Reference Guide
GETTING THE MESSAGE:
A BIBLE INTERPRETATION STUDY
Reference Guide

Worthville Baptist Church
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1. Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is to provide a condensed, easy to reference set of tools to aid in your understanding of the Bible and your personal ministry of the Word. This guide will explore general Bible interpretation principles and help navigate the impact of genre (Old Testament narrative, epistle, prophecy, etc.) on Bible interpretation. I pray that you will find this guide helpful; I pray that God uses it to increase the return on your investment in the study of the Word.

WHAT’S THE FUSS?

I think it safe to assume (you are reading a Bible interpretation guide, after all) that we are in agreement: we want to read the Bible, understand it correctly, live it out, and teach others to do the same. However, you might wonder, “why go to all the effort of making this guide—can’t I just read the Bible and be happy with what it says to me or how it makes me feel?” There are a few reasons that we can’t be satisfied with that approach to reading the Bible. Let’s address three of those reasons now.

Reason #1: I Don’t Get to Determine What the Bible Means; Meaning is Determined by the Author

Who or what determines the meaning of a text? The author, the text itself, or the reader? The author is the one who has constructed an intelligent thought (who has constructed the meaning) and conveyed it through inanimate objects (paper, ink, or pixels on a digital display) in order to communicate meaning to an audience. Meaning is created and determined by the author. In the case of the Bible, God has inspired multiple authors over a period of around 1500 years to reveal Himself to mankind. He has a message, an intended purpose and meaning in communication. We simply do not have the freedom to impose our feelings and impressions on God’s message to mankind. The role of the student of the Bible is to discover the consciously-willed meaning of the inspired author.

Reason #2: The Bible is the Inerrant Word of God

Another reason that Christians put so much effort into understanding the Bible is that it is true in all that it communicates—it is the inerrant Word of God. Further, biblical inerrancy means that when the Bible speaks in historical narrative, that the history is true; where the Bible touches on matters of science, it speaks truth; when the Bible describes the lost condition of sinful man and the redemption that is in Christ, it speaks truth; when the Bible issues commands for how those who love Him should live, it speaks truth.

Reason #3: There is “Distance” Between Ourselves and the Original Audience

Daniel Doriani describes the issue that this distance causes: “Because we believe in the authority of the Bible, we need an objective method for determining, as best we can, what the Bible originally meant and what it means today. We need training because we live in a world far
removed from the world of the Bible—in time, in language, and in customs. We speak English, Spanish, or German. They spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. We live in a technological society, shaped by cars, refrigerators, telephones, videos, and computer networks, all ruled by elected officials, convertible currencies, and global markets...Because of the differences between biblical times and our age, we need training in the biblical language and customs. As for language, how many of us know precisely what the terms atonement, justification, redemption, and propitiation mean?" Speaking to the gap between ourselves and the original audience of the Bible, John MacArthur makes this observation: “so we have to kind of close all those gaps to interpret Scripture accurately because whatever the Bible meant when it was originally given is exactly what it means now. And so we have to recreate that scene. Sometimes you hear people say, ‘We need to bring the Bible into modern times.’ That’s exactly the wrong thing to do, you need to take the modern reader into ancient times. You need to reconstruct the setting in order that you can get the interpretation at the time it was written.”

SO, WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

Commit to an Author-Determined Approach to Meaning

We do not read the Bible to see a reflection of ourselves in the text; we read the Bible as a window through which we discover God’s truth about the universe, ourselves, and Him. “[When reading the Bible] the goal is to arrive at the creative intention of the original author contained in the words of the text...the meaning of the text is what the author consciously intended to say by his text. Thus, the meaning of Romans is what Paul intended to communicate to his readers in Rome when he wrote his letter.”

Who is the Author of the Bible? God is the ultimate author; and He appointed human authors.

God inspired a variety of human authors over a period of approximately 1500 years who wrote as thinking, feeling human beings to convey His message. God superintended over the process so that as the human author expressed God’s inspiration in their own words and thoughts, every word that was written was also the exact word he wanted to be written—free from all error. This dual authorship is evident in Scripture.

“When writing a letter to the Corinthians, Paul did not enter an ecstatic state, recite the letter to a secretary, and then, when finished, pick up the completed composition and say, ‘Let’s see what God wrote!’ Yet, as an apostle, Paul expected his teaching to be fully obeyed and believed—received, in fact, as the very word of God (1 Cor. 7:40; 14:36-37; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; Col. 1:25; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:14).” The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews recognizes the inspired quality in the Old Testament when the author of Hebrews introduces Psalm 95 saying, “The Holy Spirit says” (Heb. 3:7). Robert Plummer provides some guidelines for interpreting the Bible in light of the dual-authorship of the Bible:

1. The clear purpose of the human author is a good place to start in understanding the Bible, the Scripture cannot mean less than the human authors consciously intended. Admittedly, there are a few places where the human author confesses his ignorance of the revelation given to him (e.g., Dan. 12:8–9), but these are exceptions. The human authors usually seem acutely aware of conveying timely messages to their current audiences.
2. God, as the Lord of history and revelation, included patterns or foreshadowing of which the human authors were not fully aware. Under God’s sovereign hand, his prior historical interventions were in themselves prophetic—pointing forward to Christ. (e.g., the comment on Old Testament laws in Heb. 10:1) Similarly, Paul notes that the inclusion of the Gentiles and Jews together under the saving work of Christ was a “mystery” present in the Scriptures but not fully revealed until the Spirit declared this truth through the New Testament prophets and apostles (Eph. 3:3-6). We should seek explicit statements in later revelation to clarify any such divine intentionality. One should be forewarned against finding symbolic or prophetic details in the Old Testament when no New Testament author has provided authoritative interpretation of the text.

3. In general, the Bible can't mean something that the human author did not consciously intend to communicate. That is to say that broadly, an author only intends one meaning. That meaning can be the foundation for numerous implications (of which the author may or may not be aware). If that is confusing, go to the “Start with the Right Vocabulary for Bible Interpretation” which immediately follows.

Start with the Right Vocabulary for Bible Interpretation

“One of the major problems encountered in interpreting and discussing written texts is the use of imprecise terminology. If in the process of interpretation, terms are used inaccurately, confusion will result.” Here’s a vocabulary set from Robert Stein to add clarity for the guide:

**Meaning:** The meaning of a text is the principle that an author consciously willed to convey by the words (shareable symbols) used. It is the biblical author who is the determiner of the text’s meaning. Since the principle originated in the past when the text was written, the meaning of a text can never change (locked in history). Even the author cannot change the meaning of a text because he cannot change the past. [For example: an author can issue a revised edition of a book, they can even recant of the original edition, but they can never make the old text mean something different than what it meant.]

**Implications:** Are those inferences in a text of which an author may or may not have been aware but that nevertheless legitimately fall within the principle he willed. For instance…in Ephesians 5:18 (“do not get drunk with wine”), [note that] Paul was prohibiting drunkenness that results from drinking any alcoholic beverage, not just wine. The command not to be drunk with wine is part of that principle, of course, but that principle also involves all later alcoholic beverages, as well as drugs used for non-medical purposes. Although Paul was thinking primarily of drinking wine, he also meant by implication becoming drunk by consuming alcoholic beverages or by taking drugs intravenously, even though he had no idea of how such substances could enter the body in this manner. There is just one meaning of a text, but there can be numerous implications of that meaning.

**Significance:** Refers to how a reader responds to the meaning of a text. For Christians there is a close relationship between the significance and the implications of a biblical text. The reason is that Christians attribute positive significance to the implications of such text. But a non-Christian might agree that X and Y are legitimate implications of a biblical
text and simply say, “I don’t believe this!” or “So what! I don’t care!” A note about application: “Application,” in popular use can refer to both implications (when one applies the meaning [principle] of a passage to generate implications for present day) and significance (seeing the implications of the Bible as something that we should be obedient to, we apply those implications to our lives by seeing their significance—we apply the implications by doing/following them).

Subject matter: Refers to the content, or “stuff,” talked about in a text, without regard to how it is used by the author to convey meaning.9

Commit to a “Literal” Interpretation of the Bible

A “literal” interpretation of the Bible may not mean what you think it means. When this guide refers to a literal interpretation of the Bible, it is referring to an approach that takes the text at face value without assuming or seeking a true, hidden meaning underneath, behind, or beyond the text. Interpreting the Bible literally is agreeing that it is what it purports to be: the inspired Word of God, given to man. A literal interpretation doesn’t deny the use of symbolism in the biblical text; the Bible should be understood according to its literary context. There are many literary contexts or genres contained in the Bible: poetry, narrative, parables, prophecy, letters, etc. Other terms commonly used to describe a literal interpretation of Bible are plain sense, normal reading, or straightforward.10

It is true that we have to put a bit of effort into discerning whether a particular text is intended to be interpreted literally or symbolically—but that is far from an impossible task. As Henry A. Virkler writes, “if the author meant [the particular biblical text] to be interpreted literally, we err if we interpret them symbolically. If the author meant them to be interpreted symbolically, we err equally if we interpret them literally.”11

Understand the Impact of the Inerrancy of Scripture

A Summary Statement from the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

“1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God’s witness to Himself.

2. Holy Scripture, being God’s own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms, obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises.

3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.

4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.”

Henry Virkler makes a helpful case for why the Christian should be convinced of the inerrancy of Scripture: “If Jesus Christ is, in fact, the Son of God, then his attitude toward Scripture will provide the best answer to the question of inerrancy...

First, Jesus consistently treated the historical narratives of the Old Testament as straightforward records of fact.


Third, Jesus consistently adduced the Old Testament Scriptures as the authoritative court of appeal in his controversies with the scribes and the Pharisees. His complaint with them was not that they gave too much credence to Scripture, but that they had, by their rabbinic casuistry (misleading technical distinctions), managed to circumvent the clear and authoritative teachings to be found in it.

Fourth, Jesus taught that nothing could pass from the law until all had been fulfilled (Matt. 5:17-20) and that Scripture could not be broken (John 10:35).

Finally, Jesus used Scripture in his rebuttal to each of Satan's temptations.”

Virkler also provides a pointed quote from J. I. Packer: “The fact we have to face is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, who claimed divine authority for all that He did and taught, both confirmed the absolute authority of the Old Testament for others and submitted to it unreservedly Himself…If we accept Christ’s claims, therefore, we commit ourselves to believe all that He taught—on His authority. If we refuse to believe some part of what He taught, we are in effect denying Him to be the divine Messiah—on our own authority.”

Recognize the Impact and the Limits of the Spirit’s Illumination

Robert Plummer notes that “most Protestant theologians affirm that the Holy Spirit illumines the believer. That is, the Spirit brings to the Christian greater cognitive understanding of the biblical text. Theologians also affirm the Spirit’s related work of bringing conviction, that is impressing upon the believer’s conscience that the teachings of Scripture are in fact true, applicable, and incumbent upon the reader. It is also important to note what illumination is not.” Plummer also provides a relevant quote from Grant Osborne regarding what illumination is not:

“The Spirit does not whisper to us special reasons which are not otherwise available; rather, he opens our eyes to acknowledge those reasons which are available.” (1986:234) In other words, the Spirit makes it possible for the reader to use every faculty to discern the Word and apply it How does this explain the fact that equally spiritual scholars interpret the same passage quite differently? The Spirit makes it possible to overcome our
preunderstanding in order to discern the Word, but he does not guarantee that we will do so. On difficult passages we must use every tool we can muster and still will often read a text the way our experience and theological proclivities dictate...Some passages are so ambiguous that more than one interpretation is possible. We must make our hermeneutical choice but remain open to further leading from the Spirit and challenge from our peers. The Spirit enables us to free our minds to the text but does not whisper to us the correct answer.”16

Select a Good English Translation of the Bible for Study

“A study Bible will not only give you a helpful overview of each book but also provide verse notes to help you understand doctrinal biases of the persons writing those notes. For that reason, I recommend the Zondervan NIV Study Bible and the ESV Study Bible (Crossway). Both are respected works whose notes represent broad consensus of evangelical scholarship.”

Study the Bible to Understand What it Communicates to Believe it and to Do it

The process of studying the Bible according to what it originally meant is what we are referring to as interpreting the Bible literally. “In modern times, evangelicals have spoken of literal interpretation as grammatical-historical interpretation to indicate that there exists both a grammatical-language context as well as a historical context which must be taken into account to read a passage.”17

A word that is used to describe Bible interpretation is “hermeneutics.” That term—hermeneutics—“is from a Greek word, hermeneuo which means to interpret or to translate, to give the meaning. It is giving the sense of what something says. It would be used of anything that needed to be interpreted. And, of course, we’re used to this. We communicate with one another and we very often say, ‘What exactly do you mean by that?’ That’s a very common expression to something you don’t understand...So hermeneutics, which is an English transliteration of this Greek verb, hermeneutics is the science of Bible interpretation. And I want you to identify it as a science because it is a science. That is, it operates under fixed rules. That’s very important to establish. It is the crucial science behind all accurate doctrine, all sound doctrine that is faithful to the Word of God. Where you have a deviation from sound doctrine, inevitably you have a failure to stay by the science of hermeneutics. Or you have a flat-out denial of the veracity and authenticity of the text itself.”

The rest of this guide breaks down this grammatical-historical method of hermeneutics (Bible interpretation) into six steps.

SECTION 1 ENDNOTES


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 33.

7 Ibid., 34, Points 1 and 2 are quoted from Plummer. Point 3 is an adaptation.


9 Ibid., 31-42. The entire vocabulary set is a quote from Stein. It should be noted that this selection lists only a portion of the terms; Stein's vocabulary is larger than what is presented here.


14 Ibid., 32-33


16 Ibid., 144-145.

2. Overview of the Six Steps of Bible Interpretation

Theologians refer to this hermeneutic (interpretive) process by the phrase *grammatical-historical-literal interpretation* (often leaving literal off the end). These six steps are Virkler’s method of giving structure and order to the grammatical-historical method of Bible interpretation.

**THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION**

**Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis**

In this step, you consider the historical and cultural environment in which an author wrote in order to understand his allusions, references, and purpose. Additionally, you consider the relationship (context) of the immediate passage with the surrounding passages, and the entire book, “since a better understanding of an author’s intended meaning results from an acquaintance with the larger text.”

**Lexical-Syntactical Analysis**

In this step you develop “an understanding of the definition of words (lexicology) and their relationship to one another (syntax) in order to understand more accurately the meaning the author intended to convey.”

**Theological Analysis**

Study the level of theology (understanding religious faith, practice, and experience) at the time a revelation was given in order to discover the intended meaning of a passage for the original recipients. Take into account related Bible passages, whether they were revealed before or after the passage you are studying. Identify and evaluate your own theological biases, account for their impact on interpretation, and, validate or correct your interpretation and/or theology.

**Literary (Genre) Analysis**

Identify the literary genre or device used in the passage. Genre includes historical narrative, epistle (letter), poetry, and so on; devices include idioms, symbolism, hyperbole, etc. Each genre and literary device presents diverse attributes and interpretive demands.

**Consult Christian Community and Commentaries**

Make use of the Christian community and high-quality commentaries. Compare your interpretation and conclusions from the four steps above with the interpretation and conclusions of others. Be willing to both take correction and defend your interpretation.

**Application**

Translate the meaning of a passage for its original hearers (of a different time and culture) into the significance it has for believers now. “In some instances the transmission is accomplished fairly easily; in other instances, such as biblical commands that were obviously influenced by
cultural factors (e.g., greeting with a holy kiss), the translation across cultures becomes more complex.”

SECTION 2 ENDNOTES


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.
3. How to Work Through the Six Steps of Bible Interpretation

The following outline is a lightly adapted and heavily annotated reproduction of Henry Virkler’s Summary: The Processes Involved in Interpretation and Application of a Scriptural Text:

**STUDY THE SITUATION: HISTORICAL-CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

The meaning of a text cannot be interpreted with a great degree of certainty without a general understanding of the people who received a message, their experience, and their culture. For example, a modern reader might see the command of Proverbs 22:28 (“Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers.”) and conclude that we shouldn’t make changes to how we have always done things (if our ancestors established something, we shouldn’t change it). However, a historical-cultural analysis, will help us to conclude that “the ancient landmark refers to the boundary marker that separated one man’s land from his neighbor’s. Without modern surveying techniques, it as a relatively easy matter to increase one’s acreage by moving such markers late in the evening. The prohibition is directed against a specific type of stealing.”

In order to understand the historical, cultural, and contextual environment of a Bible passage, you will need, at a minimum, a good study Bible. Robert Plummer notes, “A study Bible will not only give you a helpful overview of each book but also provide verse notes to help you understand more obscure statements. The notes in a study Bible obviously will exhibit the doctrinal biases of the person writing those notes. For that reason, I recommend the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* and the *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway). Both are respected works whose notes represent the broad consensus of evangelical scholarship.” Other helpful resources include Bible dictionaries, handbooks, and commentaries. For help identifying quality resources, speak to your pastor or discipleship director.

**Determine the general historical and cultural milieu of the writer and his audience.**

*Determine the general historical circumstances.* Some helpful questions: “What were the political, economic, and social situations? What was the main source of livelihood? What were the major threats and concerns? Knowledge of the historical-cultural context is crucial for answering basic questions about a text, such as What is happening to the author of Lamentations? is he suffering from a ‘nervous breakdown’ or from a normal grief reaction? Or, Why was Jonah so unwilling to obey God’s command to preach to the people of Nineveh?”

*Be aware of cultural circumstances and norms that add meaning to given actions.* “In Mark 7, for example, Jesus soundly upbraids the Pharisees for their concept of corban. In the practice of corban a man could declare that all his money would go to the temple treasury when he died, and that, since his money belonged to God, he was therefore no longer responsible for financially supporting his aging parents. Jesus argues that men were using this Pharisaic tradition to render God’s command (the fifth commandment) of no account. Without knowledge of the cultural practice of corban, we would be unable to understand this passage.”

*Discern the spiritual condition of the audience.* “Many of the biblical books were written at times when the recipients’ level of commitment was low because of carnality, discouragement, or
temptation from unbelievers and apostates. The meaning of a text cannot be understood properly if divorced from a knowledge of these factors.”

**Determine the purpose(s) the author had in writing a book.**

Some important questions: Who was the writer? What was his spiritual background and experience? To whom was he writing (e.g. believers, unbelievers, apostates, believers who were in danger of, those he knew well, strangers, an individual, a group)? Does the writer explicitly state his purpose in writing this particular book?

*Note explicit statements or repeated phrases.* “For example, Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1 tell us that Luke’s purpose in writing was to present an orderly account of the beginning of the Christian era. In John 20:31 John tells us that his purpose was to present an account of Christ’s ministry so that we might believe.”

*Observe exhortations.* “Since exhortations flow from the purpose, they often give an important clue regarding the author’s intentions. The book of Hebrews, for example, is interspersed with exhortations and warnings, so there is little doubt that the author’s purpose was to persuade Jewish believers undergoing persecution (10:32-35) not to return to Judaism but to stay true to their new profession of faith (10:19-23; 12:1-3). The Pauline books likewise are filled with theological facts immediately followed by a ‘therefore’ and an exhortation. If the meaning of the theological fact is uncertain, the nature of the exhortation will often be valuable in understanding its meaning.”

*Observe issues that are omitted or emphasized.* “The writer of 1 and 2 Chronicles, for example, does not give a complete history of all national events during Solomon’s reign and the divided kingdom. He selects events illustrating that Israel can endure only if the nation and its leadership remain faithful to God’s commandments and his covenant.”

**Understand how the passage fits into its immediate context.**

*Identify the major blocks of material in the book and show how they fit into a coherent whole.* What is the outline of the book? Take into account and observe that various authors were more organized in their structure than others. “It is important that outlines of biblical books not be imposed on the text but be developed by study of the text itself.”

*Show how the passage under consideration fits into the flow of the author’s argument.* “What is the connection between the passage under study and the blocks of material immediately preceding and following it? There is usually a logical and/or theological connection between any two adjacent passages.”

*Determine the perspective that the author intends to communicate: noumenological (the way things really are) or phenomenological (the ways things appear).* We have a “phenomenological metaphor for the more cumbersome description of a section of the earth rotating out of the path of the sun’s direct rays”—the setting sun. “For an accurate understanding of [the author’s] meaning, it is important to distinguish the author’s intention to be understood as a direct spokesman for God from his intention to speak as a human reporter describing an event phenomenologically.”


Distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive truth. “Descriptive passages relate what was said or what happened at a particular time without necessarily commenting on the veracity of the statement or the appropriateness of the action. What God says is true; what humans say may or may not be true; what Satan says usually mixes truth and error [in a harmful way]…Prescriptive passages of Scripture claim to articulate normative [applying at all times to all people] principles. The Epistles are primarily prescriptive, but occasionally they contain instances of individual rather than universal prescriptions (e.g. Paul’s request that Timothy bring him his cloak and parchments [2 Tim. 4:13]).”

Distinguish between incidental details and the teaching focus of a passage. “A contemporary example of the failure to make a distinction between incidental details and the teaching focus of a passage…centered around 1 Corinthians 3:16: ‘You yourselves are God’s temple.’ Paul’s central point in this verse is the sacredness of Christ’s body, the church. Focusing on an incidental detail (the structure of the Old Testament temple), this educator concluded that since the temple had three parts (an outer court, an inner court, and a holy of holies) and since Christians are called temples, it therefore follows that humans have three parts: body, soul, and spirit!”

Identify the person or category of persons for whom the particular passage is intended. “A popular statement claims: ‘Every promise in the Book is mine!’ Pious though it sounds, the concept is invalid…A more valid procedure is to ask the questions discussed above: Who is speaking? Is the teaching normative or intended for specific individuals? To whom is the passage directed?”

STUDY THE MESSAGE: LEXICAL-SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS

Identify the general literary form. “The literary form an author uses (prose or poetic) influences the way he intends his words to be understood.”

Trace the development of the author’s theme and show how the passage under consideration fits into the context. “This step, already begun as part of contextual analysis, provides a necessary perspective for determining the meaning of words and syntax.”

Identify the natural divisions (paragraphs and sentences) of the text. “The main conceptual units and transitional statements reveal the author’s thought process and therefore help clarify his meaning.” “The context is the best source of data for determining which of several possible meanings of a word the author intended. Second, unless a passage is put into perspective of its context, one risks becoming so involved in the technicalities of a grammatical analysis that one loses sight of the primary idea(s) the words actually convey. The ‘hermeneutical circle’ is a term for the recognition that one cannot accurately interpret the smaller parts of communication (such as words and grammar) without understanding the larger whole (such as entire writings and genres) of which they are a part and yet one cannot accurately interpret the whole without an understanding of the parts.”

Identify the connecting words within the paragraphs and sentences and how they aid in understanding the author’s progression of thought.
Pay attention to connecting words within paragraphs and sentences. “Connecting words (conjunctions, prepositions, relative pronouns) show the logical relationship between two or more thoughts.”

“By way of illustration, Galatians 5:1 says: ‘Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.’ Taken by itself, the verse could have any one of several meanings: it could refer to human slavery, slavery to sin, and so on. The “then” indicates, however, that this verse is a resulting application of a point Paul makes in the previous chapter. A reading of Paul’s arguments (Gal. 3:1–4:30) and his conclusion (4:31) clarifies the meaning of the potentially ambiguous 5:1. Paul is encouraging the Galatians not to become enslaved again to the bonds of legalism (i.e., by trying to win salvation through good works).”

Don’t look at the chapter and verse numbering system of the Bible as transitions in the text. “Remember that the biblical chapter-and-verse divisions, which are so much a part of our thinking today, were not an original part of the Scriptures; these divisions were added many centuries after the Bible was written as an aid in locating passages for easy reference. Although verse divisions serve this purpose well, the standard verse-by-verse division of the text may have the disadvantage of dividing the author’s thought unnaturally.”

Determine what the individual words mean.

“Any word that survives long in a language begins to take on a variety of meanings. Thus it is necessary to identify the various possible meanings of ancient words at the time the biblical author used them and then to determine which of the several possible meanings is the one the author intended to convey in a specific context.”

The interpreter who doesn’t know the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible “will rely on several kinds of lexical tools that are available to assist the modern student of Scripture with this and other steps of word study.” Two particular types resources will be of help for this step:

1. An exhaustive concordance of the Bible (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible). “To find the original-language word behind an English word that has been selected for study, the interpreter should consult a concordance. A concordance contains a listing of all the occurrences of a given word in Scripture. to examine the various ways a given Hebrew or Greek word was used, consult a Hebrew or Greek concordance, which lists all the passages in which the word appears.”

2. A Hebrew and Greek Lexicon. “A lexicon is a dictionary of Hebrew and Greek words. Like an English dictionary, it lists the various denotations of each word found in it.”

Hebrew and Greek words studies can be helpful and they can easily be misused or misunderstood. The most common errors that result from a misuse of word studies are illegitimate totality transfer and etymological root fallacy. For help identifying quality resources and for guidance regarding how to use them, speak to your pastor or discipleship director.

Furthermore, it is extremely important not to rush to Hebrew and Greek word study tools before taking the time to study the history, culture, context, purpose, and outline of the passage you are studying.

Identify the multiple meanings a word possessed in its time and culture. “Most words that survive long in a language acquire many denotations (specific meanings) and connotations (additional
implications often including the emotions associated with those specific meanings). Words may have both technical and popular denotations, that is, usages found in ordinary conversation. For example, when [people] say that a person is obsessive, they usually mean he or she is overly concerned with the details. When counselors use the same words as part of the phrase “Obsessive Compulsive Disorder” they have a different meaning in mind.”\(^5\)

In the late 1980’s, it was common for talk about how good something was by calling it bad.

So, how can we discover the variety of meanings a word is known to have (semantic range)? “The most common and effective word-study method is an analysis of the ways a word was used in other ancient literature.”\(^6\) For example, to determine what Paul intends to communicate by using αὐθεντέω (authenteo) in 1 Timothy, we would look to how Paul uses authenteo (in order of priority): [a] in the rest of 1 Timothy, [b] in the Pastoral Epistles (of which 1 Timothy is one), [c] in Paul’s letters, [d] in the rest of the Epistles, [e] in the New Testament, [f] in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and [g] in secular Greek literature around the time of 1 Timothy.

Once the semantic range is established how do we find the specific meaning (denotation) that was intended? Here are five methods:

1. Examine definitions or explanatory phrases that the authors themselves give. “For example, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states that the Word of God was given so that ‘the man of God may be perfect’ (KJV). What does the author mean by perfect here? Does he mean sinless? Incapable of error? Incapable of error or sin in some specific area the best answer is supplied by his own explanatory phrases immediately following—that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.’ In this context Paul meant for this word, translated into our language as perfect, to convey the idea of being thoroughly equipped for godly living.”\(^6\)

2. Determine if the subject and the predicate of a sentence may explain each other. “For example, the Greek word μόρανθε in Matthew 5:13 can mean either ‘to become foolish’ or ‘to become insipid.’ How do we determine the intended denotation? In this instance the subject of the sentence is ‘salt,’ so the second denotation (‘if the salt has lost his savour,’ KJV) is selected as the correct one.”\(^6\)

3. Examine parallelism if it occurs within a passage. Psalm 103:10 is an example:

   He does not treat us as our sins deserve
   or repay us according to our iniquities.\(^5\)

4. Determine if the word is being used as part of a figure of speech. (See Section 6. Principles for Handling Literary Devices in Scripture > Idiom and Figures of Speech.)

5. Study parallel passages. “To understand the meaning of an obscure word or phrase, look for additional data in clearer parallel passages. It is important, though, to distinguish between verbal parallels and real parallels. Verbal parallels are those that use similar words but refer to different concepts. The concepts of God’s Word as a sword, found in Hebrews 4 and Ephesians 6…Real parallels, in contrast, are those that speak of the same concept or same event. The marginal references [cross references] found in
most Bibles are designed to identify real parallels, although such parallels seem to be more verbal than real. A careful examination of context is the best method of determining whether the passages are verbal or real parallels.  

Analyze the syntax to show how it contributes to the understanding of a passage.

“The relationship of words to one another is expressed through their grammatical forms and arrangement.”

Put the results of your analysis into nontechnical, easily understood words that clearly convey the author’s intended meaning to the English reader.

“Creating your own paraphrase requires that you both commit to and state clearly your interpretive decisions.” Don’t forget that your main purpose is to understand the Bible and communicate what you understand so that others can understand it as well.

THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

It is unavoidable fact: we come to the Bible with some kind of belief (or unbelief) about God—we do not read the Bible with a “blank slate” theology. In this step, you are seeking to be aware of your own theological conclusions from the whole of the Bible, identify how they impact your interpretation of the passage at hand, evaluate the consistency of your interpretation, and consider (if necessary) whether your theology or interpretation of the passage requires revision.

Here are some helpful principles:

Determine your own view of the nature of God’s relationship to humankind.

Ask the question: How does this passage fit into the total pattern of God’s revelation [a] that was revealed prior to its writing (what was already revealed to the original recipients?) and [b] that was revealed at any time? Bible scholars call [a] biblical theology while [b] is termed systematic theology. At the heart of these questions is the view of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament (informed by an understanding of both) and the relationship of Israel to the church. As Henry Virkler notes, your conclusions to those questions are “too important to assume from someone else without carefully and prayerfully considering the evidence yourself.”

Identify the implications of this view for the passage you are studying.

“For example, a position on the nature of God’s relationship to humanity that is primarily discontinuous will view the Old Testament as less relevant for contemporary believers than the New Testament.” Using that example does not constitute support for that approach to the Old Testament.

Assess the extent of theological knowledge available to the people of that time (the “analogy of Scripture”).

“What previous knowledge had been given? (This previous knowledge is sometimes referred to in hermeneutics textbooks as the ‘analogy of Scripture.’) this biblical references to earlier texts that appear in the margins of Bibles such as the Thompson Chain Reference Bible can provide assistance, as can good biblical theology texts.”
Determine the meaning the passage possessed for its original recipients in light of their knowledge.

You will have done some work in this area in the Study the Situation (Historical-Cultural Analysis) and Study the Message (Lexical-Syntactical Analysis) steps above.

Identify additional knowledge about this topic that is available to us now because of later revelation (the “analogy of faith”).

“(This knowledge is sometimes referred to in hermeneutics textbooks as the ‘analogy of faith.’) What other, perhaps clearer, passages and teachings do you need to consider in your interpretation of the passage? Topical Bibles and systematic theology texts that provide comprehensive scholarship on major [biblical] topics…can be helpful in acquiring this type of information.”

If you would like help identifying helpful study resources, speak to your pastor or discipleship director.

LITERARY (GENRE) ANALYSIS

Look for explicit references that indicate the author’s intent regarding the method he was using. If the text does not explicitly identify the literary form of the passage, study the characteristics of the passage deductively to ascertain its form.

Apply the principles of literary genre and devices carefully but not rigidly.

The topic of handling genre and literary devices gets extended treatment in sections 4, 5, and 6 of this guide:

Section 4: Genre: Impact and Scope of Impact on Interpretation
Section 5: Principles for Handling Genre in Scripture
Section 6: Principles for Handling Literary Devices in Scripture

Sections 4 is an overview; Sections 5 and 6 provide principles and examples.

The genres covered in Section 5 are: Narrative, Epistle, Covenant, Law, Parable, Poetry, Wisdom Literature, Prophecy, and Apocalyptic Literature.

The literary devices covered in Section 6 are: simile, metaphor, allegory, idioms and figures of speech, hyperbole, and type.

CONSULT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND COMMENTARIES

Compare your analysis with that of other interpreters (after you have performed your own analysis).

Modify, correct, or expand your interpretation as appropriate.

APPLICATION

We know from 2 Timothy 3:16 (“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”) that there is something to apply to our lives from every passage of Scripture. We also know that biblical narrative (a large
portion of the Bible) doesn't give commands for us to apply by following. Additionally, commands in the Bible are given to a people with different experiences, languages, and cultures—how are we to apply those commands in our time?

**Principle-izing: Discover theological principles in biblical narrative.**

Based on a historical-cultural, contextual, lexical-syntactical, and theological analysis of the narrative portion, ascertain by deductive study (1) the principle(s) that passage was intended to teach, or (2) the principles (descriptive truths) illustrated within the passage that remain relevant for the contemporary believer.

*An example:* “Many of the dynamics of Eve’s temptation are often present in Satan’s temptations of believers today. With only brief introspection we can recognize his tactics of maximizing the restriction, minimizing the consequences, mislabeling the action, mixing good and evil, and mixing sin with beauty operating in our own lives.”

Here are some guidelines for principle-izing:

1. Focus on principles implicit in a story that are applicable across times and cultures. The details may change, but the principles remain the same: “for example, Satan may continue to tempt us by maximizing a restriction but is not likely to do so by using a fruit tree.”

2. If the principle is based on the meaning of the narrative, the foundation must be a sound, careful historical, lexical analysis. The meaning we assign to the narrative must be the meaning intended by the author.

3. If the meaning or principle are not consistent with all the other teachings of Scripture, that is an indication of misunderstanding or an invalid principle.

4. “Principles derived by this method may be either normative [applying universally] or non-normative [applying in certain circumstances]. For example, it is valid to say that Satan sometimes uses the above methods to tempt believers today, but it would be invalid to say that he always uses these methods or that he uses only these methods.”

5. “Texts have only one meaning but may have many applications [perhaps better said to be “implications”]. Principle-izing is a method of application. The meaning is the author’s intended one, but the applications of that meaning may refer to situations that the author, in a different time and culture, never envisioned. For example, the author of Genesis intended to give us a narrative account of the first temptation—not a psychological analysis of the temptation process.”

**Transcultural transmission of biblical commands (applications of principles).**

*Discern as accurately as possible the principle behind the command.*

*Discern whether the principle is transcultural or culture-bound by examining the reason given for the principle. Here are a couple of helps:*
1. Determine the reason given for the principle. “For example, we are to love one another because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). We are not to love the world and its values because love of the world and love of God are mutually exclusive (1 John 2:15).”

2. “If the reason for a principle is culture-bound, then the principle may be also. If the reason has its basis in God’s unchanging nature (his grace, his love, his moral nature, or his created order), then the principle itself should probably not be change.”

If a principle is transcultural, determine whether the same behavioral application in our culture will express the principle as adequately and accurately as the biblical one. Here are some helpful guidelines:

1. When a transcultural principle is expressed in a manner common to the culture at the time, the form of the principle may be modified, but the principle still stands. “For example, Jesus demonstrated the principle that we should have an attitude of humility and willingness to serve one another (Mark 10:42-44) by washing the disciples’ feet (John 13:12-16), a familiar custom of the day. We retain the principle, although there are other ways to express that principle more meaningfully in our culture.”

2. “It is important to define the intended recipients of a command and to apply the command discriminately to other groups. If a command was given to only one church or one individual, this may indicate that it was meant to be a local rather than universal practice. For instance, in 2 Timothy 4:9-13 Paul issues a command: ‘Come to me quickly…Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.’ Few readers of this text have felt the need to book the next flight to Troas to gather Paul’s belongings and then attempt to deliver them to the apostle! Clearly, the command was given to Timothy and no longer applies directly to today’s reader.”

If the behavioral expression of a principle should be changed, suggest a cultural equivalent that will express the God-given principle behind the original command.

A CHECKLIST FOR THESE SIX STEPS

To see this six step process in outline/checklist form for quick reference, see Appendix A of this guide.

SECTION 3 ENNOTES


24 Ibid., 81-82.


27 Ibid.
Ibid., 84.
Ibid., 85.
Ibid., 86.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid., 87.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid., 88-89.
Ibid., 89.
Ibid., 89-90.
Ibid., 99.
Ibid.
Ibid., 100.
Ibid., 101.
Ibid., 100.
Ibid., 102.
Ibid., 101.
Ibid., 100.
Ibid., 106.
Ibid., 107.
Ibid.
Ibid., 102-103.
Ibid., 105.
Ibid., 111.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid., 113
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Ibid., 115.
60 Ibid., 121-122.
61 Ibid., 142.
62 Ibid., 143.
63 Ibid., 144.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 200.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 206.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 206-207.
72 Ibid., 207
4. Genre: Impact and Scope of Impact on Interpretation

As Grant Osborne points out, “all writers couch their messages in a certain genre in order to give the reader sufficient rules by which to decode the message. These hints guide the reader (or hearer) and provide clues for interpretation. When Mark recorded Jesus’ parable of the sower (Mk 4:1–20), he placed it in a context and within a medium that would communicate properly to his readers. We can recover that meaning by understanding how parables function and by noting how the symbols function within [the context of Mark].”

Genre for a Particular Passage Cannot Be Determined Without First Studying the Situation (Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis) and Message (Lexical-Syntactical Analysis)

Before looking closely at the impact of genre on the interpretation of a particular passage, you should have already completed an historical-cultural, contextual, grammatical-syntactical, and theological analysis. Following the steps in order will give you the appropriate tools to handle genre and ask the right genre-specific questions required to properly interpret a particular passage. It will be helpful, however, to have a general understanding of how genre manifests in the Bible before studying your passage so that you can more readily identify genre in your reading.

Thomas Howe explains the point well: “An interpreter cannot know the genre of a text before he knows how the text is structured or before he finds the characteristics in the text that suggest its genre. And an interpreter cannot discover how a text is structured until he reads the text, grasps the meanings of the words and sentences, and thereby uncovers the structure of the piece. In other words, the genre must be discerned and discovered in the text as one reads it. But if, as many commentators and theorists assert, meaning is genre-dependent, then this seems to imply that in order to interpret the text the interpreter must first identify the genre.”

Genre is not the Sole—or Even Primary—Factor of Impact on Interpretation

Mike Stallard notes: “One other issue must be mentioned in this matter of use of genre for interpretation. One must ask how the interpreter recognizes the genre that a piece of biblical literature happens to be. The answer is by literal interpretation, that is, grammatical-historical interpretation. In other words, literal interpretation logically precedes genre recognition. This means that the sometimes heard statement that ‘genre determines meaning’ is wrong. While genre is one input to the exegetical process, it is not an extra-biblical truism that is somehow the pre-judge of the text before the exercise of the normal reading of the text. In other words, genre does not ‘regulate’ one’s ultimate reading of the text. Rather, it classifies or describes what is found.”

Genre Impacts Interpretation

Stallard notes the impact of genre on interpretation: “When this process has successfully arrived at the identification of the appropriate genre, the characteristics of that genre will help the reader to interpret the text more completely by discovering aspects of word play, or repetition, or parallelism, or figure of speech, or even aspects of significance.”
Howe points out that although genre doesn’t always have enormous impact in interpretation, there are moments when genre makes a noticeable impact: “when considering a piece of poetry, for example, persons not trained in the nature of poetry may not be able to perceive the literary devices that are used by the poet to construct this distinct literary piece, and in some instances a literary piece may not even be recognizable as poetry even to the trained eye.”

So, as a means of introducing an evaluation of the impact of genre on interpretation, give weight to the impact of genre, but do not regard genre as the final authority in Bible interpretation. Additionally, a student of the Bible need not be an expert in biblical genres to faithfully and fruitfully interpret the Bible. Use the “Principles for Handling Genre in Scripture” as a helpful aid to be consulted and to inform, not as a cruel taskmaster.

Stallard expresses the point well: “There is throughout the Bible a historical plot line and the teaching of basic truths that can be understood apart from detailed genre analysis and knowledge of literary structure. Evangelicals must make sure to let Christians in their churches know that the Bible is a book that God has given, in one sense, directly to them. This can be done because God is not hiding from us, but has given us a Book in space and time that can be understood literally.”

**SECTION 4 ENDNOTES**


77 Ibid.

5. Principles for Handling Genre in Scripture

NARRATIVE

Roughly 40 percent of the Old Testament and 60 percent of the New Testament is narrative. Dr. Robert Plummer says, “it is worth noting that historical narrative is rarely a pure genre, in that it is often found mixed with other genres such as genealogies (Matt. 1:1-17), songs (Exodus 15:1-8), proverbs (Matt. 26:52), prophecies (Mark 13:3-37), letters (Acts 23:25-30), or covenants (Josh. 24:1-28).” Biblical narratives “are stories—purposeful stories retelling the historical events of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the present. This has always been so for all peoples in all cultures; and in this regard the biblical narratives are no different from other such stories. Nonetheless, there is a crucial difference between the biblical narratives and all others because, inspired by the Holy Spirit as they are, they story they tell is not so much our story as it is God’s story—and it becomes ours as he ‘writes’ us into it.” Biblical narrative recounts factual, historical events in the form of a story—not unlike a news story or biography. Unlike biblical epistles (where the purpose for writing and theological prescriptions are clear) difficulty is discovered when interpreting historical narrative: the author’s purpose in writing is not explicit or “on the surface.” At times, narrative describes things as they happened without approving or condemning those actions. So, how can we know what point we should take from the story or what significance it should have for us? One key thing to constantly remember: “that the narratives were written to show the progress of God’s history of redemption, not to illustrate principles. They are historical narratives, not illustrative narratives.” Here are some helpful principles for handling biblical narrative.

Context determines meaning.

Each passage is to be understood as part of the chapter in which it is found. Each chapter is to be understood in relation to how it fits within the other chapters of the book and the book’s overall message. The book is to be understood in light of the rest of Scripture. What to avoid: reading and attempting to determine meaning of a verse or phrase by itself. Robert Stein gives an example of context determining meaning in Mark 1:2-8. “In this passage Mark tells the story of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. Frequently this passage is read (and taught) as follows:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, ‘After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not
worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ (Mark 1:2-8 ESV, italics and underlining added)

In the above passage, the italicized words tend to receive the emphasis when read...Mark 1:2-8 is a narrative about Jesus, not John...The the emphasis in reading this passage should be not on the italicized words but on the underlined words.”

Authorial comments (both narration and theological comments) indicate how to interpret narrative. “A familiar example of this is found in the expression that a king did ‘what was right in the eyes of the Lord’ (1 Kings 14:8; 15:5; 11; 22:43; 2 Kings 10:30; 12:2; 14:3; 15:3; 34; 18:3; 22:2; 2 Chron. 14:2; 20:32; 24:2; 25:2; 26:4; 27:2; 29:2; 31:20; 34:2. What is right in god’s eyes is explained in Exod. 15:26; Deut. 6:17-18; 13:18).”

Authorial summaries within a narrative indicate how to interpret narrative.

“After the creation account in Genesis 1:1-30, the narrator summarizes God’s work: ‘And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.’ (v. 31).”

Repetition within a narrative indicates meaning by revealing the author’s purpose in writing.

This type of repetition occurs in Luke.“Luke continually emphasizes the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Spirit is involved in the birth of John the Baptist (1:15) and the conception of Jesus (1:35). Before his birth the Spirit bears witness to Jesus (1:41-45). At his baptism Jesus is anointed by the Spirit in a powerful way (‘in bodily form, like a dove,’ 3:22). ‘Full of the Holy Spirit’ he is then led by the Spirit into the wilderness (4:1), he announces in his first sermon, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ (4:18). Clearly, by this repetition Luke wants his readers to understand the importance of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus, and this prepares for the importance of the Spirit for the life and ministry of the church in Luke’s second work, Acts.”

Proportion—the amount of ink dedicated to certain aspects of a passage—indicates how to interpret narrative.

“This can be seen in two narratives found in Mark 5. Mark spends an unusual amount of space describing a demon-possessed man in 5:2-5, 9…the second is found in 5:25-26…in both of these stories the author has heightened the tragic and hopeless condition of man and woman and the inability of those who sought to help. Jesus’ ability to heal these two people indicates his great might and power.”

Avoid any attempt to determine meaning of a passage or verse by itself.

(See Mark 1:1-8 above.)

Avoid reading descriptions of events as authorial comments or commendations.

(e.g. Genesis 19:30-38) Since narrative describes events, do not assume it commends the events described without an indication of such (e.g., “…did evil in the eyes of the Lord…”).

Avoid moralizing (seeking a moral lesson from every passage of narrative).
We should not assume that a narrative passage has a principle for living. “The moralizing reader, in effect, asks the question what is the moral of this story? at the end of every individual narrative. An example would be: what can we learn about handling adversity from how the Israelites endured their years as slaves in Egypt? The fallacy of this approach is that it ignores the fact that the narratives were written to show the progress of God’s history of redemption, not to illustrate principles. They are historical narratives, not illustrative narratives.”

Avoid allegorizing or searching for the hidden meaning of the passage.

The description of Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospels is intended as narrative and should be interpreted that way. To allegorize the passage is to interpret the narrative in a way that the author did not intend.

Avoid treating biblical texts as myths.

A person might not agree that what the Bible describes through miracles or of God’s act of creating the universe actually happened. However, the Bible (especially in narratives) purports to be a text that is true and describes real events, people, and places. Interpret the Bible according to what it intends to mean to understand the message of the Bible. After determining meaning from the Bible a person is free to regard the Bible with whatever significance they prefer.

Avoid questions and approaches from the study of fictional narrative.

When Luke describes the life of Paul in Acts he is describing actual events. Questions such as “Why didn’t Luke choose to have King Agrippa profess to follow Christ after Paul’s sermon in Acts 26:28?” are inappropriate and unhelpful.

**NARRATIVE: SPECIFIC HELPS FOR OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE**

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart offer ten helpful principles for reading and interpreting Old Testament Narratives:

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
3. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral application.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.
5. Many (if not most) of the individuals in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect—as are their actions as well.
6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge this on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in Scripture.
7. All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given. What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.

8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific, limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere in other ways.

9. Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).

10. In the final analysis, God is the hero of all the biblical narratives.

**NARRATIVE: SPECIFIC HELPS FOR NARRATIVE IN ACTS**

A couple of general points will be helpful for interpreting Acts:

1. We have to remember that Acts is historical narrative. Be careful about making descriptive statements prescriptive. (See Narrative: How to Know When a Passage is Prescriptive or Merely Descriptive above.)


**EPISTLE**

Form and Structure

“In the NT the dominant literary form is the epistle or letter. Technically, a letter is a less literary and more personal form of communication that tends to address a specific situation or problem and builds on an established relationship. The occasional nature of Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians are apparent from the very start. An epistle is more artistic in form and is intended as a self-explanatory treatise to a wider public. The distinction between them can be blurred, however. Paul’s writings seem to lie somewhere in between, with Philemon resembling more a letter and Romans an epistle...even as present-day letters possess a conventional literary form (date, address, salutation, body, conclusion, name), letters in biblical times possessed a conventional literary form.”

*Salutation:* “This consists of a reference to the sender (‘Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ’) and the recipient(s) of the letter (‘To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons’) along with the greeting (‘Grace to your and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ [Phil. 1:1-2]).”

*Thanksgiving and/or prayer:* “This is found in all of Paul’s letters except Galatians, where its omission is significant.”
Body: “This is frequently the largest part of a Pauline letter, as can be seen from Romans 1:18-11:36…”

Exhortation and instruction: Example: Romans 12:1-15:32

Conclusion: This can include a wish for peace (Romans 15:33), a concluding autograph (Galatians 6:1), a benediction (Romans 16:20), a doxology (Romans 16:25-27), greetings to various individuals (Romans 16:3-16), greetings from those accompanying Paul (Romans 16:21-23), prayers (Romans 15:33), prayer requests (Romans 15:30-33), and news from Paul and his team (Romans 15:22-29).

Epistles are occasional; they are not intended to answer every question.

“The letters in the New Testament are not abstract treatises of systematic theology. they are often passionate appeals written to specific persons in particular situations in the first century AD. In a word, they are occasional—addressing specific occasions.” As a result, interpreting epistles will often be aided significantly by understanding the historical context of a letter.

Epistles cannot be pressed to teach doctrine exhaustively.

Divide the text into discourse units.

“Break the text into more manageable units. In doing so, we should follow the literary and structural clues the author has given us. Does he change topics? Does he shift from third to second person? Do conjunctions or exclamations signal the movement to a new subject?”

Determine the meaning of individual words.

“Important theological words worthy of focused study are found throughout the Bible. Yet, in the dense, logical argument of many New Testament epistles, there is an especially high frequency of such words…At the most basic level, if the interpreter is having difficulty honing in on the exact sense of a word or phrase, several modern English translations can be compared.” (See Section 3. How to Work Through the Six Steps of Bible Interpretation > Study the Message (Lexical-Syntactical Analysis) of this guide.)

Hebrew and Greek words studies can be helpful and they can easily be misused or misunderstood. The most common errors that result from a misuse of word studies are illegitimate totality transfer and etymological root fallacy. For help identifying quality resources and for guidance regarding how to use them, speak to your pastor or discipleship director.

Read through the whole letter fast at one time and make general notes.

Make four kinds of notes:

1. What you notice about the recipients themselves
2. Paul’s attitudes/expression
3. Any specific things mentioned as to the specific purpose of the letter
4. The letter’s natural and logical divisions
Think Paragraphs and “What’s the Point”

“Think paragraphs, and not just as natural units of thought but as the absolutely necessary key to understanding the argument in various epistles…the one question you need to need to learn to ask over and over again is what’s the point?” Therefore you want to be able to do two things: (1) In a compact way state the content of each paragraph. What does Paul say in this paragraph? (2) In another sentence or two try to explain why you think Paul says this right at this point. How does this contribute to the argument?”

Identify what applies to us.

We read the Epistles to (1) find out what they were intended to mean to the original audience and (2) apply that meaning to our lives. “Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar specific life situations) with the first century hearers, God’s word to us is the same as his word to them. It is this rule that causes most of the theological texts…in the Epistles to give modern-day Christians a sense of immediacy with the first century. It is true that ‘all have sinned’ (Rom. 3:23) and that ‘by grace [we] have been saved, through faith’ (Eph. 2:8).”

For how to determine what applies to us when we don’t “share the particulars” with the original audience, see Section 3. How to Work Through the Six Steps of Bible Interpretation > Application and Section 7. Application (The Goal).

COVENANTS

“A great deal has been learned in the past century concerning the covenant form. this is due to the discovery of numerous covenants in the literature of the ancient Near East, especially in the Hittite literature. There were two main kinds o covenants. The difference between them depends on the relationship of the people involved. If the relationship involves equals (Gen. 14:13; 21:27-32; 26:28-31; 31:44-50; 1 Sam. 18:3; 1 Kings 5:12), this results in a parity covenant. In such a covenant both parties mutually agree as equals to obey similar stipulations. The other form is call a suzerainty covenant. This is not a treaty among equals, for an ancient suzerain was a feudal lord. In a suzerainty covenant the lord unilaterally establishes the terms and conditions for his subject. The subjects in turn can only accept or reject the covenant and its terms.” A suzerainty treaty would be structured as follows: (1) Preamble, (2) historical prologue, (3) stipulations, (4) provision for continual reading (so the next generation remembers the covenant), (5) list of witnesses, (6) blessings and curses (contingent upon the subjects’ performance of the contract), and (7) ratification ceremony. Several Old Testament covenants appear to follow the form of the suzerain treaty: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 17:1-14, Exodus 19-24, Deuteronomy, Joshua 24:1-33. “The parallels between [the examples just listed] and ancient suzerain treaties are quite impressive. As they recorded these covenants, the writers of Scripture expected their readers to recognize them as suzerain treaties and to understand their various elements. Knowing this treaty form and what is involved enables us to interpret the biblical examples better.”

God was exceedingly gracious to obligate himself through covenant.

“We must always keep in mind the unilateral and gracious nature of the biblical covenants. These covenants are not treaties established among equals. On the contrary, they originated in the graciousness of a most superior party—God himself. Thus, we must remember at the start they
they should not be interpreted as a means of placing God in our debt or under obligation to us. The sovereign Lord may willingly obligate himself to us, but this has nothing to do with our worthiness or merit. the covenant originated in grace and is based on grace alone.”

Pay attention to the difference in stipulations of the biblical covenants.

Note the permanence of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3: once Abraham leaves he has completed the stipulation “task list.” In the Abrahamic Covenant, there are no curses listed and there is no continued requirement for living up to the stipulations. Contrast that with the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 19-24 (esp. Ex. 19:5; Deut. 11:8). In reconciling the rest of Scripture that follows a covenant, it is important to discover whether the stipulations of the covenant have been violated, renewed, or replaced.

The new covenant referenced in Jeremiah 31:31-34 doesn't make mention of disqualifying stipulations.

LAWs

“In the Bible a large section, the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, is called the “Law.” The “Law” can also refer to the entire OT (cf. John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; 1 Cor. 14:21, which refer to the Law but quote another part of the OT). Usually, however, the Law is associated with Exodus 20-Deuteronomy 33. Within this section we find material other than laws. However, since there are over six hundred commandments or laws found in Genesis-Deuteronomy, these five books are usually referred to as “the Law.”

Christians are not bound to the Old Testament law.

“The NT does teach that Christians are not bound to the stipulations of the old covenant—or, at the very least, by the great majority of the stipulations…the 613 laws were stipulations of a suzerainty-vassal treaty that Yahweh made with a particular West Semitic nation living along the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. According to the OT writers this treaty was violated and in fact repudiated by that nation (e.g. Jer. 11:10; 22:9; 31:32; Ezek. 44:7), and according to the NT writers God has consequently abrogated the treaty and has established a new (not a “renewed”) treaty with a reconstituted covenant people (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6, Heb 8:6-13; 9:15-18; etc. cf. Jer. 31:31-34)...That the collection of 613 regulations comprising God's covenant with ancient Israel is not intended to legally govern the Church would seem obvious on another count: The vast majority of the laws are simply nonapplicable to and unfulfillable by the NT Christian.”

Christians have plenty to apply from the Old Testament law.

“[For Christians] the Mosaic laws, though not legally binding, comprise a treasure of insights and information regarding the very mind and ways of God and therefore, a priori, will be binding on Christians in precisely the same sense as are all other portions of the OT...It is here that the point of profound applicability for the Christian is found. A law reflects the mind, the personality, the priorities, the values, the likes, and dislikes of a lawgiver. Each law issued by God to ancient Israel...reflects God’s mind and ways and is therefore a theological treasure.”

Some notes from David A. Dorsey on the purpose of the Old Testament law:
1. The corpus (the entire body of “the Law”) was designed to regulate the lives of a people living in the distinctive geographical and climatic conditions found in the southern Levant, and many of the regulations are inapplicable, unintelligible, or even nonsensical outside that regime.

2. The corpus was designed by God to regulate the lives of a people whose cultural milieu was that of the ancient Near East.

3. The Mosaic corpus was intended to regulate the lives of people whose religious milieu was that of the ancient Near Eastern world (particularly Canaan) and would be more or less inapplicable outside that world.

4. The code of laws was issued by God to lay the detailed groundwork for and regulate the various affairs of an actual politically- and geographically-defined nation.

5. The corpus was formulated to establish and maintain a cultic regime that has been discontinued with the Church (cf. Heb 8:18; etc.).

How should a christian interpret and apply Old Testament law?

Some guidelines from Dorsey for interpreting Old Testament laws (all of the stipulations, not just the “moral” laws):

1. Remind yourself that this law is not my law, that I am not legally bound by it, that it is one of the laws God issued to ancient Israel as part of His covenant with them. When I look at this law, I am looking over the shoulder of the Israelite.

2. Determine the original meaning, significance and purpose of the law. What was its point? What did God issue it? What, apparently, were His motives in giving it? (Allegorizing, spiritualizing, and typologizing here are counter-productive, succeeding only in obscuring the original significance and purpose of the law.)

3. Determine the theological significance of the law. What does this law reveal about God and his ways? A law, as mentioned, reveals a great deal about the lawgiver. What does this law reflect about God’s mind, His personality, His qualities, attitudes, priorities, values, concerns, likes and dislikes, his teaching methodologies, the kinds of attitudes and moral and ethical standards He wants to see in those who love Him?

4. Determine the practical implications of the theological insights gained from this law for your own NT circumstances.

“To take an example from the civil laws, Exodus 22:25 states: “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.” First, this law is not my law. It was part of Israel’s covenant with God (Christian bankers can relax—for a moment). Second, as far as the point of the law is concerned, it forbids the charging of interest when lending to a poor person, presumably to assist the person who is in a financial crisis in such a way this his recovery will be possible and the repayment will not be overly burdensome. A second purpose is undoubtedly to encourage the individual Israelite to be openhanded and generous, to be sensitive to the needs of the poor, and to be ready and
willing to help needy people in practical ways even when it will not result in one’s own financial gain.

What theological insights from this law? The Person who issued this law is obviously concerned about the physical and emotional well-being of the poor. Moreover, He apparently wants His people to have a similar sensitivity toward the poor, to be willing to help the needy sacrificially.

In light of what I, a NT Christian, learn about God and his ways from this particular law, many practical implications present themselves, including various specific ways in which I myself might help needy people that I know of. Interestingly, a Christian banker, confronted by the request of a struggling young woman of an ethnic minority who has been turned down by several other banks, could, on the basis of what he learns of God and his ways from this very law, graciously grant her a needed loan—indeed, a loan with interest. In so doing he might very well be working out the practical implications of the theological insights rising from this law while at the same time treating the regulation as legally nonbinding.”

PARABLES

“Probably the best-known literary form found in the Bible is the parable. Approximately 35 percent of Jesus’ teachings are found in the form of parables, and such parables as the good Samaritan and the prodigal son are well known to Christians and non-Christians alike.”

A parable is an illustration that compares two different things. “Something is likened to something it is not. The real, lifelike quality of the parables, especially the parables of Jesus, has frequently caused interpreters to forget that the parable is a fictional literary form. This literary form consists to two parts: a picture part, or the story proper, and a reality part, or the comparison to which it is likened. (Other terms used are ‘vehicle’ and ‘message’; ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’…”.

Do not read parables like an historical narrative.

The picture (signifier) does not describe an actual historical event. It is a fictional creation that came into being out of the mind of its author… We cannot ask, ‘In the parable of the prodigal son, why was the older brother out in the field when the prodigal returned?’ (Luke 15:25). There is no historical answer to the question. The two brothers never had historical existence.”

A parable generally teaches one basic point: do not allegorize to assign meaning to every detail.

“In the parable of the good Samaritan, is it important that the man was going “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho? It does not appear so. Jericho lies approximately 3,500 feet below Jerusalem, and the meaning of the parable would not change if the man had been going “up” from Jericho to Jerusalem.”

“Not all details in a parable have significance. Rather, many details simply make the story interesting, memorable, or true to life for the hearers. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23-35), the amount of money (“ten thousand talents”) and the unit of money (“talents”) have no special significance—other than to denote a large debt in a known currency. Likewise, in the parable of the prodigal son, when the father greets his repentant son with new clothes, new shoes, a ring, and a banquet (Luke 15:22-23), these gifts signify
acceptance and celebration. They do not each carry some symbolic meaning that must be decoded. In fact, to attempt such decoding is to head down the misguided path of allegorical interpretation." See Section 6. Principles for Handling Literary Devices in Scripture > Allegory for the difference between allegory (a legitimate literary device) and allegorization (an illegitimate interpretive approach).

Look at the context to discover the point Jesus sought to make.

“Here we recognize that the Gospel parables have two authors, and both willed a meaning. These meanings, although possessing a similar principle tend to be addressed to different audiences and to emphasize different implications. When the parables are interpreted in their original setting, the situation of Jesus, they become exciting and alive.”

Look to the immediate context to see who Jesus is addressing with a certain parable. That will be very telling about what response he was seeking to get out of them with the parable. “The parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4–7), the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) must be understood as addressed to those who ‘grumbled, saying this man receives sinners and eats with them’ (Luke 15:2). Thus, the emphasis is not on the demonstration of God’s love for the outcasts but on the reaction of the older brother to such love. If these parables were directed to tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1), their main point would be to illustrate God’s great love toward them. But since the audience to which these parables were aimed was the Pharisees and scribes, the point is different. Jesus appealed to them through these parables, as if to say, ‘Why are you not rejoicing in what God is doing? (Luke 15:7, 10, 24, 32). The lost are being found; the lame walk; tax collectors and sinners are entering the kingdom. Why, like this older brother, are you not joining in the banquet celebration?’”

Ask diagnostic questions to determine the main point of a parable.

Who are the main characters? “As we have already seen with the parable of the prodigal son, the main characters are the father, the younger brother, and the older brother. Stein suggests that of the three, the father and the older brother should be given the most attention.”

What happens at the end? “As Jesus often stresses his most important point at the end of a parable, the fact that the parable of the prodigal son ends with a rebuke of the older brother (Luke 15:31–32) further supports that Jesus is focusing on correcting a wicked attitude toward God’s gracious treatment of sinners.”

What occurs in direct discourse (in the quotation marks)? “Direct quotations draw the readers’ or listeners’ attention to the parable’s emphasized point. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son, note the emphatic placement of the older brother’s quoted words toward the end of the parable (Luke 15:29–30).”

What/who gets the most ink? “Simply by giving the most literary space to a certain person or item in the parable, Jesus showed us where his emphasis lay.”

Bring the implications for our lives to surface.

“After having correctly understood the meaning of Jesus and/or the Gospel writer, however, our task is not over. The most important aspect of interpretation still lies ahead. We must now seek
those implications that are most relevant for us and act on them. What ultimately does it profit us if we have learned the meaning of a parable without allowing that meaning and its implications to affect our lives.”

Remember that parables are punchy illustrations intended to generate a response upon hearing. Take note of exaggeration and surprising details or events. Unexpected details (“Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.” [Matt. 25:12]; “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.” [Matt. 21:38]) draw attention to the point and to the response that Jesus seeks.

Don’t let familiarity with the passage or of terms rob the intended punch out of the parables. For example, in the parable of the good Samaritan, our culture associates “Samaritan” with positive attributes. We have a Good Samaritan hospitals, Samaritan’s purse, and Good Samaritan laws. It would be easy for us to gloss over the fact that in the parable, Samaritans were far from being considered neighbors—they were despised with an ethnic-based hatred. A good understanding of the historical-cultural background and a commitment to having “fresh eyes” with parables will aid your interpretive effort.

POETRY

Recognize when poetry is employed (visually).

When it comes to biblical poetry that has been translated from the original language, most of the indicators (the use of consonants, vowels, and diphthongs, for example) of poetry do not translate to English. As a result, readers of an English translation of the Bible can best identify poetry by the layout of the text. “Almost all modern Bibles present poetry in recognizable ways—spacing out stanzas, grouping parallel lines, leaving plenty of white space around the poetic passages so they are distinct from nonpoetic sections, etc. Flip through a modern Bible, and you will quickly see the distinct layout of poetic versus nonpoetic sections. The entire book of Psalms, along with many prophetic books, for example, is laid out poetically.”

Remember that poetry is employed for two main reasons: (1) to make the message more memorable and (2) to express and evoke strong emotions.

To Make the Message More Memorable: “As the greatest teacher who ever lived, Jesus taught in engaging ways. Jesus intended for his teaching to be remembered, obeyed, and repeated (Matt. 7:24–29; Mark 6:7–13, 30). His teaching style made the task of remembering his words easier.”

To Express and Evoke Strong Emotions: “When reading poetry, we do not find scientific, factual lists. We expect to be presented with a moving reality and to be moved ourselves. Of course, that is not to deny that the poem’s author intends to convey factual information. However, we must expect figurative (nonliteral) and exaggerated language, which, if taken literally, would be wrongly understood. Indeed, the key hermeneutical question always is, ‘What did the inspired author intend to convey by these words and phrases?’ For example, in Old Testament poetic descriptions of battle, cosmic imagery is sometimes used in a figurative way. Stars fall from the sky, the moon is darkened, and the sun is blotted out (Isa. 13:10; 34:4; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; 3:15). If the descriptions of such cosmic catastrophes occur within poetic sections and other textual markers indicate that life on this planet continued normally, then we likely should understand such cosmic language as figurative descriptions of nation or international turmoil.”
Be familiar with common poetic forms.

You may find it helpful to read in introduction to Hebrew poetry from any Bible dictionary (e.g. the article “Poetry” in the *New Bible Dictionary* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

“Part of the proper interpretation of poetry hinges on recognizing poetic forms and reading them in light of authorial assumptions associated with such forms.” Here is a list of common poetic forms:

a. **Synonymous parallelism:** the second (or subsequent) line reinforces the first (e.g. Isa 42:22)

b. **Antithetical parallelism:** the second (or subsequent) line reinforces the first through contrast (e.g. Hosea 7:14)

c. **Synthetic parallelism:** the second (or subsequent) line adds further information to the first (e.g. Obadiah 21)

d. “X, X+1”: Hebrew poetry sometimes uses the “x, x+1” form to emphasize a list of two or more items. This presents the list in a memorable, emphatic way. (e.g. Proverbs 6:16-19).

e. **Repetition of similar sounds:** For a number of reasons (e.g. as a memory device) an author may repeat sounds (using consonants, vowels, etc.) in poetry. Because English Bibles are translations from the Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament), those repetitions almost never survive. “For example, in James 1:1-2, the words in Greek for “greetings” (chairein) and “joy” (charan) sound very similar. James sometimes stitches together his sections by repeating words with a similar sound. This organizational device is lost to the non-Greek reader, though the footnotes of a study Bible or a commentary should inform the reader of such literary devices.”

f. **Chiastic parallelism:** “In a chiasmus we have an inverting of parallel statements, in the form ABB’A’. The first statement consists of two parts (A and B). The second consists of two parts as well, by they are in reverse order (B’ and A’).” Take Matthew 23:12 for example:

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A    Whoever exalts himself  
    B     will be humbled,  
    B’    and whoever humbles himself  
A’    will be exalted
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Interpreting poetry as if it were prose will lead to misunderstanding.

We must realize that poetry is often figurative and not likely to intend to communicate truth in the same way as prose.
“We are fortunate that in the Bible we have at least two places where prose and poetic accounts of the same event appear side by side. By comparing them we can see that they function in different ways, although in each instance they still convey what the author meant by the verbal symbols he place in these different literary genres.

One example in which prose and poetic accounts of the same event are found side by side is Exodus 14-15. It is obvious that chapter 14 is prose because it is solid black paragraphs and that chapter 15 is poetry because of the unevenness of its paragraphs and the amount of white space. The writer also makes this clear by his introduction: “Then Moses and the people of Israel 

sang this song to the Lord, saying…” (15:1). Thus, whereas we have in chapter 14 a description of the Lord’s victory over the army of Pharaoh in the form of prose, in chapter 15 that victory is described in poetry.

We find the poetic version of this victory several descriptions that cannot be taken literally:

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. (v. 1)

“Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea,  
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. (v. 4)

In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;  
you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble. (v. 7)

At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. (v. 8)

You stretched out your right hand;  
the earth swallowed them. (v. 12)

Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. (v. 21)”137

Poetry is not limited to the book of Psalms.

Poetic form is all over the Bible, so we don’t pay attention to interpreting poetry only when we are reading Psalms.

“The amount of poetry found in the Bible and in the teachings of Jesus is impressive. In the Gospels alone we find over 220 examples of various forms of poetic parallelism in the teachings of Jesus. Clearly, the world of the biblical writers was one in which people sought to express their thoughts using emotive and picturesque language. This is clearly seen in the poetry of the Bible,
for the metaphorical nature of this material is impressive, and we cannot read it without feeling the heartbeat of the authors.”

POETRY: SPECIFIC HELPS FOR THE BOOK OF PSALMS

“The largest poetic section of the Bible is the book of Psalms. Psalms, the largest book of the Bible consists of 150 individual psalms arranged in five “books” (1-41; 42-72; 73-79; 90-106; 107-150).…Psalms 1 and 2 serve as introductions to the entire book of Psalms, and Psalm 150 serves as a doxology for the book of Psalms as a whole. The name Psalms comes from the Greek word psalmos that translates the Hebrew mizmor, which appears in the titles of fifty-seven psalms, and refers to a song accompanied by music. The psalms and their present arrangement were compiled over an extended period of time.”

Identify the psalm category.

The Psalms can be categorized into groups based on their characteristics. A psalm can have overlap into more than one category. Here are seven of the most common psalm types:

Lament Psalms: This is the largest subgenre of psalm, making up about one-third of Psalms. A lament psalm features an expression of grief or distress from an individual or a group of people. As with all the psalms, a lament psalm is directed to God as a prayer-song. John Hayes lists seven parts commonly found in lament psalms: (1) address to God; (2) description of distress; (3) plea for deliverance; (4) statement of confidence in God; (5) confession of sin; (6) vow to do certain things when God answers; and (7) praise or restatement of request. It is noteworthy that even when the psalmist is unrestrained in his complaint (Ps. 3:1-2), in nearly the same breath, he expresses confidence in God (Ps. 3:3-8). Lament and faith are complementary expressions.

Praise Psalms: “These psalms are characterized by the prominent motif of praising God (Pss. 106; 111-113; 146; 150).”

Thanksgiving Psalms: “As indicated by the title, these songs thank God for answering the request of the worshipper(s).” (e.g., Psalms 18; 65)

Celebration Psalms: “These psalms ‘celebrate God’s covenant relationship with the king and the nation.’ Two subsets of the group are (a) royal psalms and (b) songs of Zion.” (e.g., Psalms 2; 24; 93; 46; 76)

Wisdom Psalms: “A hybrid of song and wisdom literature, wisdom psalms deal with topics such as the divine source and nature of true wisdom…wisdom psalms recast the themes of wisdom literature as songs of worship.” (e.g., Psalm 73)

Penitential Psalms: “Penitential Psalms, whether individual or corporate, give voice to the psalmist’s repentance.” (e.g., Psalm 51)

Impeccatory Psalms: “In such psalms, the speaker calls on God to enact his divine justice against the psalmist’s enemies…Christians sometimes have trouble squaring such psalms with the biblical injunctions to forgive one’s enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 12:14, 17). Nevertheless, in both the Old and New Testaments, the authors of Scripture point to God’s ultimate intervention against evildoers as a source of comfort (Ps. 73:17-20; Rom. 12:19; 2 Thess. 1:6-8)…In the
reading of imprecatory psalms, it is also important to remember that the palmist often speaks as king or representative of Israel, God’s people. A call for vindication is a call for God to show himself faithful to his people.”147 (e.g., Psalms 35; 60; 70; 109; 137; 140). [See Section 6. Principles for Handling Literary Devices in Scripture > Idioms > Imprecatory Psalms for more on Psalm 137.]

Make use of the contextual information in the inspired psalm headings.

“Many psalms have superscriptions, which give the author and sometimes the occasion of the psalm in question. For example, the superscription in Psalm 51 reads, ‘For the director of music. A Psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.’”148 Unlike the chapter and verse divisions of the Bible that are not present in the original manuscripts, these superscriptions are in the earliest manuscripts and the New Testament treatment of Psalms validates the truth of the information in the superscriptions.149

Identify the structure of the psalm: treat each of the stanzas (groupings) as separate applications or propositions.

“As Hebrew poetry, psalms are divided into various lines and strophes (or stanzas). Translators’ decisions about how to format their English translations are based on syllabification, stress, and other markers in the original Hebrew text…Thankfully, we have many modern English translations that convey this information well. A quick glance at any page of the Psalms reveals a lot of white space around the typed lines. this space is a result of parallel lines being grouped together and strophes being separated.”150

remember that psalms are poetic—recognize poetic literary devices of the psalm.

“Psalms are poems to be sung. As such, they are filled with poetic language—metaphor, simile, alliteration, hyperbole, parallelism, etc…[Hebrew] authors employ poetry as an aesthetic expression, or a memory device, or to convey intense emotion.”151 Psalms are poetic expressions of emotion and not precise (or literal!) theological statements.

WISDOM LITERATURE

Identify the overall message of the book.

Wisdom literature is not meant to isolated verse by verse.

To understand Job (dialogue), Ecclesiastes (monologue), and Song of Songs (lyric poetry), we should consider each as a whole, search for the overarching point, and seek to understand structure and the interpretive cues that structure provides.152

For example, Ecclesiastes 3:2 (“a time to be born and a time to die”) is “is about how the ebb and flow of human life and activity are set by God and thus outside of human control—since all die when their ‘time’ comes, no matter how bad or good their life is. Unfortunately, some Christians have thought this very human observation was intended to teach that God protectively picks out our life span for us; but in context, this is definitely not what this author was saying.”153

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 provides the lens through which the book should be interpreted: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole
duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Because proverbs are easy to isolate, it is especially tempting for some to view them as independent statements. Stay disciplined to interpret proverbs in the context of the entire body of Proverbs.

**Interpret Proverbs as generalizations and not as absolute laws or promises from God.**

“Proverbs are not laws. They are not even promises. They are generalizations…formulated not simply by observing life, but by observing life in the light of divine revelation…A biblical proverb is a short, pithy saying that expresses a wise, general truth concerning life from a divine perspective. Because of the general nature of proverbs, exceptions are possible. The existence of such exceptions in no way refutes the truth of the proverb, for what a proverb says is true in the majority of instances. Thus, the fact that godly parents who train their children in the way they should go at times have ungodly children does not refute [Proverbs 22:6]. In the majority of instances the result is indeed children who desire to follow in the faith of their parents.”

**Proverbs are constructed to be memorable; not to be theologically precise.**

Seek to identify the memorable image that a proverb creates—that is the point of the proverb. To treat proverbs as airtight theological statements will surely result in misunderstanding.

“No proverb is a complete statement of truth. No proverb is so perfectly worded that it can stand up to the unreasonable demand that it apply in every situation at every time. The more briefly and parabolically a principle is stated, the more common sense and good judgement are needed to interpret it properly—but the more effective and memorable it is [consider the popular proverb from outside of the Bible: “look before you leap”].” Proverbs try to impart knowledge that can be retained rather than philosophy that can impress a critic. Thus the proverbs are designed either to stimulate an image in your mind (the mind remembers images better than it remembers abstract data) or to include sounds pleasing to the ear (i.e., repetitions, assonance, acrostics, et al.) As an example of the use of imagery, consider the following proverb (15:19):

> The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway.

Here we read language designed to point not to the types of plans found in certain lazy people’s favorite routes, but to point beyond itself to the principle that diligence is better than sloth.”

**While most proverbs are generalizations that assume exceptions, proverbs that deal with the nature of god are always true.**

“Insofar as a proverb describes a quality of God (holiness, knowledge, etc.), that proverb is true without exception…” Though a proverb may use figurative language to describe Him, how it describes Him never changes because He never changes. For example, there are never any exceptions to the list in Proverbs 6:16-19:
There are six things that the LORD hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that make haste to run to evil,
a false witness who breathes out lies,
and one who sows discord among brothers.

Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture require “translation” or application to present day.

Our culture is not identical to that of the Bible. That brings about situations where we will have to translate the objects or ideas of a proverb to apply to a modern day equivalent. Take Proverbs 25:24 as an example:

It is better to live in a corner of the housetop
than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.

“Most of us…do not have flat roof houses of Bible times, where lodging on a roof was not only possible but common (cf. Joshua 2:6). . . [the meaning of this proverb] is not so difficult to discern if one makes the necessary ’translation’ from that culture to ours. We could even paraphrase: ’It is better to live in a garage than a spacious house with a woman you never should have married.’ Here one needs to remember that the advice of most proverbs is given as if to young persons starting out in life. The proverb is not intended to suggest literally what to do if you, a male, find your wife to be quarrelsome. It is intended to advise that people be careful in the selection of a mate.”157

PROPHECY

Here are some basic principles for interpreting prophecy:

Know the specific context.

Of course we should know the larger context (Israel’s history, history of prophecy in Israel, timeline of prophets) and just like any Bible passage we must pay attention to context (date, audience, situation). However, specifically for prophecy, since we are so far removed, we need to rely on good commentaries and handbooks. Example: “a good commentary will identify for you the fact that [Hosea 5:8-12 is an] is in the form of a war oracle, one of a type (form) that announces the judgement of God as carried out through battle. The usual elements of such a form are these: the call to alarm, the description of the attack, and the prediction of defeat.”158

Isolate individual oracles (individual sayings).

“Most of the time, what prophets said is represented in their books in run-on fashion,” without chronology.159 Isolating individual oracles is a difficult task that has reward. A good commentary or handbook is helpful in identifying individual oracles.

Some other helpful observations:
Some prophetic books make it easier to isolate individual oracles. Haggai and the early chapters of Zechariah have dated prophecies. Parts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are dated or placed in a setting.

If dates or explanatory headings are not in the prophetic text, pay attention to the changes in the subject of the prophecy.

Chapter divisions are not a helpful guide for oracle divisions. "All three of the oracles in [Amos] 5 were given late in the reign of King Jeroboam of Israel (793-753 BC) to a people whose relative prosperity caused them to consider it unthinkable that their nation would be so devastated as to cease to exist in a generation. A good commentary or Bible handbook will explain such things to you as you read. Do not handicap yourself needlessly by trying to read these great moments without some helps, since they will greatly multiply your understanding as you read."\textsuperscript{160}

Literal interpretations of prophecy are valid and often intended, but do not interpret prophecy literally when it is not meant to be taken literally.

“The question of whether a word or phrase should be interpreted literally has no easy answer although G. B. Caird suggests six indicators to help identify when an author does not intend his words to be taken literally: (1) the author makes an explicit statement to that end, (2) a literal interpretation is impossible, (3) a low degree of correspondence exists, (4) the imagery is highly developed, (5) the author piles up multiple images, and (6) the author uses original imagery."\textsuperscript{161}

Identify poetry in prophecy.

“All the prophetic books contain a substantial amount of poetry, and several are exclusively poetic. Before you read these books, therefore, you may find it helpful to read in introduction to Hebrew poetry”\textsuperscript{162} from any Bible dictionary (e.g. the article “Poetry” in the New Bible Dictionary (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996)

There are three features of repetition to learn:

*Synonymous parallelism*: the second (or subsequent) line reinforces the first (e.g. Isa 42:22)

*Antithetical parallelism*: the second (or subsequent) line reinforces the first through contrast (e.g. Hosea 7:14)

*Synthetic parallelism*: the second (or subsequent) line adds further information to the first (e.g. Obadiah 21)\textsuperscript{163}


Do not assume that all prophecy foretells (when foretelling) of the distant future. Read through Ezekiel 25-39 and “notice that the various oracles contained in that large block of material concern mostly the fate of nations other than Israel, though Israel is also included. It is important to see that God refers to the fate of these nations, and that the fulfillment came within decades of the time the prophecies were delivered, that is, mostly during the sixth century BC.”\textsuperscript{164}

Distinguish between conditional and unconditional prophecy.
The fulfillment of some promises depends on human response (e.g. Jeremiah 18:7-10).\textsuperscript{165} A condition does not have to be explicitly stated (employing if, for example); consider Jonah: “In this case God had apparently commanded Jonah to preach the message that Nineveh would be overthrown in forty days. There seemed to be no stated conditions by which that prediction could be averted; however, when the people of Nineveh repented, God also deferred his predicted judgment (Jonah 3:10).”\textsuperscript{166}

Symbols do not always mean the same thing each time they are used. Simply because a certain number is found in multiple passages does not automatically mean that it is meant symbolically. It is true that seven, twelve, and forty are often used symbolically. However that should not be our automatic assumption or conclusion. Names, colors, metals, and jewels often have symbolic meaning.\textsuperscript{167}

Assume a single intended fulfillment of prophecy.

Instead of concluding that a single prophecy can refer to multiple fulfillments (at multiple events) consider helpful concepts such as: prophetic telescoping, progressive prediction, and developmental fulfillment.\textsuperscript{168}

Prophetic telescoping: Prophecy occasionally telescopes three time periods of fulfillment: fulfilled in the nation of Israel (e.g. Jeremiah's prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem which occurred in 586 BC), fulfilled in the messianic period, and eschatology fulfilled in the end times (e.g. Christ’s return and reign).\textsuperscript{169} “Prophetic telescoping is best described with a comparison to the perception of a mountain range. When one views a mountain range from a distance, the peaks appear to be quite near to one another. However, on closer examination it becomes evident that wide valleys and many miles separate the individual peaks. When the prophets looked toward the future, they also saw things that appeared to them to be side by side, yet as the time of fulfillment approaches, significant gaps become visible…The telescoping that sometimes occurred when prophets blended the first and second advents of Christ is an example of this phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{170}

“Progressive prediction refers to the fact that although each passage has a single intended fulfillment, often a series of passages exhibit a pattern of chronological progress in the prophetic enactment…Sometimes these passages are presented as cycles within the same book…Two well known examples of progressive prediction that occur in cycles are the books of Zechariah and Revelation.”\textsuperscript{171}

Developmental fulfillment refers to a generalized, comprehensive prophecy that builds in clarity and specificity over time. “An example is the Genesis 3:15 prophecy, which speaks in general fulfillment of this prophecy beginning with Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension (John 12:31-32; Rev. 12:5, 10), continue in the church (Rom. 16:20), and end with Satan’s imprisonment in the abyss (Rev. 20:3) and the lake of fire.”\textsuperscript{172}

\textbf{APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE}

“The English word \textit{apocalyptic} comes from the Greek word \textit{apokaluptō}, meaning ‘to reveal’ or ‘to unveil.’ Apocalyptic literature is a genre of Jewish literature characterized by its use of symbolic imagery to reveal God’s mysterious, providential workings behind the scenes and his coming plans for the future.”\textsuperscript{173}
“Within the Bible there are isolated elements that might be classified as apocalyptic (e.g., Isa. 24-27; Ezek. 38-39; Zech. 1-6; Mark 13), but the only canonical books with enough relevant content to be considered part of the apocalyptic genre are Daniel and Revelation.”

Interpreting Daniel

“First transcribed in the sixth century BC, Daniel’s visions in chapters 7-12 describe great shifts of international power in the coming centuries, with special emphasis on the battles in the second century BC. Also, Daniel’s visions anticipate the climax of history and the resurrection of the dead (Dan 12:1-4). A good study Bible or commentary will assist the modern reader in understanding the sometimes obscure imagery and historical allusions.” For help, talk to your pastor or discipleship director.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

“Recognizing the book of Revelation as apocalyptic literature leads us to begin with a major interpretive caveat: we must be careful to interpret the symbolic images according to the author’s intent. Because of the difficulty in understanding some parts of Revelation, we should not adopt any interpretation that is out of harmony with the rest of the Bible. We must have great humility… There are several distinct interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation.” If you have any questions, talk to your pastor or discipleship director about those approaches (preterist, historicist, idealist, and futurist) or the variety of eschatological (end times) theories that deal specifically with the topic of the timing of Christ’s second coming in relation to the millennium (premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism).

Robert Plummer offers some helpful guidelines for interpreting Revelation:

1. Old Testament apocalyptic passages provide the most helpful background to understanding Revelation (e.g., Isa. 24-27, Ezek., 38-39; Zech. 1-6; Dan. 7-12). Of 405 verses in Revelation, 278 contain allusions to the Old Testament.

2. The book of Revelation should be read from the perspective of the original audience. How would the early Christians of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation 1-3 have understood the later portions of the book?

3. In accord with the standards of apocalyptic literature, the symbolic images in Revelation must not be taken literally. This does not mean, however, that they are not important, meaningful, or authoritative descriptions of reality. Yet, the symbols point to reality in a figurative way. For example, the walls of unimaginable thickness in Revelation 21:17 point to the splendor of the heavenly city and the complete safety of all who dwell there.

4. Revelation is not intended to be read chronologically. This is made clear by the fact that Christ’s birth is not reported until Revelation 12, and various sequences and visions repeat nearly identical judgment language (e.g., 6:12-17; 11:19; 16:18-21). The certainty and truth of God’s coming judgment is emphasized in the prophetic recapitulations.”
SECTION 5 ENDNOTES


81 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 94.


83 Ibid.

84 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 108.


86 Ibid., 88.

87 Ibid., 92.

88 Ibid., 93-94.

89 Ibid., 94.

90 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 108.

91 The observation is original to Stein, 82

92 Different passage, but the idea is borrowed from Stein, 81.

93 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 116.


95 Ibid., 189.

96 Ibid., 190

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., 190-191.


101 Ibid., 287.

102 Ibid.

103 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 62.

104 Ibid., 67.

105 Ibid., 78.


107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., 103
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid., 104.
113 Ibid., 332.
114 Ibid., 326-328.
115 Ibid., 332-333.
117 Ibid., 158-159.
118 Ibid., 159.
119 Ibid., 162.
120 Robert L. Plummer, 40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 274.
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123 Robert L. Plummer, 40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 273.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 243-244.
129 Ibid., 244.
130 Ibid.
131 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All its Worth, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 204-205.
132 Robert L. Plummer, 40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 244-245.
133 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All its Worth, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 204-205.

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Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 251-257.

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Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 247.


Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 248.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 198.

Ibid., 199.

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162 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 204-205.

163 Ibid.

164 Ibid., 207.


166 Ibid.

167 Ibid., 172-173.

168 Ibid., 175.

169 Ibid., 169.

170 Ibid., 169-170.

171 Ibid., 175.

172 Ibid.


174 Ibid., 214.

175 Ibid.


6. Principles for Handling Literary Devices in Scripture

SIMILE

“A simile is simply an expressed comparison: it typically uses the words like or as (e.g., ‘the kingdom of heaven is like…’). The emphasis is on some point of similarity between two ideas, groups, actions and so on. The subject and the thing with which is is being compared are kept separate (i.e., not ‘the kingdom of heaven is…’ but rather ‘the kingdom of heaven is like…’).”178

METAPHOR

“A metaphor is an unexpressed comparison: it does not use the words like or as. The subject and the thing with which it is being compared are intertwined rather than kept separate. Jesus used metaphors when he said, ‘I am the bread of life’ (John 6:35, 48) and ‘You are the light of the world’ (Matt. 5:14). Although the subject and its comparison are identified as one, the author does not intend his words to be taken literally. In both similes and metaphors, because of their compact nature, the author usually intends to stress a single point (e.g., that Christ is the source of sustenance for our spiritual lives or that Christians are to examples of godly living in an ungodly world).”179

ALLEGORY

“Just as a parable is an extended simile, so an allegory is an extended metaphor…Unlike parables, an allegory generally includes several points of comparison, not necessarily centered around one focal point. For example, in the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32) the central purpose is to show the spread of the gospel from a tiny band of Christians (the mustard seed) to a worldwide body of believers (the full-grown tree). the relationship between the seed, the tree, the field, the nest, and the birds is casual, and these details acquire significance only in relationship to the growing tree. However, in the allegory of the Christian’s armor (Eph. 6), there are several points of comparison. Each part of the Christian's armor is significant, and each is necessary for the Christian to be ‘fully armed.’”180

The Difference Between Allegory (A Legitimate Literary Device) and Allegorizing (An Illegitimate Interpretive Approach)

Allegorizing is taking a text (regardless of whether it is actually an allegory) and making an allegory out of it: establishing “several points of connection, not necessarily centered around a focal point,”181 establishing a corresponding “signified” for a number of “signifiers.”182 Engaging in allegorization likely reveals an assumption that parables are “simple stories for those on the outside to whom the ‘real meanings,’ the ‘mysteries,’ were hidden…”183 This method of interpreting Scripture is now repudiated because (a) “one can be absolutely certain this is not what Jesus intended,”184 (b) any number of interpretations can be generated in this manner, and (c) the allegorizations are prone to be silly and useless.185

In the literary device of allegory (where interpreting through an allegorical lens is legitimate), there is some cue (from Jesus in the Parables, for example, or from the author/narrator) as to how we should establish the signifiers and their corresponding signifieds.
When allegorizing (an illegitimate method), you are taking a text and forcing corresponding signified connections to a text that does not define them or provide a basis for establishing them.

When appropriately handling the literary device of allegory, you interpret the text as it was intended; when allegorizing you interpret the text in a way that it is not intended.

**Principles for Identifying and Interpreting Allegories**

1. Use the historical-cultural, contextual, lexical-syntactical, and theological analyses as you would with any other passage of Scripture. Allegories are not exempt from a sound interpretive approach.

2. Identify the multiple points of comparison in the text by relying on the author and the context for points identified and defined. If the text does not explicitly define or make the comparison clear (if you are required to supply what the various points represent), then this is not likely to be a legitimate allegory.

Virkler provides an example of a legitimate allegory in the Bible:

“The allegory of Christ as the true vine (John 15:1-17) is analyzed here to show the relationship of the several points of comparison to the meaning of the passage. There are three foci in this allegory. The first is the vine as a symbol of Christ. The entire passage emphasizes the importance of the vine: the pronouns I, me, and my, occur thirty-eight times in the seventeen verses and the word vine three times, underscoring the centrality of Christ in the spiritual fruit bearing of the Christian. The focus is summarized in verse 4... The second focus is the Father, symbolized as the vinedresser. In this illustration the Father is actively concerned with fruit bearing. He prunes some branches that they may be more fruitful and eliminates those that produce no fruit. The third focus is found in the branches, the disciples themselves. ‘Abiding’ speaks metaphorically of relationship, and the present tense speaks of a continuing relationship as a necessity for fruit bearing. Obeying God’s commands is a necessary part of relationship, and loving fellow believers is an integral part of that obedience. The allegory portrays the need for a continuous, living relationship with the Lord Jesus, coupled with obedience to his Word, as the essence of discipleship and fruit bearing.”

**IDIOM AND FIGURES OF SPEECH**

“One of the most difficult forms of literature to interpret is the idiom. The reason is that with idioms, what the author meant by these words often bears little or no relationship to the literal meaning of the individual words. An idiom is a set phrase whose meaning does not derive from the normal meanings of the individual elements making up the phrase. In fact, frequently its meaning is different from and even contrary to the normal use of the words. We can only know if a combination of words is an idiom by finding this same combination of words in different places and noting from the context that its meaning is different from the normal meaning conveyed by these words. We will then begin to recognize that these words belong together as a set phrase peculiar to itself and must be interpreted as such.”

Robert Stein offers a couple of examples of known Biblical idioms:

**Love-Hate Imagery**
“One of the most troubling of the biblical idioms is found in Malachi 1:2-3:

‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have you loved us?’ ‘Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the LORD. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.’

As he refers to God’s election, Paul quotes this passage in Romans 9:13 in support and writes, ‘As it is written, *Jacob I love, but Esau I hated.*’ How can a God who loves the world (John 3:16) and desires all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9) hate Esau? If we ignore the idiomatic nature of these words and interpret them literaltically as meaning God ‘hated’ Esau—that is, he intensely detested and willed harm on the people of Edom—[we will have a problem]. (For positive comments about God’s attitude toward Esau, see Deut. 23:7-8; Amos 9:12; cf. also more-general statements like Mal. 1:11 and Acts 14:16-17). Understood as an idiom, this saying makes better sense. God chose (he ‘loved’) Jacob/Israel (cf. Deut. 4:37; 7:6-8; 10:14-15; etc.), but he did not choose (he ‘hated’) Esau/Edom…God never forgot his covenant with his chosen people and led them back to the promised land. Edom however, experienced a judgment that led eventually to losing its geographical and ethnic identity in the fourth century BC, becoming absorbed into the Idumean empire, and ceasing to exist as a nation (Lam. 4:22; Jer. 49:7-22).”

Esau/Edom was “hated” or not preferred/chosen to be the the people through which the covenant with Abraham would continue.

“The key passage [to see the idiomatic love-hate language of Malachi 1 and Luke 14:26]…is Genesis 29:30-31: ‘So, Jacob…loved Rachel more than Leah…When the Lord saw that Leah was hated…’ Note here that in the ESV, which translates the Hebrew literally, the opposite of ‘loving more’ is ‘hating.’ To love someone (Rachel) more than another (Leah) is in the Hebrew idiom to love one (Rachel) and hate the other (Leah)…Yet surely, the writer of Genesis knew that Jacob did not hate Leah. We know this because he describes their relationship as producing six sons and a daughter. Something other than hatred must have been involved in their relationship. Jacob did love Leah, but he loved Rachel more. Thus, according to the Hebrew idiom, Jacob loved Rachel and hated Leah.”

Imprecatory Psalms

“The repulsive nature of the imagery is evident to all. How could the psalmist wish this upon the children of Babylon, even if they were his enemies? Yet the idiomatic nature of the saying means something different than a mere for bloodthirsty vengeance. The imagery used here was tragically enough all to common in ancient warfare and had become an idiom to describe the judgement of a nation (2 Kings 8:12; Isa. 13:16; 18; Hosea 10:14; 13:16; Nah. 3:10; cf. Luke 19:44). What the psalmist is describing, however is not a desire for vicious revenge upon the children of Babylon but rather a desire for divine justice to take place. He wishes for God’s righteous judgment to fall upon the evil kingdom of Babylon. In his desire for divine justice he uses the imagery of his day to describe the overthrow of nations.”

Some other examples of idioms in the Bible: “our hearts melted” (Josh. 2:11, 5:1; 7:5) for the loss of courage; the stars, sun, and moon not giving light (Isa. 13:9-11; 24:23; Ezek. 32:7-8) for divine intervention in history, whether for blessing or judgment; “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Lam. 2:16; Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; Luke 13:28) for experiencing sever sorrow and loss; “not a man was left” (Josh. 8:17; Judge 4:16; 2 Kings 10:21; cf. Num. 21:35; Deut. 3:3) for winning a
great military victory; “make the ears tingle” (1 Sam. 3:11; 2 Kings 21:12; Jer. 19:3) for bringing shocking news to those who hear; “girding up one’s loins” (Exod. 12:11; 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 4:29; 9:1; Job 38:3; 40:7; Jer. 1:17; Nah. 2:1; Luke 12:35; Eph. 6:14) for preparing oneself for action.¹⁹²

**HYPERBOLE**

“As has been noted on several occasions, the Bible contains a great deal of exaggerated language. Poetry, proverbs, and prophecy by their very nature use exaggerated language [see Section 5. Principles for Handling Genre in Scripture]…Some Christians find it difficult to believe that there is exaggeration in the Bible. They associate exaggeration with inexactness and imprecision. Worse yet, in the minds of some, exaggeration is a synonym for falsehood. Hyperbole and overstatement, however, are perfectly acceptable literary forms when shared by writer and reader. When used in this way, they are powerful literary forms that enable the writer to convey not just factual information but feelings and emotions as well. In fact, it is very difficult to communicate certain things apart from exaggeration. How do two people in love express their love to one another? Certainly not in the precise language of science. On the contrary, they may use poetry that is filled with metaphor and hyperbole. The one form they will certainly not use is the literal precision of a chemistry lab report…When a man tells his beloved that his is sick and would die if he never saw her again, this conveys the truth that he deeply loves and misses her, even if he feels perfectly well at the time. On the other hand, for an employee who feels perfectly well to phone in and state that he or she cannot come to work because of being seriously ill is to lie, and a bank teller who exaggerates bank accounts is likely to be charged with fraud. The acceptability of this literary form of communication depends on its being shared. When shared, exaggerated language is a powerful and effective form of communication. When not shared, it can be a bad example of miscommunication, incompetence, or deceit.”¹⁹³ (Examples of hyperbole: Matt. 23:24; Ps. 22:14; Mark 10:24b-25).

If the statement in a passage is literally impossible, it is an indication of hyperbole.

If the statement in a passage conflicts with what the speaker teaches elsewhere, it is an indication of hyperbole.


If the statement in a passage conflicts with the actions of a speaker elsewhere, it is an indication of hyperbole.

See Matthew 5:33–37 and Matthew 10:34.¹⁹⁵

If the statement in a passage conflicts with the teachings of the Old Testament, New Testament, or is interpreted by another biblical writer in a nonliteral way, it is an indication of hyperbole.


If the statement in a passage would not achieve the desired goal, uses a form prone to exaggeration, or uses universal language, it is an indication of hyperbole.

**TYPE**
“David Baker provides a solid general definition identifying a type as ‘a biblical event, person, or institution which serves as an example or pattern for other events, persons or institutions.’ A typological relationship exists between an initial event that through divine inspiration foreshadows a corresponding event occurring at a later time in salvation history.”

Virkler offers a helpful approach to types in the Bible:

**Characteristics**

1. There must be a notable resemblance or analogy between the type and its antitype.
2. There must be evidence that the type was appointed by God to represent the thing typified.
3. A type must prefigure something in the future.
4. Classes of the type and its antitype: persons, events, institutions, offices, and actions.

**Interpretation**

1. Determine the significance within the time and culture of both the type and its antitype.
2. Search the text for the point(s) of correspondence between the type and its antitype as they relate to salvation history.
3. Note the important points of difference between the type and its antitype.

**SECTION 6 ENDNOTES**


179 Ibid., 148.

180 Ibid., 160.

181 Ibid.


183 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 154.

184 Ibid., 155.


187 Ibid., 160-161.


189 Ibid., 153-154
190 Ibid., 154.
191 Ibid., 156.
192 Ibid., 156–157.
193 Ibid., 174–175.
194 Ibid., 178.
196 Ibid., 180.


7. Application (The Goal)

We do not invest in following sound interpretive methods just to “be right” or possess the most convincing argument about the Bible. Instead, we engage in careful study in order to faithfully apply the message to our own lives. Our goal in interpreting the Bible is to be equipped for application of the Bible’s message. While it is true that the primary purpose of this guide has been to equip you with the tools to use sound Bible interpretation principles, it would be a shame to lay out sound interpretive methods and not provide any assistance to get started down the path of application. It could even be argued that you have not properly interpreted the Bible if you do not apply it. Nevertheless, the outline that follows is an undisguised summary from Daniel Doriani’s *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company):

**THREE APPROACHES TO APPLICATION**

**View #1: Let It Flow (Invalid Approach)**

“View 1 regards application as easy; it flows from our personal spirituality. On this view, application depends on the private spiritual life of teachers and preachers, on one side, and of the their Christian listeners on the other…This view contains both commendable and questionable ideas…True, we should leave a place for God’s voice in a biblical interpretation; surely teachers need not take eight steps before they hear the Master. Too much method can squeeze God out of the study…[However,] we dare not neglect the role of the corrupted human heart in the process of application…In short, free meditation has few safeguards against the infections of a deceitful heart.”

**View #2: Let God Do It (Invalid Approach)**

“According to view 2, because application is problematic, it is best left to God…Some leave application to God for another reason. They are afraid that if we take it upon ourselves to decide how to behave, we will enter a vortex that will suck us down into the abyss of legalism…the ‘leave it to God’ view rightly points to the inherent capacity of the Word to touch our lives and to remain perpetually contemporary, far beyond our efforts to make it relevant. This view also knows a preacher’s limits…Still, we must work at application…We must do something to stop the common perception that the Bible is irrelevant in modern times. Even Christians fail to see what the Bible has to do with their financial struggles and emotional decay at home, or with the temptations and the pressures to compromise at work.”

**View #3: Let’s Work at It**

“View 3 recognizes that sound application is difficult, and therefore it deserves our best attention. To excel in application, one needs to training in exegesis (interpreting the intended meaning of the Bible)...Like most skills, these are largely amoral and open to all. Trained agnostics are intellectually capable of comprehending the Bible—until they come to application.”

“Application is both a necessary and a difficult phase of teaching, one that cannot simply be ‘left to God.”
APPLICATION IS DIFFICULT; A METHOD IS REQUIRED TO DO IT WELL

1. The Bible is neither a casebook for personal decisions nor a detailed guide to daily conduct. It does not tell us, directly, whom to marry or what our life calling should be.

2. The Bible does not explicitly address some contemporary issues. For example, how should I use social media?

3. The Bible is not a text of moral philosophy. It does not provide a list of first principles and postulates. It does not outline a theoretical system for moral analysis or present a multistep plan for making moral judgements.

4. We wonder how much the Bible is meant for everyone and how much it applies only to believers. In the Old Testament, how much is strictly for Israel? How should we take commands to individuals such as Abraham or Peter?

5. Reading the Bible is like entering a conversation with someone from another culture—someone with a unique history, language, and set of customs. Human nature is constant enough that communication is possible, yet the strain to communicate proves that there is a distance between cultures.

6. The Bible is a story of salvation, not a handbook of moral living.204

FIND APPLICATIONS IN ALL KINDS OF SCRIPTURE (NOT JUST COMMANDMENTS)

“To be precise, we can identify seven partially overlapping places to find application in Scripture. This broad list shows that while the Bible is not a set of instructions, the entire Bible is instructive.

Laws or Rules

“…require obedience to specific commands. Some of these transfer to our culture easily, and some do not. (e.g., Ex. 21:29 does not transfer easily)205

Ideals or Principles

“…guide a wide range of behavior without specifying particular deeds. (e.g., Matt. 5:44)”206

Actions in Narratives

“…depict positive examples to be imitated and negative ones to avoid…Every narrative also teaches us something about God and his redemptive plan, and thus requires us to believe something about him. (See Section 5. Principles for Handling Genre in Scripture > Narrative.)”207

Biblical Symbols and Images

“…create new ways of seeing things, new opportunities to see life God’s way, and act accordingly. Most symbols are concrete objects that represent and abstract concept. For example, the cross, a symbol of Christ’s work and our fellowship in his sufferings, calls us to fidelity, whatever the price.”208
Doctrines

“…that is, cardinal beliefs of the faith, require us to act according to our convictions. (e.g., if we believe that Jesus is the only savior, we must evangelize).”

Divine Promises

“In divine promises, God commits himself to do something in the future. Promises tell us which deeds God approves and rewards, and which he disapproves and disciplines.”

Songs and Prayers

“…show us how to worship and pray. The Psalms are divinely sanctioned examples of praise and thanksgiving of the believer. The prayers of the righteous show us what we should desire.”

APPLYING ANCIENT TRUTHS IN OUR CULTURE

The Sidewalk: Sometimes the application of a text is basically the same today as it was thousands of years ago.

The Bridge: We bridge the gap between prophets, apostles, and Americans by applying established principles to new situations.

1. Determine the original meaning.
2. Find the principle. (See Section 3. How to Work Through the Six Steps of Bible Interpretation > Application > Principle-izing.)
3. Apply the principle to a similar situation today. (See Section 3. How to Work Through the Six Steps of Bible Interpretation > Application > Principle-izing.)
4. If possible, verify your conclusions by comparing them with other Scriptures.

SECTION 7 ENDNOTES

200 Ibid., 124-125.
201 Ibid., 125-127.
202 Ibid., 127.
203 Ibid., 130.
204 Ibid., 139-140.
205 Ibid., 141.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid., 141-142.
209 Ibid., 142.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
213 Ibid., 144.
214 Ibid., 144-146.
Appendix A. Checklist for the Six-Step Bible Interpretation Process

I. Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis
   A. Determine the general historical and cultural milieu of the writer and his audience.
      1. Determine the general historical circumstances.
      2. Be aware of cultural circumstances and norms that add meaning to given actions.
      3. Discern the spiritual condition of the audience.
   B. Determine the purpose(s) the author had in writing a book.
      1. Note explicit statements or repeated phrases.
      2. Observe paraenetic or hortatory sections.
      3. Observe issues that are omitted or emphasized.
   C. Understand how the passage fits into its immediate context.
      1. Identify the major blocks of material in the book and show how they fit into a coherent whole.
      2. Show how the passage under consideration fits into the flow of the author’s argument.
      3. Determine the perspective that the author intends to communicate: noumenological (the way things really are) or phenomenological (the ways things appear).
      4. Distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive truth.
      5. Distinguish between incidental details and the teaching focus of a passage.
      6. Identify the person or category of persons for whom the particular passage is intended.

II. Lexical-Syntactical Analysis
   A. Identify the general literary form.
   B. Trace the development of the author’s theme and show how the passage under consideration fits into the context.
   C. Identify the natural divisions (paragraphs and sentences) of the text.
   D. Identify the connecting words within the paragraphs and sentences and how they aid in understanding the author's progression of thought.
   E. Determine what the individual words mean.
      1. Identify the multiple meanings a word possessed in its time and culture.
      2. Determine the single meaning intended by the author in a given context.
   F. Analyze the syntax to show how it contributes to the understanding of a passage.
   G. Put the results of your analysis into nontechnical, easily understood words that clearly convey the author’s intended meaning to the English reader.

III. Theological Analysis
   A. Determine your own view of the nature of God’s relationship to humankind.
   B. Identify the implications of this view for the passage you are studying.
   C. Assess the extent of theological knowledge available to the people of that time (the “analogy of Scripture”).
   D. Determine the meaning the passage possessed for its original recipients in light of their knowledge.
   E. Identify additional knowledge about this topic that is available to us now because of later revelation (the “analogy of faith”).

IV. Literary Analysis
A. Look for explicit references that indicate the author's intent regarding the method he was using.
B. If the text does not explicitly identify the literary form of the passage, study the characteristics of the passage deductively to ascertain its form.
C. Apply the principles of literary devices carefully but not rigidly.
   1. Simile
      a. Characteristic: an expressed comparison.
      b. Interpretation: usually a single point of similarity or contrast.
   2. Metaphor
      b. Interpretation: usually a single point of similarity.
   3. Proverb
      a. Characteristic: comparison expressed or unexpressed.
      b. Interpretation: usually a single point of similarity or contrast.
   4. Parables
      a. Characteristics: an extended simile—comparisons are expressed and kept separate; the story and its meaning are consciously separated.
      b. Interpretation: determine the focal meaning of the story and show how the details fit naturally into that focal teaching.
   5. Allegories
      a. Characteristics: an extended metaphor—comparisons are unexpressed and intermingled; story and its meaning are carried along together.
      b. Interpretation: determine the multiple points of comparison intended by the author.
   6. Types
      a. Characteristics
         (1) There must be a notable resemblance or analogy between the type and its antitype.
         (2) There must be evidence that the type was appointed by God to represent the thing typified.
         (3) A type must prefigure something in the future.
         (4) Classes of the type and its antitype: persons, events, institutions, offices, and actions.
      b. Interpretation
         (1) Determine the significance within the time and culture of both the type and its antitype.
         (2) Search the text for the point(s) of correspondence between the type and its antitype as they relate to salvation history.
         (3) Note the important points of difference between the type and its antitype.
   7. Prophecy
      a. Characteristics
         (1) Be aware that the style is generally figurative and symbolic.
         (2) Watch for supernatural elements such as information conveyed by the announcement of angels, by visions, or by other supernatural means.
         (3) Note the emphasis on the unseen world that lies behind the action of the visible world.
(4) Follow the action to its usual conclusion by a sovereign intervention of God.

b. Interpretation

(1) Determine the specific historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the writing. Study intervening history to see whether the prophecy has been fulfilled.

(2) Study parallel passages or other cycles within the same prophecy for further information.

(3) Analyze whether this passage is part of a progressive prediction, is capable of developmental fulfillment, or includes prophetic telescoping.

V. Comparison with Others

A. Compare your analysis with that of other interpreters.

B. Modify, correct, or expand your interpretation as appropriate.

VI. Application

A. Principle-izing: Based on a historical-cultural, contextual, lexical-syntactical, and theological analysis of the narrative portion, ascertain by deductive study (1) the principle(s) that passage was intended to teach, or (2) the principles (descriptive truths) illustrated within the passage that remain relevant for the contemporary believer.

B. Transcultural transmission of biblical commands.

1. Discern as accurately as possible the principle behind the command.

2. Discern whether the principle is transcultural or culture-bound by examining the reason given for the principle.

3. If a principle is transcultural, determine whether the same behavioral application in our culture will express the principle as adequately and accurately as the biblical one.

4. If the behavioral expression of a principle should be changed, suggest a cultural equivalent that will express the God-given principle behind the original command.215

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Appendix B. Exercises

These exercises are included as a means of providing an opportunity to practice the interpretive principles outlined in this guide. These exercises are quoted directly from *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* by Henry A. Virkler and Karelynne Gerber Ayayo (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

**THE NAPHTUNKIAN’S DILEMMA (INTRODUCTION > REASON #1: I DON’T GET TO DETERMINE WHAT THE BIBLE MEANS; MEANING IS DETERMINED BY THE AUTHOR)**

Situation: You once wrote a letter to a close friend. En route to its destination, the postal service lost your message, and it remained lost for the next two thousand years, amid nuclear wars and other historical transitions. One day it was discovered and reclaimed. Three poets from the contemporary Naphtunkian society each translated your letter and unfortunately arrived at three different meanings. “What this means to me,” said Tunky I, “is...” “I disagree,” said Tunky II. “What this means to me is...” “You are both wrong,” claimed Tunky III. “My interpretation is the correct one.”

Resolution: As a dispassionate observer viewing the controversy from your celestial (we hope) perspective, what advice would you give the Tunkies to resolve their differences? We will assume that you are a fairly articulate writer.

a. Is it possible that your letter actually has more than one valid meaning? If your answer is “yes,” go to (b). If “no,” go to (c).

b. If your letter can have a variety of meanings, is there any limit on their number? If there is a limit, what criteria would you propose to differentiate between valid and invalid meanings?

c. If your letter has only one valid meaning, what criteria would you use to discern whether Tunky I, II, or III has the best interpretation?

If you conclude that Tunky II’s interpretation is superior, how would you justify this to Tunkies I and III?

**ROMANS 8:28 (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > HISTORICAL-CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS)**

A Christian man lost his job due to company downsizing. He and his wife interpreted Romans 8:28 to mean that he lost his job so that God might give him a better-paying one. Consequently he turned down several lower- or equal-paying job opportunities and remained on unemployment for over two years before returning to work. Do you agree with his way of interpreting this verse? Why, or why not?

**ROMANS 14:2-3 (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > HISTORICAL-CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS)**

In a discussion about vegetarianism, a college student cites Romans 14:2-3, where she read, “One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.”
On the basis of these verses she has determined that God allows Christians to be either vegetarians or meat eaters but that those who are vegetarians have weaker faith. Would you agree with this use of Romans 14? Why, or why not?

ROMANS 9:13 (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > LEXICAL-SYNTACTICAL ANALYSIS)

Using Romans 9:13 as a text (“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”), a well-known Bible teacher analyzed these two brothers to show why God hated one and loved the other. Is this a valid use of this text? Why, or why not?

OLD TESTAMENT APPLICATION (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS)

You are part of a Bible study discussion group in which someone offers a point based on an Old Testament passage. Another person responds, “That’s from the Old Testament and therefore does not apply to us as Christians.” As discussion leader that night, how would you handle the situation?

PAUL VERSUS JAMES (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS)

Some writers have suggested that there is an inconsistency between the doctrine of Paul (as found in Gal. 2:15-16; Rom. 3:20, 28) and the doctrine of James (as found in James 1:22-25; 2:8, 14-17, 21-24). Do you believe these doctrines can be reconciled? If so, how would you reconcile them?

LUKE 15:11-32 (PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING GENRE IN SCRIPTURE > PARABLES // PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING LITERARY DEVICES IN SCRIPTURE > ALLEGORY)

Read Luke 15:11–32. One interpreter argues that the single basic point of this passage is that just as the older son will not accept and rejoice in the loving forgiveness that his father has extended to his brother, so the Pharisees and teachers of the law are unwilling to accept God’s loving forgiveness of tax collectors and sinners through the ministry of Jesus. Another interpreter believes that three truths are communicated in this text: (1) Sinners may confess their sins and turn to God in repentance, (2) God offers forgiveness for undeserving people, and (3) those who claim to be God’s people should not be resentful when God extends his grace to the undeserving. Do you agree with the first or the second interpreter? Can you classify this text as either a parable or an allegory? Explain your answer to each question.

JEREMIAH 10:3-4 (PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING GENRE IN SCRIPTURE > PROPHECY)

It has been stated that the Bible prophesies the use of Christmas trees in Jeremiah 10:3-4. Is this a valid interpretation of these verses? Why, or why not?

NAHUM 2:4 (PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING GENRE IN SCRIPTURE > PROPHECY)

According to some interpreters there is also a biblical prophecy of police cars, rushing to an emergency with their headlights beaming (Nah. 2:4). Discuss the validity of this interpretation.
1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-8 (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > APPLICATION)

Basing his view on 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, a pastor stated that it is wrong for a Christian to sue another believer. Is this hermeneutically valid? Why, or why not?

ACTS 4:32-35 (HOW TO WORK THROUGH THE SIX STEPS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION > APPLICATION)

Some believers use Acts 4:32-35 as the basis for Christian communal living today. What hermeneutical considerations are relevant to such an application of this text?
Bibliography


Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. How to Read the Bible for All its Worth. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006


