



Cutting It Straight

Lesson 6: STEP 2 - Interpretation

Key Verse: Nehemiah 8:8 (NET)

“They read from the book of God’s law, explaining it and imparting insight. Thus the people gained understanding from what was read.”

Bible Interpretation

The first step in Bible study is observation. Observation asks the question, “What does it say?”, or put another way, “What do I see?” The second step in Bible study is interpretation which asks the question, “What does it mean?” The goal of interpretation is to understand what the Bible means by what it says. But why can’t we just open the Bible, read a passage, and then apply it? Why do we have to go through the process of understanding the text? Howard Hendricks answers this by stating, “time and distance have thrown up barriers between us and the biblical writers, which block our understanding.”¹

Interpretation seeks to knock down those barriers and draw us back to the original author’s intent, and, therefore, the original meaning. This will help us to discover the original, divinely intended meaning of the author who wrote that text.

Two Areas of Interpretation

_____ *Hermeneutics*

General hermeneutics refers to the general principles that are used in interpreting all of the writings of Scripture.

_____ *Hermeneutics*

Special hermeneutics refers to the process of using more specialized principles for interpreting certain genres of Scripture (i.e., narrative, proverbs, psalms, parables, epistles, prophecy).

¹ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 202.

General Hermeneutics

A. The Gaps

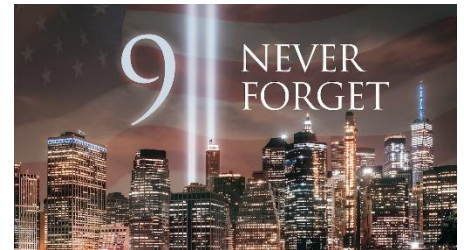
Because of time and distance, there are some gaps between us and the original authors and readers. Therefore, to properly interpret the Bible, we must bridge those gaps. We will look at three gaps: the historical gap, the cultural gap, and the language gap. The goal in interpretation is to bridge the gaps and get back to the author's original intention in writing.

1. *The _____ Gap*

Because every book of the Bible was written to specific readers in specific historical situations, we must understand every passage in the Bible in the context of its historical background. It is essential for the Bible student to reconstruct the historical background of a passage when seeking to find the meaning. This means the student must seek to bridge the gap by going back in time when interpreting the Bible.

For example, what is the historical context of this picture?

Would anyone in the year 2000 or earlier have known what this was about? They couldn't have known because it has an historical context. Today, most people know what this means because they understand the historical context behind it.



Questions to ask:

- What prompted the author to write this book?
- To whom is it written?
- When is this taking place?
- Where does this book/passage fit into history?
- What else was taking place in the world at this time?

2. *The _____ Gap*

The original writers and recipients of Scripture lived in a very different culture than our own. This is often called the "culture gap" between us and those to whom Scripture was originally written. The goal is to bridge the gap by understanding the culture of the original reader.

Be careful not to read our modern culture back into the text.

For example, read 1 Corinthians 11:4–6.



3. *The _____ Gap*

God has chosen to communicate to His people through human languages. We speak English today, but the Bible was written thousands of years ago in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Therefore, understanding the original languages and the mind-set, culture, and worldview of those who used those languages helps us interpret the Bible correctly.

For example, read Acts 26:16.

B. Other Principles

1. _____ Context

D.A. Carson said, “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof-text.”² The Latin verb *contexo* means “to connect or weave together.” Used generically, it refers to “that which surrounds and gives meaning to something else.”

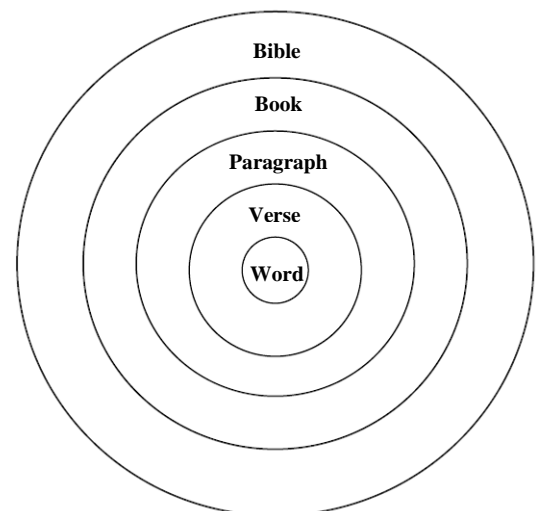
The literary context of a given verse is the larger whole of which that verse is a part of.

Dear John,

I am writing to tell you how wonderful you are as a friend. Years ago, I would go around and tell people how much I hate you and consider you to be the worst person in the world. But God has saved me and changed my heart. I ask for your forgiveness for the hurtful things I said about you. I am so grateful to have you as a brother!

In Christ,

Tom Smith



If you received a long letter from a friend, you wouldn't turn to the third page, read a sentence in the middle of a paragraph, and then try to understand the meaning of those statements in isolation from the rest of the letter. Yet this is exactly what many people do with the Bible.

² D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies, second ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 115.

Because each passage of Scripture was written in as a part of a larger literary unit, it must be interpreted in light of its literary context in order to determine the proper meaning of a given verse or passage.

2. _____ *Analysis*

Because God chose to communicate to His people through human languages, we must understand how individual words put together with other words combine to make a complete thought. In grammatical analysis we see to determine the meaning by ascertaining four things:

- The meaning of words (lexicology)
- The form of words (morphology)
- The function of words (parts of speech)
- The relationship of words (syntax)

Grammatical analysis shows how individual words put together help give understanding.

3. _____ *Analysis*

Lexical analysis is simply identifying the meaning of a word in a text.

For example, “faith” (*pistis*) can mean: 1) trust or confidence in God; 2) faithfulness; 3) a body of truth; or 4) intellectual assent.

Jude 3: “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the **faith** which was once for all handed down to the saints.”

Romans 3:3: “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the **faithfulness** of God, will it?”

Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through **faith**; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God;”

James 2:19: “You **believe** that God is one. You do well; the demons also **believe**, and shudder.”