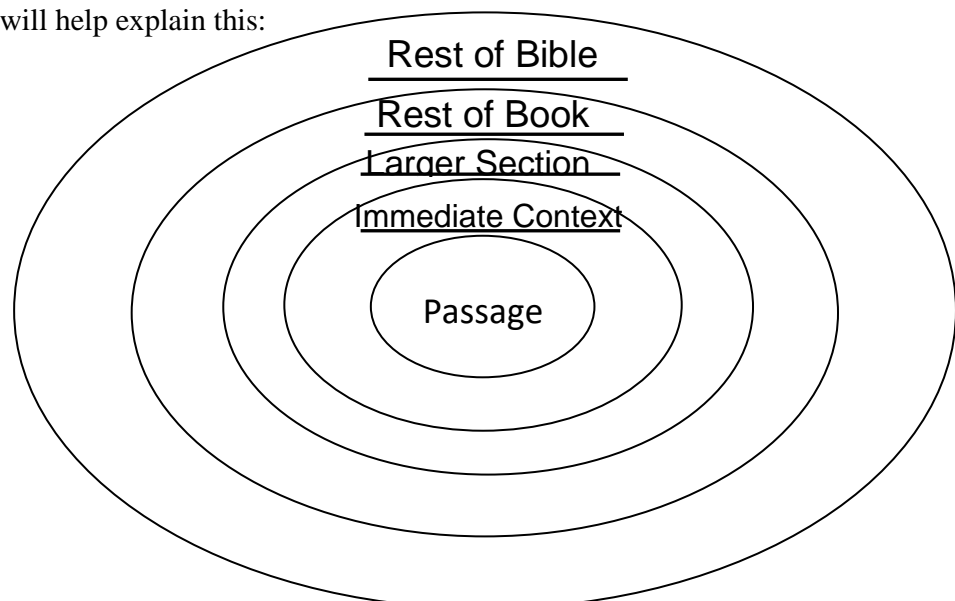
- 1. The genre of a Biblical book is an important aspect of literary context and the interpretation process.
- 2. Genre is basically the form of style or writing.
- 3. The Bible contains multiple genres:
  - i. Old Testament:
    - a. Narrative - a story or account of events, people, and/or experiences.

- b. Law – Israeli legal codes.
  - c. Poetry – the creative use of language to convey a thought, message, or story often using multiple literary devices.
  - d. Prophecy – writings of prophets foretelling and forthtelling.
  - e. Wisdom – literature intended for the purpose of giving instruction.
- ii. New Testament:
- a. Gospel – writings centered on the life of Jesus Christ for the purpose of telling His good news.
  - b. History – similar to narrative above.
  - c. Letter – correspondence or written conversation between two or more people.
  - d. Apocalyptic – literature that describes cataclysmic or end times events often using allegories or metaphors.

4. Each genre requires that the reader use different rules when reading and interpreting. We will discuss the rules later but for now remember that you cannot read each genre in the same way.
5. The genre or style of the writing must be taken into consideration when seeking understanding and meaning.

### C. Surrounding Context

1. When you read a passage, you must pay attention to the surrounding context.
2. Surrounding context is the body of literature that surrounds the passage.
3. Just as you need to hear the whole conversation to understand one line of dialogue, you must observe and study the surrounding context to understand one specific passage of scripture.
4. There are varying levels and degrees of surrounding context. The following graph will help explain this:



5. The highest priority in interpretation should be given to the immediate context.

However, each circle should be considered when interpreting.

#### D. Cautions Concerning Context

1. Never ignore context no matter how independent the verse may seem.
2. Do not get sidetracked by chapters and verses, these were not part of the original writing. Chapters and verses are good for reference but not good interpretative tools.
3. Do not connect verses out of context that should not be connected. Finding scriptures to prove your point can lead to misinterpreting the Bible and creating meaning rather than discovering meaning. Duvall and Hays rightfully write, “Misreading the Bible ultimately hurts people by enslaving them rather than setting them free with truth.”

#### E. Examining Context

1. Literature, like verbal conversation, must be read in context because context determines meaning. If your interpretation of an individual passage conflicts with its immediate and overall context, the interpretation is flawed.
2. Duvall and Hays write, “Normally, sentences build on previous sentences and lead into later sentences in order to produce a coherent message.” Therefore, any passage you read in the Bible draws meaning from previous sentences and gives meaning to subsequent sentences. We call this “flow of thought”.
3. “Flow of thought” is the organized progression of the author’s ideas and statements concerning a particular topic or theme. It is important to locate the passage’s place in the author’s flow of thought when interpreting.
4. The process of examining context has four steps:
  - i. Read the whole book or at least large sections of text surrounding the passage and not the section and paragraph divisions.
    - a. This extra reading will help you see the overall theme and message of the book and where the passage under study falls within the overall work and theme.
    - b. Remember, chapter and verse numbers do not always portray accurate divisions. A thought that began in chapter 2 can continue into chapters 3 and 4.
    - c. Book outlines can be helpful in this process. Outlines are given in study Bibles and commentaries. Consider making your own outline based on your study of the entire book.

- d. Paragraphs are key to look for. Some Bibles display the text in paragraph form but others do not. To find where paragraphs and sections divide look for the following:
    - 1. Conjunctions
    - 2. Change in style of writing
    - 3. Change in topic or theme
    - 4. Change in time, location, and/or setting
    - 5. Grammatical changes
  - ii. Summarize the main points of the paragraphs and sections.
    - a. Ask the following questions:
      - 1. What is the author trying to say in the overall context?
      - 2. How does each section relate to that overall context?
    - b. Remember to look for main points. First find the author's main points then connect that with the details.
  - iii. Organize the summaries to find the author's flow of thought.
  - iv. Find where the passage you are studying fits into the flow of thought and allow that to aid you in interpretation.
- F. Remember, if our interpretation of the text is not support by the context of the scripture, we must change our understanding and take into account the literary (and historical) context. The context of the passage must inform our interpretation.



# **Biblical Languages and Translations**

## I. Biblical Languages and Translation

- A. As mentioned earlier, we recognize that the Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek (with some Aramaic).
- B. Thankfully, we can easily read the Bible through modern translations of Scripture. However, Biblical interpretation sometimes requires study in the original language
- C. The first translations of Scripture took place when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek around 250 BC. This translated work is called the Septuagint
- D. The next major translation took place when the Church had the Old and New Testaments translated from Greek to Latin around 350-450 AD. This translated work is called the Vulgate.
- E. It was not until the 1500s that the Bible began to be translated into the languages of the people.

## II. The Nature of Bible Translation

### A. What is Translation?

1. In general, translation is transferring a message or work of literature from one language into another language.
2. Translation happens every day internationally for numerous reasons yet the Bible remains the most translated material in the history of the world.

### B. Why do we need Bible translation?

1. Biblical translation is necessary for most modern Christians to hear, read, and understand the Bible. Without translation we would need to learn ancient Hebrew and Greek to use the Scriptures.
2. While reading the Scriptures in the original languages is the ideal way to read the Bible, reading a good translation in your language is the next best way. Translation is not a bad thing but is actually a great blessing to the church.

### C. The Origins of Bible Copying and Translation

1. The original Biblical documents were given or sent to original recipients at or near the date of writing. The original recipients realized the value of these documents and produced copies for preservation and sharing with other people/communities.
2. Copies were made by handwriting word-for-word the original text onto scrolls or papyrus paper. This was a long, detailed, and tedious process.
3. War and exile led to the destruction of the original Old Testament documents. Severe persecution led to the destruction of the original New Testament documents.
4. As a result, today we have NO original Biblical documents/books/letters. Yet we do have numerous copies of the original writings that were saved.

- i. The oldest Old Testament documents come from the Dead Sea Scrolls. These were found in 1948 and date back to around the birth of Jesus.
  - ii. The oldest New Testament document is a fragment of a handwritten copy of the book of John dating back from between 200 and 300 AD. The other copies we have are from 300 AD and forward.
  - iii. Scholars have identified and preserved over 5,000 early handwritten copies of Biblical literature. We call these manuscripts.
5. With the invention of the printing press in 1400s, the Bible was able to be copied and mass produced much quicker. This breakthrough made a way for the Bible to be available to most Christians everywhere. Since more Bibles were being made and used, people wanted to read the Bible in their own language.
  6. The first language to have the complete scriptures translated was Latin around 400 AD. No other translations were allowed but some people did begin to translate the Bible into local languages around the 1400s. In the 1500s, the Protestant Reformation encouraged and undertook Bible translation. Since then, Bible translators have been at work translating the Bible from the two original languages into thousands of languages.
  7. Early translators were persecuted for their and even killed for their work. Today missionaries are still at work, dedicating their lives to translate the Word of God into every known language on Earth.

### III. The Process of Bible Translation

- A. Bible translation requires mastering the original languages:
  1. Ancient Hebrew for the Old Testament
  2. Koine (or common, community) Greek for the New Testament. This is not classical or modern Greek, rather it is marketplace Greek of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.
- B. Translators also rely on the work of Biblical literature scholars who take all those 5,000 manuscripts and create a text from which translation can begin. This is an ongoing process as new discoveries are being made yet we are confident that 99.9 % of the original writing is intact and available through the known copies.
- C. Good translations are produced by a team of translators. Teamwork serves at least three purposes:
  1. To discuss and examine the possibilities or options in translating certain passages.
  2. To keep personal opinion out of translation.
  3. To assist in translating into the receiving or target language.
- D. In some cases, the work continues as the translators prepare the language group to receive the Bible. In all cases, the interpreter (preacher, teacher, minister) must help the readers/hearers understand what they have must read/heard.

- E. Duvall and Hayes give a summary of this process: “God spoke through human authors who composed an original text. The originals were copied and recopied. Textual analysts do their best to determine which copies most likely resemble the originals and produce a critical edition of the Old and New Testaments texts. The translators then go to work moving the meaning of the ancient Biblical text into our own language so that we can hear the Lord speak to us through His Word.”
- F. The history of the English translation of the Bible is found in the textbook. A history of some of the East African languages and Bible translation can be found in the library.

#### IV. Difficulties in Bible Translation

- A. It is not always possible to convey the meaning of one word from a foreign language into a receiving language. This makes it difficult and sometimes inaccurate to do a word-for-word translation.
- B. Vocabulary sizes vary in size in every language. Some languages have fewer or more words than other languages. Once again, this makes word-for-word translation very difficult and sometimes inaccurate.
- C. Not every language uses the same syntax.
  - 1. Syntax is the form or placement of words in phrases and/or sentences.
  - 2. Different languages use different methods (syntax) for creating sentences. For example, in some languages the adjective come before the noun but in other languages the adjective comes after the noun.
- D. In general, accurately taking a message from one language to another is a difficult and tedious process.

#### V. Two Approaches to Biblical Translation

##### A. The Literal Approach

- 1. The literal approach (also called the “formal” approach by some) attempts to translate scripture literally or word-for-word. This approach tries to stay as close as possible to the structure and words of the original language.
- 2. However, this approach produces a translation that is often awkward and hard to read because it does not take into account the style of the receiving language.
- 3. This approach is more concerned about direct translation rather than translation based on the meaning or intent of scripture.

##### B. The Functional Approach

- 1. The functional approach (also called the “dynamic” approach by some) attempts to convey the meaning or the original intent of the author in the translation. The translator wants the translation to have the same affect on the new audience as it did on the original audience.

2. Rather than translating word-for-word, this approach tries to translate thought-for-thought, conveying the meaning of the text rather than exact words.
  3. The problem with this approach is that some have accused the translators of being too free with the translation and moving away from the original wording too much.
- C. Both approaches are useful at times but in general terms we try to find a translation that is somewhat in the middle of the two.
- D. Another type of translation is a paraphrase.
1. A paraphrase is a restatement or explanation of a particular translation using different words.
  2. Paraphrases are based on an existing translation rather than the original Hebrew and Greek. They are sometimes called a type of commentary on the Bible.
  3. Paraphrases are good secondary study tools but should not be our primary study tool as ministers. However, paraphrases may be greatly beneficial for devotional Bible reading. Popular English paraphrases include the Living Bible and the Amplified Bible.

## VI. Choosing a Translation

- A. Choose a translation that uses a modern version of the language you wish to use.
- B. Use a translation that is based on reliable (accepted) Greek and Hebrew manuscripts.
- C. Use a translation that was formed by a committee or team rather than one person.
- D. Use a translation that is appropriate at the time.
- E. Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect translation so it is always good to consult a variety of translations. A parallel Bible is good for this.

## Discovering Meaning

### I. Moving Through the Process

- A. Up to this point, most everything we have studied has been tools to use in doing steps 1 and 2 of the process of Biblical interpretation.
  - 1. Step 1 is understanding what the text meant to the original audience and step 2 is finding the difference between the original audience and us today.
  - 2. Careful reading, studying context, word studies, and translations help us with this.
- B. Now it's time to move to step 3, finding the universal principle.
  - 1. Even though we have already spoken about this briefly, we will now see some practical tips for discovering this principle.
  - 2. Remember, as Biblical interpreters, we discover meaning rather than create meaning.

### II. Interpreting the Bible in an Age of Relativism

- A. Relativism is the idea that there are no universal principles or standards of truth. Everyone decides for himself/herself what is right and wrong, good and bad, true and false.
- B. In many forms, relativism stands in opposition to the Bible because in Christianity we view the Bible as containing absolute truth and a standard for ethics. This is why we look for universal principles in and behind Scripture. We believe that the Bible is for all people, at all time, everywhere.
- C. The rise and acceptance of relativism, however, has affected the way many read the Bible. When many read the Bible they are not asking, "what does this mean." Rather, they are asking, "what does this mean *to me*?" This makes us believe that the Bible can rightly mean different things to different people and a verse may be interpreted in many different but equally legitimate ways.
  - 1. While this may be true for application, this is completely false in terms of the universal/theological principles in Scripture. God, speaking through human authors, has a universal message for all people in His Word. We may need to apply that in different ways but the meaning intended by God in a particular text is the meaning for everyone, at all times, everywhere.
  - 2. We must reject relativism in our approach to interpreting the Bible.
  - 3. Some secular books are intended to be read from a relative mindset. Certain authors and artists create material and invite people to create meaning for themselves from that material. The Bible is **NOT** this type of literature.

### III. When reading the Bible, who determines meaning?

- A. In a relativistic approach to Scripture, the reader determines the meaning of a passage.
- B. However, the proper Biblical interpreter understands and accepts that Biblical authors determine a passage's meaning.

1. The Bible is unique in that it has both a divine author (God) and many human authors through whom God worked.
  2. This divine authorship gives the Bible a place above all other literature and affects the way we read and interpret its text.
  3. When reading the Bible, we look to these divine and human authors for meaning. What were they trying to say? The intent of God through human writers is the true meaning of each text.
  4. Through Scripture, God communicates both the immediate, original message for the Biblical audience (step 1) and the theological/universal principle for all people, at all times, everywhere (step 3).
- C. If you believe that the Bible is God’s revelatory Word and that the Scriptures function as communication from God, you should interpret the Bible by looking for the meaning that God, the author, intended. Your interpretative questions should be: What is the main God intended in this text?”
- D. In Biblical interpretation, the reader does not control the meaning. Rather, the authors control the meaning. We do not create meaning. Rather, we seek to discover and accept the meaning intended by the author.
- E. Always remember:
1. The true meaning of any Biblical text is that which the author wished to convey through the writing.
  2. The reader’s response to this meaning is application.

#### IV. The Importance of Following the Process

- A. Since meaning is determined by the author and not the reader, we must be committed to the process of Biblical interpretation.
1. Careful reading and observing grammar, syntax, figures of speech, and literary devices in Step 1 will give us insight into the meaning of scripture. It is not wasted labor but a necessary step in discovering meaning.
  2. Analyzing historical and literary context in Steps 1 and 2 shines a great deal of light on meaning.
  3. If everyone can decide for themselves what Scripture means, there is no need to read carefully. But since the meaning is defined by the author, we must pay close attention to what they actually wrote.
- B. Remember, before you can begin Steps 3 and 4, it is absolutely necessary that you thoroughly complete Steps 1 and 2.

#### V. Wrong Methods for Determining Meaning

- A. Spiritualizing Scripture

1. Spiritualizing Scripture is the attempt to find and communicate a hidden or spiritual meaning beyond the literary, intended meaning of a passage of scripture.
2. The problem with this approach is that the intended meaning is often neglected or overlooked for some more exciting or original meaning that actually not intended by the author at all.
3. This approach to Biblical interpretation also opens the door to relativistic style of reading and determining meaning (what does scripture mean *to me*).
4. We must overcome the temptation to read something into the text that is not actually there. Rather, let us hold tightly to the meaning intended by the author (God and the human writers).

#### B. Allegory

1. An allegory is an extended metaphor. Allegorical interpretation is the attempt to make everything in scripture a metaphor for something outside the passage
2. Again, this approach to Biblical interpretation opens the door to relativistic style of reading and determining meaning (what does this scripture mean *to me*) since it allows the reader to develop the metaphor around what is happening in their life.
3. While some Biblical writers do use metaphors and allegories in their writing, none of the Biblical writers intended for their entire work to be taken as allegory. Even the book of Revelation which relies heavily on allegory contains many portions of text that have no allegorical function.
4. Allegorical interpretations often separate the text from its historical, culture, and literary context. This is a mistake. God speaks through the situation of the original writer and audience, not above or apart from their context.

#### C. Bible Codes

1. Many have tried to find secret codes in the Bible. These codes are said to provide hidden information. However, many of these codes have been proven as faulty.
2. There is a Hebrew numerical system called Gematria that assigns each Hebrew letter with a numerical value. Some have tried to find secret codes with this system but Biblical writers did not write hidden messages, they made the message plain.
3. God has not hidden secret codes in the Bible. God did not give his word in a way that only a special few who can find the code can understand and communicate it.
4. Reject all interpretative models that use secret codes.

### VI. Tips for Finding the Universal/Theological Principle in a Passage

#### A. Follow steps one and two properly.

1. You cannot find the universal principle without doing the preliminary work.
2. The interpretative process leads to the universal/theological principle.

#### B. Find and study the specific situation.

1. This will require synthesizing all the contextual information you discovered.
  2. Summarize the specific situation in one or two sentences.
- C. Focus on the response of God or God's person/people to the specific situation.
1. Once again, this may require looking to the larger context.
  2. Summarize the response in one or two sentences.
- D. Identify any cultural issues that do not apply outside the specific, original situation.
1. These cultural issues are most likely not applicable to all Christians everywhere.
  2. We must be able to separate cultural practices from universal principles.
- A. Develop a universal/theological principle that is based on the original situation but applies to the same situation everywhere, every time.
1. The universal principle is one that applies to all people, at all times, everywhere.
  2. A universal principle is not tied to one culture or time or person. It is always applicable even though its actual application may be different.

## II. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical Interpretation

### A. The Process and the Spirit

1. Some may say that this process of Biblical interpretation rejects or restricts the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the reader. Why study the Bible in this way if we have the Holy Spirit to teach us and lead us into understanding?
2. It is true that the Holy Spirit helps us understand but we also know that God has given us a mind to use. The Holy Spirit helps us in our study but not in our lack of study. We still have a responsibility to study seriously God's Word.

### B. The Work of the Spirit in Biblical Interpretation

#### 1. Inspiration

- i. The work of Inspiration refers to the guidance given by the Holy Spirit to the original human authors as they wrote what became our Bible.
- ii. This work of inspiration (proper) is finished. The Holy Spirit has completed this task of leading human writers into communicating God's Word to us. We do not believe that the Holy Spirit is leading people to write new books of the Bible today. The Bible is finished and complete.

#### 2. Illumination

- i. The work of Illumination refers to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to assist believers in their understanding and acceptance of the truth of scripture as inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- ii. The Holy Spirit helps us to understand and accept what He has already communicated through human authors in the Bible. The Spirit does not need to give us the Word of God because we have the Word of God. Rather, He helps us to comprehend and live out what is in that Word.



- iii. The Spirit will not lead you into something that is contrary to the Word of God. He will not contradict Himself. He will illuminate (help us to understand) us to what He has inspired the Biblical authors to write.
- iv. Since the Spirit has already worked (very well) in the area of inspiration, it is our act of honor, worship, and service to Him to seriously study what has been given as a result of that work.
- v. Therefore, we must study the inspired Word and rely on the Spirit's assistance as we go through the process of Biblical interpretation rather than allowing personal feelings, experiences, traditions, or culture to sway us one way or the other. The Spirit does not want to inspire a new Bible or new scripture but rather He seeks to illuminate us to what has already been written through His inspiration.
- vi. The Holy Spirit will anoint our minds to understand as we honor the Word of God through our faithful and proper study.

C. The Consequences of Studying the Bible Alone (without the help of the Holy Spirit):

1. While we teach and encourage every student of the Word to follow the proper steps to Biblical interpretation, we also recognize the need for the Holy Spirit to help us.
2. Without the Spirit, we can do little more than study grammar and context.
  - i. Grammar and context are extremely important as this shines light on the original and universal meaning of the passage. If we never move beyond grammar and context, we miss the meaning and purpose of God's Word.
  - ii. The Bible is not just great literature; it is the Word of God. However, without the Holy Spirit, the reader will never be able to move beyond literary and historical issues.
3. Without the Spirit, we can only partly understand the Word of God.
  - i. We might be able to know what the Bible says but without the Spirit we could never understand and apply the Word of God for several reasons:
    - a. Sin's effect has touched the whole person and even though we are saved we are awaiting our ultimate redemption. Thus, even our minds are affected. can still read the words of the Bible, a mind without the Spirit involved will never be able to discern and live out the truth in God's Word.
    - b. An unbelieving person will never accept the authority of the Bible, the principles in the Bible, or the need for God's Word.
    - c. A person without the Sprit leading him/her will not see beyond the information of the Bible. They will not recognize that is contains

the words of life. Only through the work of the Spirit will the whole person accept the whole Bible.

4. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul writes that even if a person who rejects the work of the Spirit does understand the basic principles of the Bible, they will reject those principles as truth as well. Without the Holy Spirit, some people may be able to understand some of the Bible's message but they will never accept those meanings as truth or apply those meanings to their lives.
5. We cannot apply the Word of God to our lives without the help of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in teaching these steps we are not excluding the Spirit from the process but rather honoring Him through proper study of what He has given us.

D. How does the Holy Spirit help us in Biblical Interpretation?

1. Having the Holy Spirit in our life does not mean we will automatically understand all Scripture. We still need to do proper study and interpretation. Yet the Spirit enables us to do the work necessary for proper Biblical understanding. He has renewed our minds so that we can achieve ongoing Biblical understanding.
2. The Spirit does not create new meanings or understandings in terms of Biblical truth but rather He illuminates us to what He has already inspired others to write. He helps us realize what is already in God's Word for us.
3. The Spirit helps us to discover the meaning of a passage for our situation.
4. The Spirit enables us to accept the Bible as true, authoritative, and relevant.
5. The Spirit enables us to receive the Word of God and live it out.
6. Spiritual maturity is necessary for the believer and will increase our capacity to understand God's Word.
7. The Spirit guides us to the passages that we need to study/teach/preach/read through prayer, devotional time, worship, and discernment.

E. Proper Biblical Interpretation involves the Spirit and the interpreter working together.

1. If the interpreter never seeks the illumination of the Spirit he will miss the true meaning or application of the passage.
2. If we never attempt proper and serious study, we demonstrate a lack of concern for the previous work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit expects us to use our minds and the tools we have to understand God's Word and honor His work.
3. Don't be lazy in either seeking the Spirit's guidance or studying the Bible properly. View Bible study as an act of worship and love towards God. Understand that we cannot possibly grasp God's Word on our own, we recognize we need the Spirit in our life.
4. Finally, the Holy Spirit helps us to do the work of applying meaning and message of the Bible.

# Application

## I. The Need for Application

- A. The process of Biblical interpretation is not complete without step four: application.
  - 1. Why study and understand meaning if we do not apply that meaning to our lives?
  - 2. Do not discover the meaning but fail to live it out. God gave His Word to us not only for our understanding but also for our living.
- B. John 14:21 is clear that God wants us to both understand and obey.
  - 1. Study and obedience are our acts of love, worship, and service.
  - 2. Learning/understanding should lead to doing/action.
- C. We must be willing to make the final step.
  - 1. Many interpreters can discover the universal/theological principle.
  - 2. Many interpreters can tell others how to apply that principle to their life.
  - 3. The challenge now is can we apply that principle to our life?
- D. Duvall and Hayes write, “God certainly wants us to know biblical principles and valid applications, but his ultimate goal in communicating with us is to transform our thinking and acting so that we conform to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. When we come to the point of truly grasping God’s Word, we will find God’s Word grasping us.”

## II. The Nature of Application

- A. Application is different from meaning.
  - 1. Meaning refers to what the author intended to communicate through the text.
    - i. Meaning is determined by the author and cannot be created by the reader.
    - ii. The meaning of the text is the same for all people.
  - 2. Application, however, refers to the response of the reader to the meaning of the passage.
    - i. Readers may need to apply the text in different ways. While application is somewhat controlled by meaning, the situation of the reader needs to be taken into consideration.
    - ii. In application, we ask “how do I live out the meaning of this text in my life?”
- B. Application (step 4) can only be undertaken properly when steps 1-3 are complete.

## III. Steps to Developing Application

- A. You can find appropriate application by using the following process:
  - 1. First, find and study how the universal principle in the text addresses the original situation of the text.
    - i. This requires us to look back to step one and two. Examine how the universal principle found in step three relate back to original situation.

- ii. Examine the key elements in the passage and how those elements also relate to our world or our situation.
  - iii. Observing how the original audience applied the universal principle to their life in their situation will help us apply the universal principle to our life.
2. Next, connect the text's original situation with a situation from the reader's life.
- i. The text's meaning applies in similar ways to the original situation.
  - ii. Ensure you apply the universal principle to an appropriate situation.
  - iii. Karl Barth once wrote, "Preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other." We must know our culture and the culture of the people to whom we minister and be able to properly relate and apply the meaning of the text to the situations and circumstances of those cultures. Know what's happening in your home, your community, and your world and be able (and willing) to apply and preach the text to your home, community, and world.
3. Lastly, make the application specific to the reader and modern audience.
- i. Bring the text home. It is for you, where you are, right now.
  - ii. Find and give specific ways for you and your congregation to apply the text to their life. You can help make this application by finding and giving real-world scenarios or situations to explain how we should apply the text.
  - iii. Duvall & Hayes: "We want the contemporary audience to know that God's Word is eternally relevant. Real-world scenarios should be both faithful to the meaning of the text and relevant to the contemporary audience."

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. Remember, the key to proper application is to do it. When you find the proper way to apply the text to your life, you must live that out.
- B. It is your responsibility (not your choice) to preach the whole message of Scripture. Many allow fear to prevent them from giving difficult applications of Scripture to the congregation. We are responsible to God for what we preach and not preach.

## Interpreting Gospels

- I. What are the Gospels?
  - A. The term “Gospel” comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον meaning good news.
  - B. The Gospel writers are often called evangelists because they told the good news.
  - C. The New Testament contains four Gospels written by four authors:
    1. Matthew
    2. Mark
    3. Luke
    4. John
  - D. The first three Gospels are called the Synoptic Gospels because they have numerous similarities when read together. (Synoptic means “seen together.”) John is quite unique among the four Gospels.
  - E. The Gospels are a form of biography.
    1. Above all, the Gospels are filled with stories about Jesus but these stories tell of his life and his mission.
    2. These stories do not look like modern biographies but are actually similar to ancient biographies. The authors skip directly from birth to ministry with little information about the boyhood years of Jesus’ life. Great emphasis is also placed on the last week of Jesus’ life.
    3. The stories are often arranged topically rather than chronologically.
    4. The stories are not exhaustive (no book can contain them all) but they are sufficient for knowing Jesus and developing faith in Him.
    5. Like modern biographies, the stories are based on first-hand, personal knowledge and/or the testimony of eye witnesses.
    6. Gospels are biographies with a higher, divine purpose. They are Christ-centered stories told with the intent of introducing people to Jesus and bringing them into the Kingdom of God through saving knowledge of Christ.
  - F. The General Purpose of the Gospels
    1. Each Gospel has specific purposes based on the intent of the author but they also have two general purposes:
      - i. To tell the story of Jesus through selected material/stories.
      - ii. To convey an important message to the original readers and us today concerning the Kingdom of God and Salvation.
    2. Remember when interpreting that each author does have specific purposes for writing and you need to discover those individual purposes to help you understand the material.
- II. Practical Advice for Reading the Gospels

- A. When reading in the Gospels, we have to look for the meaning of each individual story as well as the meaning of the larger section where two or more stories may be linked together. To help in this you can ask two questions:
1. What does this individual story tell us about Jesus?
  2. What is the author trying to say to the readers by linking together the smaller stories?
  3. We must view each story individually and as part of the larger section. Duvall & Hayes write, “We look at what is taught in each episode, and we look for what is taught by the way the episodes are lined together to form the larger story.”
- B. Look for the main idea in each story or group of stories. You can do this by asking the following questions:
1. What does this story teach me about Jesus?
  2. What does Jesus teach in this story?
  3. What do I learn from the actions of Jesus in this story?
- C. Reading the Individual Stories:
1. Ask the standard questions that should be asked of any story:
    - i. Who are involved?
    - ii. What is happening?
    - iii. When is this happening?
    - iv. Where is this happening?
    - v. Why is this happening?
    - vi. How is this happening?
  2. Take note of and study direct discourse:
    - i. When you see a conversation set off by quotation marks (“ ”) make a note. This is dialogue.
    - ii. Dialogue involving Jesus is extremely important and often designated in scripture with red letters.
- D. Reading a Series of Stories
1. When reading a series of stories, the most important thing to look for are the connections. What connects or unites these stories? What message or main point is being conveyed through the combination of these stories?
  2. Look for common themes or patterns.
  3. Pay attention to cause and effect relationships.
  4. Pay attention to transition statements and/or conjunctions that connect the stories.
  5. Compare the characters, the differences, the similarities, and the settings.
  6. Pay attention to the response and actions of Jesus throughout the series. Also focus on how the people in the series respond to him.

7. Always keep the larger context in view.

#### E. Literary Devices in the Gospels

1. There are literary devices to pay attention to throughout the Bible. You can see a list of these in the “reading carefully” section. However, there are a few literary devices that are found extensively in the Gospels.

#### 2. Hyperbole and Overstatement

- i. These are forms of exaggeration that are meant to forcefully make a point.
- ii. When you find exaggeration you should ask, “What is Jesus really trying to say here?”

#### 3. Metaphor and Simile

- i. Jesus often teaches using similes and metaphors to compare things.
- ii. When interpreting metaphors and similes, what point is Jesus actually trying to make.

#### 4. Rhetorical Questions

- i. Questions asked of Jesus where the answer is known and expected.
- ii. To help you understand these questions, just make the questions into statements.

#### 5. Parables

- i. Jesus is often found teaching in parables.
- ii. When interpreting parables, it would be helpful to:
  - a. Look for one main point for each main character/event or group of characters/events in the parable.
  - b. Make sure the main points you draw from the parable are applicable to the original audience. The parable was intended for the original audience. Our job is to take the original meaning and then find the universal/theological principle(s).

III. More about the Gospels can be found in the class on “The Gospels.”

## Interpreting Epistles (Letters)

- I. What are the Biblical Letters?
  - A. The Bible contains 21 letters (or epistles, an older term for Biblical letters) which are all found in the New Testament. These letters make up about 35% of the content of the New Testament are written by 5 or 6 people including Paul (13 letters), John (3 letters), Peter (2 letters), James (1 letter), Jude (1 letter), and the author of Hebrews.
  - B. These letters are somewhere between casual, informal, private correspondence and formal, literary letters. These are great pieces of literature but they also contain very personal communication.
  - C. Biblical letters were viewed as substitutes for the authors themselves. When the authors were unable to address an issue in person, they wrote a letter to help solve the problem or deal with a situation.
  - D. These letters are authoritative. They were not just general correspondence. They were written by the original Apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They speak with authority to both the original audience and the world today.
  - E. Letters were not easy to write or deliver. They were put on scrolls by secretaries or scribes who knew the special skill of writing letters. Then they had to be delivered by a person since there was no public postal service. The process was expensive and time consuming.
  - F. Once the letters reached their destination, they were read aloud to the congregation. This was their intended purpose. They were not meant for one person but for the whole community. They were read from start to finish in one sitting. They were preserved for that community and later shared with other churches.
  - G. Much more information concerning New Testament letters will be given in the two classes offered on the letters: “Pauline Epistles” and “General Epistles.”
- II. The Nature of the New Testament Letters
  - A. The letters are situational:
    1. The letters were written to address specific situations or problems related to the author and the readers.
    2. They were not merely casual correspondence. They were written for a specific occasion(s) and purpose(s).
    3. Because the letters are written to address specific situations, the interpreter must attempt to reconstruct or discover the original situation using clues in the text. Knowing the original situation will help to identify the universal/theological principles within the letter.
    4. Imagine hearing a phone conversation. In order to understand what the speaker is saying you must also know what the person on the other side of the phone is asking.



B. The letters apply theology in practical ways.

1. They do not just contain theological facts. They are real-life application of theological principles. The real-life application is tied to a certain time and culture and this must be taken into account. However, we should be aware that what we are reading in each letter is practical application of Christ-centered principles.
2. No one letter represents the author's entire theological knowledge or viewpoints. We must view each letter in relation to the author's other writings and the rest of the Bible..

III. The Form of New Testament Letters

A. The New Testament Letters generally (but not always) follow this pattern:

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Conclusion

B. Introduction:

1. The introduction contains the following information:
  - i. The name of the writer
  - ii. The name of the recipients
  - iii. A greeting
  - iv. An introductory prayer, blessing, or thanksgiving
2. Introductions are usually short but can sometimes extent to half a chapter.

C. Body

1. This is the largest part of the letter.
2. The body contains the main message of the letter.
3. While there is not set patter for the body, the body usually does contain the following items:
  - i. Instructions
  - ii. Rebukes
  - iii. Exhortations
  - iv. Teachings
  - v. Persuasions

D. Conclusion

1. Conclusions have no set form but often contains the following elements:
  - i. Commendations and Compliments
  - ii. Prayers
  - iii. Prayer Requests

- iv. Personal Greetings
- v. Final Instructions and Exhortations
- vi. Personal Writing
- vii. Benediction and/or Doxology
- viii. Travel/Ministry Plans
- ix. Usually each letter does end with a version of the grace benediction.

2. Conclusions can be short but some extend for a whole chapter.

#### IV. Practical Advice for Interpreting New Testament Letters

##### A. Examine the letter as the original audience would.

1. Remember, letters were read in the churches and the whole letter was read in one sitting. The leaders would not just read one or two verses, they read all of the letter at once. It is always helpful to read the entire letter at one in your personal study. This was how the letter was intended to be read. Even when studying one passage, we must understand its place in the whole letter.
2. As you read the whole letter make note of the following:
  - i. Major Themes
  - ii. Main Points
  - iii. Flow of Thought – how the writer progresses from one topic to the next in the letter.
3. Try to discover the situation of the original audience and let that inform your reading and interpretation. Remember to ask all the questions of context. Since you are trying to reconstruct the original situation, you need to make sure you get all the information you can from both the historical/cultural and literary context.
4. Turn to as many reliable sources as available in order to find that original situation. Remember, unlike narratives you don't know the whole story. You are only hearing one side of the conversation. So we must consider every clue available to reconstruct the original situation. Some tools include:
  - i. Hints or clues from the author
  - ii. Corresponding sections from Acts. – For example, when studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians, you also need to read Acts 19 where Paul started the church in Ephesus.
  - iii. Study Bible notes
  - iv. Commentaries and Bible Dictionaries
5. Once you find the original situation, summarize it in a paragraph for use later in the interpretative process.
6. Also remember to read in paragraphs and sections.

- i. Sentences in letters are closely connected to one another and should never be read independent of the paragraph where they are found.
  - ii. Carefully study the paragraphs before and after the paragraph where your passage is found. The larger section will greatly assist you in interpretation.
7. Examine closely the differences between the original audience and us today.
- i. Many churches and believers are still dealing with the same problems as the New Testament audience. However, there are often some significant cultural differences to work in the letters.
  - ii. Avoid the temptation of directly applying the instructions of the letters to modern audience before doing proper interpretation.
  - iii. Also examine the similarities between the original audience and us today.

#### B. Finding Universal/Theological Principles in the Letters

1. There are three questions you can ask when studying letters to help discover the universal/theological principle:
  - i. Does the author directly state a universal principle? Since letters contain practical teaching of theological principles sometimes the author will directly state a principle.
  - ii. Does the broader context reveal the universal/theological principle? Remember, sentences and paragraphs in letters are closely connected and can reveal principles for passages.
  - iii. Why does the author give a particular command or instruction? When we find the source of the command it will shine light on the universal principle being used.
2. Remember that universal/theological principles should always be:
  - i. Reflected in the Biblical text being studied.
  - ii. Timeless and not tied to specific situations.
  - iii. Free from cultural ties.
  - iv. Consistent with the teaching of the rest of Scripture.
  - v. Relevant to both the Biblical/original audience and the modern reader/audience.

C. Finding application from the letters: The authors of the letters often give application as well but make sure the application given also works in your context. If not, make it applicable to your world while remaining true to the universal principle.

## Interpreting Acts

- I. What is the Book of Acts?
  - A. A unique New Testament book.
  - B. The only book in the NT that gives a historical account of the birth and growth of the early Christian church.
  - C. Bridges the gap between the Gospels and the New Testament Letters.
  - D. A sequel or continuation to the Gospel of Luke
    1. The introductions to both Luke (1:1-4) and Acts (1:1-2) convey to the reader that the books are connected.
    2. The books are very similar in areas of style, structure, and themes.
    3. There is a definite overlap between the ending of Luke and the beginning of Acts.
    4. The ascension of Jesus is seen in the ending of the Gospel of Luke (Luke 24:51) and the beginning of the book of Acts (Acts 1:9-11).
    5. This ascension account is only seen in Luke and Acts and it serves as a transition between the two books.
  - E. The Nature of the Book of Acts
    1. Acts is a historical narrative (a collection of true stories).
    2. Acts is similar to the Gospels.
      - i. The Gospels are Christ-centered biographies given for the purpose of bringing people into the Kingdom of God.
      - ii. Acts is a Christ-centered history book given for the purpose of defending Christianity and promoting the Kingdom of God.
      - iii. Acts, however, is more tied to actual chronology than the Gospels and focus on two people:
        - a. Peter (Acts 1-8, 10-12)
        - b. Paul (Acts 9, 13-28), also called Saul
    3. Acts is often described as a “theological history”
      - i. Luke moved from theological biography (the Gospel of Luke) to a theological history (Acts).
      - ii. Luke, then, is not only an evangelist but also a historian and theologian.
      - iii. Luke gives us an accurate account of the early church history but also selected and arranged his material for theological purpose.
    4. Good history books tell both the good and the bad.
      - i. Acts records both the positive and negative events/stories/elements of the early church.
      - ii. As we read Acts we must remember that Luke includes stories of people going against God’s word. Unlike the Gospels where the main character is

always right, sometimes in the book of Acts the main characters make wrong or bad decisions. Thus, sometimes we have in Acts examples to learn from but not follow.

5. Acts includes many speeches and sermons.

- i. Speeches or sermons make up between 25% and 33% of the book.
- ii. Remember that these speeches are not necessarily word-for-word transcripts but selected overviews of the original sermon or speech.

6. Luke joins Paul's team in Acts 16 so we begin to see more details in the stories as Luke becomes an eyewitness. This does not mean that the writing of Luke before Acts 16 is less authoritative. He still wrote with the help of Paul and other eyewitnesses. Yet he had more details about the events he saw with his own eyes. Pay attention to the "we statements" in Acts as these tell you when Luke was actually present for the event (for example, see Acts 20:1-6).

F. Why did Luke write Acts?

1. In Luke's introduction to his Gospel he states his purpose for writing: "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4).
2. Acts continues the story of what happened after Jesus ascended so others may know the work of God did not end at the ascension but just began a new phase of ongoing activity through the Holy Spirit, Christian people, and the church.
3. Luke was attempting to defend and reinforce Christian faith for new believers and possibly seekers.

G. Major Themes in Acts

1. The Person, Word, and Power of the Holy Spirit
2. The Church
3. Prayer
4. Suffering for Christ
5. The Salvation of the Gentiles
6. Witnessing and Testifying of Christ
7. It is important when interpreting this book to understand these themes. We should seek to find the themes in all the books of the Bible but in Acts we can often categorize each individual story into these seven themes.

II. Advice for Interpreting Acts

A. Interpreting Narratives in Acts

1. As with the Gospels, we must interpret Acts by looking at both the individual stories and the connected stories that create the larger context
2. Remember to ask the following questions:
  - i. What is the central or main message of this individual story?

- ii. What is Luke trying to convey to his readers by connecting these individual stories together into a larger section? (Look for connections.)
- iii. Ask Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How for each story.

B. Normative or Descriptive?

1. When reading Acts, we are faced with a choice concerning the information we read regarding the early church:
2. Is this information normative? This means is this report of the early church given as a model for our churches today? If so, this information demands imitation.
3. Or is this information descriptive? This means is this report of the early church just a description of the church in that day? Such information does not demand imitation.
4. Even though there is ongoing debate about individual stories in Acts, overall we see that some information in Acts is normative and some is descriptive.
5. Each part of Acts has value to the reader but some of the information conveys a pattern for the church today and some information just describes a characteristic of the church then and is not to be replicated by the church today.
6. It is sometimes difficult to determine what information is normative and what is descriptive.
7. This can affect interpretation. We must interpret normative information as a pattern to follow and develop our universal principle around that. Then we must look at descriptive information and try to determine why this was presented.
8. The best practice is to first follow the process of interpretation and determine the universal principle or principles behind the text and then make a decision about whether the actual action or practice in the passage is normative or descriptive.
9. The following questions can help you determine if a piece of information is normative (a pattern for the church today) or descriptive (describing the church back then and not a pattern for today):
  - i. What does Luke intend to communicate to his readers through this particular account?
  - ii. Are the characters or situation giving a positive example or a negative example to the reader?
  - iii. How does this passage relate to the overall story or message of Acts and the New Testament?
  - iv. Do other parts of Acts clarify whether this passage is normative or descriptive?
  - v. Does this passage include any repeated patterns or themes from Acts?

# Interpreting Revelation

## I. What is the Book of Revelation?

- A. A series of messages given from Jesus through the Apostle John to the Church.
- B. The material in this book was revealed (given to, shared with) John while he was living in exile on the Island of Patmos.

## I. The Nature of the Book of Revelation

- A. In general, this book is a description of God's Christ-centered plan for human history.
- B. The book describes its contents as the "revelation of Jesus Christ." Here we see Jesus revealing more of himself and his plan to his people.

### C. Literary Genre

1. The Book of Revelation contains elements of three Biblical genres:
  - i. Letter
  - ii. Prophecy
  - iii. Apocalyptic
2. The Book of Revelation as a letter:
  - i. Chapters 1-3 have the elements of a New Testament letter.
  - ii. We see in the text that the writing was intended to be circulated as a letter among the seven churches mentioned in the letter (all located in Asia Minor which is modern day Turkey).
3. The Book of Revelation as prophecy:
  - i. The book identifies itself as prophecy (1:3; 22:6-7, 10, 18-19).
  - ii. Revelation contains both aspects of Biblical prophecy:
    - a. Foretelling (predicting the future).
    - b. Forthtelling (proclaiming the message of God).
    - c. Revelation is not just about the future; it also has a message from God for the present and is applicable to every generation.
    - d. Revelation contains the unusual imagery, allusions, and symbolic language of Biblical prophecy.
4. The Book of Revelation as apocalyptic literature:
  - i. Robert Mounce defines Biblical apocalyptic literature as "a group of writings that include a divine revelation usually through a heavenly intermediary, to some well-known figure, in which God promises to intervene in human history and overthrow evil empires and establish his kingdom."
  - ii. A chief characteristic of apocalyptic literature is the use of images to convey a message. Revelation is full of unusual images.

## II. The Challenge of Interpreting the Book of Revelation

A. Revelation is one of the most difficult books to interpret within the Bible. This understanding should not deter us or frighten us away but it should prompt us to approach and approach Revelation with caution.

B. Study Historical Context as Closely as Possible

1. One main aspect of the historical context is that John was writing to a church facing severe persecution from the political authorities.
2. During the time of writing (around 90 AD) the leader of the Roman Empire was Domitian. History tells us that Emperor Domitian was a severe persecutor of the church and was well known for his cruelty, evil ways, and sexual immorality. He persecuted the church.
3. The Roman empire required citizens to make the declaration “Caesar is Lord” and some Roman leaders required the people to worship them as gods. Yet the Christian proclaimed, “Jesus is Lord.” This caused political/governmental persecution.
4. Thus, Revelation was written within a background and setting of horrible persecution.

C. Study John’s Purpose for Writing

1. John’s intention/purpose for writing was closely related to this persecution.
2. He wanted his readers to see their present circumstances (persecution) with the perspective of God’s final plans of victory for faithful people and the Kingdom of God. He wrote to give hope that even though there is persecution now, victory is in store for the future. Thus, Revelation is a message of hope.

D. Study and Keep the Main Point Central

1. There are so many things that can sidetrack and frustrate the reader within Revelation. Therefore, we must read every passage with the main point of the entire book in mind.
2. That main point is this: God will win in the end. No matter what evil comes against us, God will be victorious and we will be saved into eternity.
3. Duvall and Hayes write, “Revelation says that in spite of how things appear, Caesar is not Lord and Satan is not Lord. Jesus is Lord, and he is coming soon to set things right. Revelation provides that prophetic word from God that people need in order to remain faithful in the midst of opposition.”
4. This is a message of hope where John asks his readers to not give up on their faith. Victory will come for the Kingdom of God.
5. For each passage in Revelation find how it relates to the main message of the book.

III. Practical Advice for Reading/Interpreting Revelation

A. Read Revelation with humility.



1. Revelation is not easy and no one interpreter has all the answers. Do not feel like you can or should have all the answers. Just keep the main point in mind.
  2. Beware of interpreters who appear to have all the answers to even the smallest questions. Also, do not feel pressured to have an answer for everything little detail. Just keep the main message at hand.
- B. Try to discover the message to the original readers in the individual passage.
1. Often when we read Revelation we tend to ignore the first, original audience and jump directly to our present time. This is not the correct method.
  2. Ask this question: What was John trying to communicate to his audience?
  3. Our interpretation must be applicable to both the original audience and us today. We must understand what it meant to them (the original audience) before we can understand what it means to us.
  4. Fee & Stuart write, "As with the Epistles, the primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean."
- C. Do not try to discover or create a strict timeline for future events from the book of Revelation.
1. It was not John's intention to present a detailed timeline and it should not be ours either.
  2. Rather than searching for a timeline in the book, let us grasp the main message of each individual story or passage in relation to the overall message of the book and apply it to our lives now.
- D. You cannot and should not always read the book of Revelation literally.
1. Much of the material in the book is symbolic and metaphorical and not intended to be taken literally. Even the author, John, makes this clear (Revelation 1:20).
  2. Unless you are instructed by the author or the context, interpret most of the passages you read as metaphorical or symbolic.
- E. Look for John's identifications and explanations.
1. Many times John will explain the symbolic meaning of the images.
  2. When we find an explanation from John, this is the final word for understanding the image being explained.
- F. Look to the Old Testament and historical context for help/guidance when interpreting images and symbols.
1. Revelation uses three levels of language:
    - i. Textual Level – the actual words.
    - ii. Visionary Level – the picture created in your mind.
    - iii. Practical Level – what does this picture actually mean or refer to?

2. The difficult part of interpreting Revelation is finding the meaning of the third level (the reference level). What does this actually mean?
    - i. Duvall and Hayes write, “We usually know what Revelation is saying, but we are often not sure what it is talking about.”
    - ii. The historical context and/or the Old Testament can help shed light on what the image is referring to. Actually, you will find more Old Testament references in Revelation than in any other book in the New Testament.
  - G. Study the overall outline of Revelation and know where your passage falls in that outline.
    1. The passage’s placement in the overall work will shed light on its meaning.
    2. Study Bibles and Commentaries will have these outlines but you can also make your own by studying the entire book.
  - H. Make practical for application.
    1. When you find the universal principle and you are going into application, try to find a real-world scenario where the principle can be applied or put into practice.
    2. Remember when you share your application to communicate that the main message of Revelation is that God is victorious.
  - I. Above all, don’t get too caught up in details.
    1. We can often get distracted and frustrated with the details in Revelation. This discourages us and causes us to forget the main message of the book.
    2. Duvall & Hayes write, “Read a section of Revelation and capture the main idea in a short statement. . . The details of any particular section will heighten the image on the reader but will not change the main idea. Resist the temptation to focus on the details so that you miss the main idea. Don’t let the main point of each section or vision fade from view.”
- IV. Much more information about Revelation will be presented in the Eschatology class.

## Old Testament Interpretation

### I. The Value of the Old Testament

- A. Though we are New Covenant believers and find the revelation of the New Covenant in the New Testament, we must remember that the Old Testament prepares us to understand and receive the New Covenant.
- B. Thus, we do not abandon or disregard the Old Testament. Rather, we view it as a foundation for our New Covenant salvation and theology.
- C. The Old Testament remains the Word of God. The New Testament does not replace or eliminate the Old Testament. Rather, the New Testament is an expansion and clarification of what God proclaimed in the Old Testament.

### II. Interpreting the Old Testament

- A. The Old Testament contains four divisions
  1. The Law
  2. History
  3. Poetry/Wisdom Literature
  4. Prophecy
- B. Within these four divisions you will find five genres:
  1. Law
  2. Narrative
  3. Poetry
  4. Wisdom material
  5. Prophecy
- C. Before we move into Old Testament genres, we need to share a general rule for interpreting the Old Testament. Biblical interpretation in the Old Testament requires an extra step.
  1. As Christians, we live in the reality of the work of Christ Jesus and within His New Covenant. Therefore, sometimes the New Testament (the testament of the New Covenant) will expand, clarify, or modify the Old Testament (the testament of the old covenant).
  2. Thus, the extra step for interpreting the Old Testament is this: **Cross into New Testament. Does the New Testament teaching modify or clarify the principle of this passage? If yes, how?**

## Interpreting Old Testament Law

### I. What is Old Testament Law

- A. The Old Testament Law is found mainly four books:
  - 1. Exodus
  - 2. Leviticus
  - 3. Deuteronomy
  - 4. Numbers
- B. There are actually 613 individual laws written in the Old Testament.
- C. These laws describe how the people of God should live under the Old Covenant.

### II. The Traditional Approach to the Law

- A. Traditionally, New Testament believers have divided the law into three categories:
  - 1. Moral Law
  - 2. Civil Law
  - 3. Ceremonial (Religious) Law
- B. The “civil law” was seen as applying only to the ancient nation of Israel because they dealt with the country’s legal system.
- C. The “ceremonial law” was seen as applying only to the religious of ancient Israel (before Jesus) because they dealt with the temple worship, sacrifices, and festivals. Many of these laws were fulfilled in Christ.
- D. The “moral law” however was seen as universal theological principles that applied to every person, at every time, everywhere.
- E. While this system remains a good rule of thumb, good Biblical interpreters understand that there is truth for today behind every verse. Therefore, we move beyond this traditional approach in Biblical interpretation.

### III. Putting the Law in Proper Context

- A. The Old Testament law is firmly rooted in the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, its wanderings in the desert, and its conquest of the Promised Land. Our interpretative approach to the law should take this into account. Remember the importance of this context. The law is part of the overall story (or narrative) of Israel.
- B. The Old Testament law is tightly connected with the Mosaic (or Old) Covenant. When interpreting, keep in mind the following aspects of that Old Covenant:
  - 1. Israel will conquer and occupy the Promised Land.
    - i. The covenant promises and provides a plan for taking the Promised Land.
    - i. Thus, there is a strong connection between the land, the covenant, and the law which is stressed in Deuteronomy.
  - 2. The blessings of the Mosaic (or Old) Covenant are conditional on obedience to the Old Testament law.

- i. Deuteronomy stresses that obedience to the covenant will bring about blessing but disobedience will bring about curses.
  - ii. This is seen in fulfillment in the Prophets.
- 3. The Mosaic (or Old) Covenant is no longer a functional covenant.
  - i. The New Testament is clear that Jesus made a New Covenant with humanity.
  - i. This is why we pass everything principle from the Old Testament through the New Testament.
  - ii. Therefore, much of the Old Testament law (as part of the Mosaic Covenant) is no longer applicable over us as law.
    - a. Jesus did not remove the righteous demands of the law but rather he fulfilled those righteous demands.
    - b. Jesus is the final interpreter of the Old Testament law.
- 4. We must interpret the law through the teachings of the New Testament.
  - i. The law no longer applies as direct literal law for us.
  - ii. However, the Old Testament law does contain timeless principles and lessons that are applicable to us as New Covenant believers.

## II. Practical Advice for Interpreting Old Testament Law

### A. Step 1: Understand what the text meant to the original audience.

- 1. After careful reading, begin probing into the nature of the particular law or laws you are studying. Try to identify how this particular law relates to the old covenant and original readers.
- 2. Identify clearly what the law demanded of the original audience. Be specific.
- 3. Pay attention to information found in your study of the historical/cultural context.

### B. Step 2: Determine the differences between the original audience and us today.

- 1. The difference are often many. Even though some laws seem easy to interpret and apply, you must continue to pay attention to the differences.
- 2. Some of the differences include:
  - i. Today we are under a New Covenant.
  - ii. We are not living in the Promised Land.
  - iii. We do not worship in a Temple or make sacrifices. Rather God lives in us.
  - iv. Today we live in the reality of Jesus and His work.
  - v. We have different governments, different neighboring religions, and difference ways of living (modern lifestyles).

### C. Step 3: Find the universal principle.

- 1. Remember, each Old Testament law (moral, civil, and ceremonial) contains a universal truth that is applicable to all of God's people, everywhere, at all times.

Even though we do not follow the specific law today, we are responsible to the universal/theological principle behind that law.

2. The law reveals the heart of the lawmaker.

3. Ask: “What is the theological principle that is reflected in this specific law?”

D. Step 4: Cross into the New Testament. Does the New Testament teaching modify the principle? If so, how?

1. For every principle we find the Old Testament, we must see if the New Testament affirms, modifies, or adds to that principle.

2. Often Jesus will actually add to the principle rather than take away from it.

3. In this step we develop a New Testament (New Covenant) expression for the universal/theological principle from the Old Testament (Old Covenant). We do not deny the validity or the importance of the Old Testament but we do affirm and acknowledge that we live in a New Covenant with a New Testament.

4. Remember that the universal principle must address the entire Christian community. These principles are the heart of God’s message for His church.

E. Step 5: Apply the text and make specific application for the New Covenant church.

# Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

## I. What are Narratives?

- A. In literature, narratives are stories or a collection of stories.
- B. Nearly half of the Old Testament is narrative.
- C. Old Testament narratives include:

1. Genesis
2. Exodus
3. Numbers
4. Joshua
5. Judges
6. Ruth
7. 1 and 2 Samuel
8. 1 and 2 Kings
9. 1 and 2 Chronicles
10. Ezra
11. Nehemiah
12. Daniel

## II. Characteristics of Old Testament Narrative:

- A. Definite sequence of events (timeline)
- B. Plot – the sequence of events that connect to tell a story
- C. Setting
- D. Characters
- E. Truth (not myths but actual historical facts based on real events, settings, people)
- F. Theological Meaning (universal principle)
- G. Narratives are told by a narrator, most likely the author of the book within which the narrative is contained.

1. The narrator tells the story.
2. The narrator shares information needed to understand the story.
3. The narrator shares information that is both known and unknown to the characters.

Thus, the reader often knows something that the character does not.

## III. Finding Theological Meaning in Narratives

- A. The narratives of the Old Testament are more than just interesting stories, they contain God inspired principles and knowledge for every generation.
- B. Biblical narratives are not myths or legends. They contain true, factual, historical information. Yet narratives are also more than just history. They are recorded for the purpose of teaching us about God. For this reason they are called theological histories.

- C. Thus, meaning is not determined by the reader but from the author (both heavenly and earthly authors).
- D. Meaning within narratives is primarily found within the actions and responses of the characters (even God is a main character in many narratives).
- E. Duvall and Hayes write, “Rather than telling us how to live or how not to live, the narrative shows us how to live or how not to live by the actions of the characters.”

#### IV. Benefits of Using Narratives to Convey Theological Truth:

- A. Narratives are interesting to both adults and children.
- B. Narratives exercise our imagination and pull us into the story.
- C. Narratives describe real people and real events in real places. Therefore, the reader is able to relate to the situations of the narratives.
- D. Narratives address the problems and challenges of real life, they are real and specific examples for us to observe.
- E. Narratives are easy to remember and retell.
- F. Narratives help convey truth about God in a way that we can understand. God is often a main character in the narrative and this helps us see how He responds to specific situations.
- G. Narratives are holistic. They often contain the beginning, end, and middle. They good and the bad. The beautiful and the ugly. The conflict and the resolution. This helps us see how life with God truly is.
- H. Narratives use specific events to tell or clarify a bigger story or truth.
- I. Narratives often have a powerful impact when taught and preached.

#### V. Challenges for Interpreting Old Testament Narratives:

- A. The deeper, theological meaning of the narrative is not always easily seen.
- B. The differences between us and the original audience may be great at times.
- C. Sometimes, the author does not emphasize his point but makes it subtle or not distinct in the story. It requires some deeper, more careful reading and interpreting work.
- D. Larger than normal amounts of context (both historical and literary) are often needed to find the meaning.
- E. The reader may become so interested in the story that he/she misses the bigger meaning
  1. The narratives of the Old Testament are often entertaining. However, we must remember why we are reading the narrative. We read not only for entertainment but also for spiritual truth (universal principles).
  2. Try reading the narrative once for entertainment then go back and analyze the content keeping in mind that you are looking for something that is often beneath the surface of just a good story.
- F. The reader may read only for historical content and forget about the spiritual truth.



1. Remember, even though the narratives do have historical truth and value, they are written for a higher purpose.
  2. Ask: what does this good history also tell me about God?
- G. It is very easy to make the Old Testament narratives into allegories that actually miss or neglect the real universal principles in the text.
1. Allegories are interesting but are not always intended by the author.
  2. The popular thing for New Testament believers to do is to take an Old Testament narrative and make it an allegory for a New Testament teaching. While many Old Testament stories do support New Testament teachings, the author's intent was to convey a truth that would be understood even to Old Testament believers.
  3. Thus, it is usually not correct to make the Old Testament narratives into allegories (extended metaphors). We can only do this when the author directs us to do so.

## VI. Advice for Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

- A. As always, read the passage carefully. The first step is careful reading.
1. Narratives can be so easy and entertaining to read that we fail to do proper textual analysis. Be careful and read thoroughly.
  2. Do not overlook even the smallest details. This can be overshadowed if we are not careful to find them.
  3. Pay attention to all aspects of grammar and literary devices as these are abundant and significant in narratives.
- B. Identify and Study the Plot
1. In literature, the plot of a story is the organizing structure of events that tie the story together.
  2. The plot answers the questions of What and How.
    - i. What is happening here?
    - ii. How is this happening?
  3. The plot contains several elements:
    - i. The sequence or timeline of events
    - ii. The rise, climax, and fall of dramatic action (what moves the story forward and keeps the reader interested and reading).
  4. The plot of the narrative can be divided into three components:
    - i. Exposition
      - a. This usually comes at the beginning of a narrative and sometimes serves as an introduction.
      - b. It sets up the story by giving the basic setting and beginning.
    - ii. Conflict

- a. Something in the exposition usually sets off a conflict or struggle within the story.
  - b. The conflict can be internal (an inward struggle within a character) external (an outward struggle between multiple characters. Usually the conflict is between a character and God or God's representative or God's law/commands/requirements.
  - c. The conflict is where the story intensifies. If the conflict did not exist, the story probably would not exist.
- iii. Resolution
- a. This is where the conflict is finally resolved or settled.
  - b. This division usually serves as the conclusion of the story.
5. After identifying the plot, try to write a plot summary in one or two paragraphs.
- i. Give at least one or two sentences to explaining each division of the particular story: the exposition, conflict, and resolution.
  - ii. Ask these questions and find your answers within the plot summary:
    - a. What is this story really about?
    - b. What is the main conflict?
    - c. How did the tension or conflict develop?
    - d. How is the conflict resolved?

### C. Identify and Study the Setting

1. The setting is the place, time, and situations within which the story takes place.
2. Setting answers the questions of When and Where:
  - i. When did this take place?
  - ii. Where did this take place?
3. This is where a thorough study of historical/cultural context should be done. Studying this context will greatly assist you in finding the intended meaning.
  - i. First begin by finding everything you can within and around the story. What does the author tell you directly about the setting? What does the surrounding literary context tell you about the setting?
  - ii. Then take what you have learned from the text and investigate the setting further by looking at notes in the study Bible, notes from other classes, commentaries, Bible dictionaries, maps, and whatever resources available that can help you gain more understanding.
4. Place and time are extremely important here.
  - i. Find this story's place on the timeline of history and of the Old Testament.
  - ii. Look at the specific places where this is happening. What else does the Old Testament say about these places.

- iii. Remember to look at everything in the story in relation to the whole Old Testament and the rest of the Bible.

#### D. Identify and Study the Characters

1. The characters are the main participants in the narrative.
2. This answers the question: Who is involved?
3. Study the characters thoroughly:
  - i. Find as much as you can about the characters in the scriptures. Look beyond your particular passage and create a biography for the person/people in the story using the rest of the Bible.
  - ii. Remember that when God is a character we must not overlook this. Remember take the rest of Scripture into account when you view this one action of God as a character in the narrative.
  - iii. The meaning behind the text is tied to the characters within the text.
  - iv. Look at the action or the speech of the characters.
  - v. Look closely at the response of God to the actions of the people in the narrative. This will give insight to the nature of God.
  - vi. Usually the meaning of the text is connected closely to the behavior, actions, and speech of the main characters, including God.
4. Remember that not every character in the Bible is a good person.
  - i. Jesus is the only person in the Bible who is given as the person to model our entire life after. The Bible tells of many good men but only one greatest man, Jesus.
  - ii. In fact, many of the people of the Bible have significant negative qualities. They were not always good.
  - iii. Some people are obviously bad, such as Satan or Pharaoh. But even men like David, Abraham, and Moses have negative qualities that we do not need to overlook or forget.

#### E. Pay Attention to the Viewpoints and Information of the Narrator

1. The narrator is the one telling the story. The narrator views the narrative as if from above, knowing information that the other characters may not know. It is the responsibility of the narrator to convey the meaning of the text to the reader.
2. The narrator usually shares vital information that is necessary for understanding the meaning of the passage.
3. Often, the narrator also expresses his view or opinion on the narrative. This view may be stated clearly, it may be subtle, or not directly state. Look for clues to help you find this viewpoint. Clues include summary statements, judgment statements, or statements of praise. Find the details that indicate the viewpoint of the narrator.

F. Find and Study Comparisons and Contrasts Within and Between Narratives

1. Compare/Contrast is a common literary technique used by the narrative authors.
2. These comparisons and contrasts help tell the story and give insight and understanding of the deeper meaning of the narrative.

G. Find and Study Irony in the Narratives

1. Irony is the literary device used to describe situations where the obvious or surface meaning of an event or episode is quite different the intended meaning.
2. Irony is used to forcefully convey a message.

H. Observe Literary Context

1. Literary context is extremely important with finding the intended meaning of any Biblical passage but this is especially true for narratives.
2. Most Old Testament narratives are just one small story within a much larger story. Remember this. Do not overlook the larger story or the bigger picture when reading one individual narrative.
3. As with the Gospels, we ask “what does this individual story mean” and “what does the author try to tell me by connecting this story to the others.”
4. Duvall and Hayes give four instructions for observing the literary context of the Old Testament Narratives:
  - i. Be aware of the overall story of the Old Testament
  - ii. Study the overall themes and messages of the book of the Bible where the individual narrative is found.
  - iii. Read the entire book or the entire larger section. Look for connections.
  - iv. Pay close attention to the chapter where the individual narrative is contained, the chapter before it, and the chapter after it.

I. Read the End of the Story

1. Find out how your character finished. We do not look only at the end of the narrative but also at the end of the character’s story.
2. What information does the rest of the story give us?

J. Cross over into the New Testament

1. The extra step in interpreting Old Testament passages, including narratives.
2. Try to determine whether or not the New Testament addresses the issue raised by the text. Does the New Testament modify the universal/theological principle in any way or does it make the principle more specific.

## Interpreting Old Testament Poetry

- I. What is Old Testament Poetry?
  - A. In literature, poetry is colorful and stylistic language used to appeal to the human emotions and often paint a picture with words in order to convey a message with impact.
  - B. In the Old Testament, poetry is found in over one third (33%) of the content.
  - C. Poetry is found in the following books:
    1. Psalms (entirely poetry)
    2. Job (majority poetry, some narrative)
    3. Proverbs (mix of poetry and wisdom)
    4. Song of Songs (mostly poetry)
    5. Lamentations (mostly poetry)
    6. Prophetic Books (contains some or much poetry in each book)
    7. Every Old Testament book has some poetry within it.
- II. The Nature of Old Testament Poetry
  - A. Old Testament poetry appeals to human emotion rather than logic.
  - B. Old Testament poetry uses a great amount of imagery to convey its message.
  - C. Old Testament poetry uses a great amount of literary devices and figures of speech that demand analysis and study for the modern reader to properly understand.
  - D. Old Testament poetry uses a minimum number of words. Unlike narratives, poetic texts are made of short, compact lines of verse with few words. The words, however, are chosen carefully to convey the message with great impact.
  - E. Old Testament poetry has a unique structure.
    1. As you read poetry you will find that the text is structured around poetic lines of verse rather than around sentences or paragraphs. Therefore, to read poetry you have to read line by line rather than sentence by sentence.
    2. Old Testament poetry is usually grouped into two or three lines placed together to express one thought. This practice is called parallelism (example: Psalms 3:1-2).
    3. Often in the NIV study Bible you will find helpful footnotes that give you more information about the structure of the poem/psalm in the Hebrew.
  - F. Old Testament poetry uses a large amount of figurative imagery.
    1. Old Testament poems are often intended to paint a picture in your imagination.
    2. The authors are conveying real thoughts, literal events, and actual emotions in figurative (symbolic, metaphorical) expressions. The interpreter must strive to grasp the reality being described by the figurative expression.
    3. Popular figures of speech used in Old Testament poetry include:
      - i. Simile (example in Psalm 42:1)
      - ii. Metaphor (example in Proverbs 17:22)

- iii. Indirect Analogy - This is a comparison that is not directly stated but assumed (example in Psalm 22:13).
  - iv. Hyperbole (example in Psalm 42:3)
  - v. Personification - attributing human features or human characteristics to nonhuman entities (example in Psalm 24:7).
  - vi. Anthropomorphism – the representation of God with human features or human characteristics (example in Psalm 19:4).
  - vii. Zoomorphism - the representation of God with animal or nonhuman features or animal/nonhuman characteristics (example in Psalm 91:4; 18:2).
  - viii. Cause and Effect (example in Proverbs 19:13).
  - ix. Representation – the substitution of a representative part of a whole for or instead of the whole thing itself (example in Psalm 122:2).
  - x. Addressing people not present or the self (example in Psalm 2:10; 42:5).
  - xi. Irony – writing the opposite of what is really meant (seen often in Job).
4. More Inspirational than Theological
- i. While poems are based on universal/theological principles, their primary intent is not to teach theology as the letter or the narrative might.
  - ii. Instead, the poems are intended to demonstrate appropriate responses to the theological/universal principles.
  - iii. Robert Chisholm writes that the poems “give us inspired models of how to talk and sing to God.”
  - iv. Walter Brueggemann says the poems often address three aspects of life:
    - a. Seasons of well-being and blessing that evoke gratitude.
    - b. Seasons of pain, rejection, suffering, and death that evoke despair.
    - c. Seasons of surprise and being overwhelmed with the goodness and gifts of God that evoke joy and excitement.
  - v. In all these cases, the Psalms and poems of the Bible give us a model for communicating with God. They teach us that we can and should be honest with God about our emotions and experiences.

### III. Practical Advice for Interpreting Old Testament Poetry

- A. When reading carefully, try to identify each thought in the poem (remember that one thought can be communicated in two or three lines of the poem).
- B. Identify and unmask each figure of speech. What is this really saying?
- C. Pay attention to the emotional terms as they are abundant in the poems.
- D. Summarize what the poem meant to the original audience with one or two sentences for short poems and a paragraph for long poems.
- E. Historical/Cultural context will greatly help you in the poetry books.

# **Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature**

- I. What is Old Testament Wisdom Literature?
  - A. A collection of books that describe and give advice for everyday life.
  - B. These books include:
    1. Proverbs
    2. Job
    3. Ecclesiastes
    4. Song of Songs (also called Song of Solomon)
- II. Nature of the Wisdom Literature
  - A. Purpose
    1. The wisdom literature seeks to help develop the character of the reader.
    2. These books ask the reader to think critically about life issues.
  - B. Content:
    1. These books are a collection of valuable insights into Godly living. When the advice of the books is followed, Godly character will develop and certain benefits will usually follow. (However, Job teaches us that even when we live a Godly life, bad things can and will happen to us.)
    2. Each contains information that helps us live as Godly people in the real world, both then and now (when we look at the principles in the actual proverbs/instructions).
- III. Advice for Interpreting Wisdom Literature:
  - A. The books should be taken as a whole because each gives a different viewpoint:
    1. Proverbs deals with the instructions and benefits of Godly living
    2. Job deals with suffering that comes despite (or because of) our Godly lifestyle.
    3. Ecclesiastes deals with the questions and sometimes doubts that we have in life.
    4. Song of Songs deals with the sexual relationships. Even though the wisdom literature forbids wrong sex it promotes right sex.
  - B. Wisdom literature contains proverbs.
    1. In literature, proverbs are short, easy to remember sayings or statements that teach practical wisdom about life.
    2. These proverbs are not universal principles themselves. They are usually true but not always true. The principles behind the proverbs, however, are always true. Our job is not just to do what the proverb says but find the universal principle behind the proverbs and apply it to our life today.
  - C. Wisdom literature contains poetry. Therefore, we should interpret much of the wisdom literature as we do Old Testament poetry as described in the section.

# **Interpreting Old Testament Prophetic Literature**

- I. What is Old Testament Prophetic Literature?
  - A. Old Testament prophetic literature is primarily the sermons or spoken messages of the Old Testament prophets to the nations of Israel or Judah (and sometimes their neighbors). The messages are from God and contain visions, narratives, and other literary devices. They are often proclamations of judgment, calls to repentance, or messages of hope for the future.
  - B. The Old Testament has two divisions of prophetic books: Major and Minor Prophets. They are called major and minor because of their size and not their importance.
    1. The Major Prophets include:
      - i. Isaiah
      - ii. Jeremiah
      - iii. Ezekiel
      - iv. Daniel
    2. The Minor Prophets include:
      - i. Hosea
      - ii. Joel
      - iii. Amos
      - iv. Obadiah
      - v. Johan
      - vi. Micah
      - vii. Nahum
      - viii. Habakkuk
      - ix. Zephaniah
      - x. Haggai
      - xi. Zechariah
      - xii. Malachi
- II. The Nature of the Old Testament Prophetic Literature
  - A. Old Testament Prophecy includes two aspects:
    1. Foretelling (describing the future)
    2. Forthtelling (addressing the present)
  - B. Only a small account of the Old Testament prophecies deal with future events.
    1. Fee and Stuart write, “Less than 2% of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5% specifically describes the New Covenant age. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come.”



2. The vast majority of the Old Testament prophecy addresses the disobedience of the original audience (Israel, Judah, or neighboring nations) and the coming judgment of God for that disobedience.
- C. The Prophets used much poetry and creative language so we can apply the same advice from interpreting poetry to much of our interpretation of the prophets.
  - D. Prophetic literature is some of the most emotional literature in the Bible so we need to pay close attention to emotional terms and find why there were used. The writers often use explicit language in their descriptions of the horror of the coming judgment of God. They were also very harsh in their language towards the societies, leadership, and religious communities they addressed.
  - E. The structure of the prophetic books is unique:
    1. Usually the books are a collection of prophecies or sermons by the prophet.
    2. The books contain somewhat shorter, more independent sections than do the narratives or letters.
    3. These shorter units are not usually arranged in order of time or length.
    4. Sometimes an overall theme will connect the passages but usually the theme is different in each passage.
  - F. There is also much repetition in the prophetic books.
  - G. The messages of the prophets are usually very clear and direct unless they are describing future events. Then the descriptions are vague and complex.

### III. The Basic Message of the Prophets

- A. Duvall and Hays write that the basic messages of the prophets can be summed up in three main points:
  1. You have broken the covenant and need to repent.
  2. If you do not repent you will face judgment.
  3. There is hope beyond the coming judgment for a glorious restoration in the future.
- B. Point 1: You have broken the covenant and need to repent. The covenant was broken in three ways:
  1. Idolatry
  2. Social Injustice
  3. Hollow Religious Ritualism (Hypocrisy)
- C. Point 2: If you do not truly repent you will face judgment. Judgment took several forms:
  1. The fall of the nations to foreign powers.
  2. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple
  3. Captivity
  4. The loss of the promised land
  5. Cut off from divine blessings

D. Point 3: There is hope beyond the coming judgment for a glorious restoration in the future.

This hope also took several forms:

1. The restoration of the nation of the nation of Israel.
2. The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple
3. Freedom
4. The coming of the Messiah
5. A New Covenant
6. God dwelling with mankind.
7. Forgiveness and peace
8. Relationship restoration
9. Gentile salvation

#### IV. Practical Advice for Interpreting the Old Testament Prophets:

A. Pay close attention to the historical/cultural context of the passages.

1. Know who your prophet is speaking to, where he is speaking, and why he speaks.
2. Study the history, culture, etc. of the people and places mentioned.
3. Duvall and Hays write, “Theologically the prophets proclaim their message from the context of the Mosaic covenants, primarily as defined in Deuteronomy. They tell the people to repent, to turn from idols, and to return to the covenant they agreed to keep in Deuteronomy. They warn the Israelites of the terrible punishments God threatened in Deuteronomy. The ultimate punishment, which they announce with sorrow, is the loss of God’s presence and the loss of the Promised Land.”
4. Most prophets speak at a time when an imminent invasion by either the Assyrians (against Israel) or the Babylonians (against Judah) is on the horizon.

B. Remember the major difference between us and the original audience:

1. We are not under the Old Covenant
2. We are not facing the invasion of the Babylonians or the Assyrians.
3. We do not live in the promised land.
4. We must interpret everything in light of the New Testament, specifically Jesus and His work on the cross.

C. Pay attention to figures of speech:

1. The prophets often use the analogy of a marriage to describe God’s relationship with His people.
2. When they break his commandments by worshiping other gods or violating his law, they are like a husband or wife who is unfaithful.

D. Work through the predictive passages carefully:

1. The Old Testament passages contain two levels of future prophecy:

- i. The near future which included:
    - a. The invasion of foreign nations and the fall of Israel/Judah
    - b. The restoration of Israel and the freedom from captivity.
  - ii. The far future which included:
    - a. The first coming of the Messiah
    - b. The second coming of the Messiah
  - iii. It is sometimes difficult to determine which level of future events is being foretold.
- 2. Just as in Revelation, rather than trying to determine every detail of the future prophecy, focus on the bigger, overall picture/message.
- 3. There is much disagreement within the Christian church and among Christian scholars about what these prophecies mean. Therefore, our job is really to proclaim the principles of the passage and not determine what each symbol and detail represents.
- E. Do not overlook the poetic aspects of the prophecies and interpret them as described in the poetry section above.
- F. Find the root of the figures and images being used.