



Cutting It Straight

Lesson 7: STEP 2 – Interpretation, Part 2

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.”

Special Hermeneutics

Special hermeneutics refers to the process of using more specialized principles for interpreting certain genres of Scripture (i.e., narrative, psalms, proverbs, parables, epistles, and prophecy). As the Bible student consults these additional guidelines, it is essential that they be used as a supplement to the principles of general hermeneutics already being used in Bible interpretation.

The following are six genres of Scripture and guidelines for interpreting them correctly.

1. **Biblical** _____

Biblical narrative refers to the portions of Scripture which provide an historical account of events. Narrative is the most common genre in the Bible constituting over 40 percent of the Old Testament and nearly 60 percent of the New Testament. As Matt Waymeyer says, “For this reason, it is absolutely imperative that the interpreter have a clear understanding of how to determine the divinely intended meaning of biblical narrative.”¹

Guidelines for interpreting biblical narrative:

A. Recognize the _____ focus.

Often times we read Bible narrative focusing on the people in the account. However, the stories of the Bible are first and foremost stories about God and what He did for people and through people to put His glory on display. God alone is the hero of the story.

For example, in 1 Samuel 17, we read about the story of David and Goliath. Who is this story about?

¹ Matt Waymeyer BI 505 Hermeneutics Course Syllabus, pg. 95.

B. Recognize the difference between _____ and _____.

The temptation when reading narrative is to assume that what is told in the account is how things *ought* to be. Biblical narrative simply records *what* happened, not necessarily what *should have* happened or what should happen today.

For example, Acts 19:11–12 says, “God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.” This does not mean we should send handkerchiefs or aprons to people in order to be healed.

C. Seek to determine the _____ in biblical narrative.

The purpose of biblical narrative is not simply to tell a story that happened in the past, but to tell the story to communicate a theological truth.

For example, what is the theological truth behind Genesis 37–50?

2. _____

While we read and study psalms today, most of the psalms were meant to be sung. They were written as a divinely inspired hymnbook for Israel. The psalms contain words that are mostly spoken *to* God or *about* God rather than directly *from* God. Many psalms are written in times of despair and trouble calling on God for help. The psalms give us truths about God, stir our emotions, and guide our wills.

Guidelines for interpreting psalms:

A. Read a psalm as one _____.

Be careful that you understand an individual verse in light of the entire psalm. For example, Psalm 46:5, “God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.” This verse is not about a woman, but about the city of God (the New Jerusalem) mentioned in verse 4.

B. Interpret a psalm in light of its _____.

Each psalm has a historical setting. The contents of the history are sometimes put in the introductory titles that tell who the author is and what the author was experiencing. For example, Psalm 63 states, “A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.” The historical background of Psalm 63 is David’s flight from Absalom found in 2 Samuel 15.

3. _____

What is a proverb? Howard Hendricks defines it as, “a short, poignant nugget of truth, typically practical, and often concerned with the consequences of a course of behavior.”² Often times, people will read a proverb as a promise. However, as Hendricks gives a word of caution saying, “a proverb contains a principle, not a promise. A proverb tells you: this is how life basically works.”³

Guidelines for interpreting proverbs:

A. Understand the _____ of Proverbs.

The overall theme of Proverbs is found in Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” The fear of the Lord is mentioned twenty times in the book. Proverbs is aimed at teaching believers how to fear God in every area of life.

B. Recognize the two basic _____ in Proverbs.

There are two basic verbal forms throughout the Proverbs: imperatives (commands that are either positive or negative followed by a motivational clause) and indicatives (statements of wisdom).

Command: “Do not associate with a man *given* to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man, Or you will learn his ways and find a snare for yourself.” (22:24-25)

Wisdom: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.” (15:1)

4. _____

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), one-third of the teaching of Jesus is in parables. What is a parable? A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.⁴

Guidelines for interpreting parables:

A. Understand the _____ of parables.

Jesus identified two different reasons for telling parables in Matthew 13:10–17:

1. To _____ truth from those who reject.
2. To _____ the truth to those who believe.

² Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 220.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John MacArthur. *Parables: The Mysteries of God’s Kingdom Revealed through the Stories Jesus Told* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), xxvi.

B. Understand the historical and cultural _____ of the parable.

Remember, Jesus used illustrations from everyday that the people would have understood. We have to understand what His audience would have known in order to grasp the meaning of the parable.

C. Recognize that not every _____ in the story has special significance.

In the early church, many interpreters allegorized the parables and sought to find spiritual meaning in every detail. For example, Origen saw the five lamps of the wise virgins in Matthew 25:1–13 as a reference to the five natural senses. Remember the primary point in a parable is to teach one main point. This does not mean the details are irrelevant, but the Bible student must distinguish between the main point and the supporting details.

5. _____

Twenty-one of the 27 books of the New Testament are epistles. The epistles were written to a specific church or a specific person. They were written to: 1) provide information and instructions, 2) issue commands or make requests, and 3) maintain a relationship between the author and the recipient(s) of the letter.

Guidelines for interpreting epistles:

A. Be aware of the standard _____ used in most ancient epistles.

There was a common outline used by the writer of an epistle:

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| i. Author of epistle | iv. Prayer, wish, or expression of gratitude |
| ii. Name of recipients | v. Body of letter |
| iii. Greeting | vi. Final greeting and farewell |

B. Read the entire epistle as a _____ and interpret individual parts in light of its whole.

Because epistles are letters, the Bible student should read the entirety of the letter in order to properly understand the individual parts of the letter. For example, if a man received a five-page letter from his fiancée, he wouldn't start reading page three on Monday and page four on Tuesday, etc. He would begin at page one and read the entirety of the letter so that he has context for what his fiancée has written throughout the letter.

6. _____

If you speak of prophecy in the church today and ask someone to define it, most likely they will tell you it has to do with something in the future. However, biblical prophecy is not always dealing with something in the future. A prophet in Scripture was seen more as a *forth-teller* rather than a *foreteller*. There are two types of prophecy in the Bible: proclamation of a divine message and prediction of a future event.

Guidelines for interpreting prophecy:

A. _____ prophecy as you would any other passage of Scripture.

The Bible student should not throw out the grammatical-historical method of interpretation when interpreting prophecy. Remember, even in prophecy God wants to communicate to His children.

B. Recognize the use of _____ in predictive prophecy.

The Bible student should be careful to: 1) assume that the language in every prophetic book is symbolic, and 2) assume that because *some* of the prophecy is symbolic, that means *all* of the prophecy is symbolic.

Application

1. How is Bible interpretation relevant for today?
2. Why is Bible interpretation so important for the believer?