

Biblical Interpretation: Part 1

Finding the original meaning

Biblical hermeneutics is the science of knowing how to properly interpret the various types of literature found in the Bible. For example, a psalm should often be interpreted differently than a prophecy. A proverb should be understood and applied differently from a letter. This is the purpose of biblical hermeneutics - to help us to know how to interpret, understand, and apply the Bible. This is the same process used to interpret any piece of literature.

General Principles

1. Inductive Approach

- What does it say? (OBSERVATION)
- What does it mean? (INTERPRETATION)
- What does it mean to me? (APPLICATION)

Read Romans 12:1-2 What does this passage say? Make a list of all observations.
What does this passage mean? How should you apply it to your life?

2. Literary Context. Literary context involves always taking the surrounding context of a verse/passage into consideration when trying to determine the meaning.

Read Rom 3:23 How would you describe the context of this verse?

Read James 2:24 How would you describe the context of this verse?

3. Historical Context. The historical context refers to understanding the culture, background, and situation that prompted the text.

Read Acts 8:1-3 What was the cause of the persecution against the church?

4. Harmony of Scripture. The broader view of the entire Bible often provides the information and material needed for its own interpretation.

Read Matt 10:34-36 How does this passage fit into the complete story of the Bible?

5. Grammar. Grammar is the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given language.

- Tense:
 - Past (*1Cor 6:11; 1Cor 13:11*)
 - Present (*John 4:24; Matt 23:13*)
 - Future (*John 14:3; Isa 53:4; Ps 22*)
- Parts of speech:
 - Nouns: subjects, objects
 - Pronouns: substitutes for nouns
 - Verbs: indicators of action
 - Modifiers: adjectives, adverbs

6. Word Meaning. Refers to the meaning of words as they were used by the author and/or translators to convey information to the reader. The meaning of words often change over time and may be applied differently in different cultures.

- Words change meaning over time (*1Thes 4:15 KJV – prevent*)
- Different words may have the same or similar meaning
 - Synonyms for variety (*Gal 6:2, 5*)
 - Synonyms for emphasis (*1Tim 2:1*)
- The Bible sometimes has different meaning for words
How is the cultural concept of hope different from that of scripture?
- The same word may have different meanings (*Eze 44:5-6; house*)

7. The Bible Interprets itself

- The Bible provides the information and material needed for its own interpretation and confirmation of events and details

Read Heb 11:7; 1Pet 3:20; 2Pet 2:5; 3:6 What do these passages add to the story of Noah?

8. **Literal Interpretation.** Literal interpretation asserts that a biblical text, like other pieces of literature, is to be interpreted according to the “plain meaning” conveyed by its grammatical construction unless context or the wording itself indicates otherwise. Literal interpretation keeps us faithful to the intention of the authors and away from allegorizing and symbolizing Bible verses and passages that should be understood literally. Care must be taken, however, to identify figurative language and the use of exaggeration which can’t be taken literally.

- **Metaphor:** an implied comparison between two things that are basically unlike
- **Simile:** much like a metaphor, except that the comparison is actually expressed, using the words *like* or *as*
- **Idioms:** combination of words that have a figurative meaning owing to its common usage
- **Hyperbole:** a deliberate exaggeration for emphasis
- **Irony:** says the opposite of what it means
- **Sarcasm:** a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain
- **Symbol:** something that stands for or suggests something else
- **Personification:** endowing animals, objects, abstractions with human qualities

Identify the type of figure of speech used in the following passages:

Psalms 109:29 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Psalms 92:12 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Matt 10:14 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Deut 1:28 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Matt 5:29 _____ What is actually being said? _____

1Cor 4:10 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Matt 5:14-16 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Isa 44:23 _____ What is actually being said? _____

Ezekiel 1: Literal or figurative? _____ Why? _____

- Context, Description, Metaphors, Similar passage (Ezek 10)

Gen 41:1-7: Literal or figurative? _____ Why? _____

- Context, Description, Metaphors, Similar passage (Gen 41:25-32)

APPENDIX

1. Inductive Approach

Read **Romans 12:1-2**. *What does this passage say? Make a list of all observations.*
What does this passage mean? How should you apply it to your life?

Introduction

- The word 'therefore' indicates that what follows flows from what came just before.
- The author is passionate about what he is presenting indicated by "I urge you...by the mercies of God"
- He is assuming that God is merciful
- He is speaking to believers ("brethren")

Message

- (1) A living sacrifice
 - "Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice"
 - Such a sacrifice is "acceptable to God"
 - Such a sacrifice is "your spiritual service of worship"
- (2) Conforming to the will of God
 - "Do not be conformed to this world"
 - Be transformed to prove what the will of God is
 - Transformation comes through renewing of your mind
 - The will of God is good and acceptable and perfect

Meaning

It's of paramount importance that we humble ourselves and submit ourselves to God. This continual act of worship is what is acceptable to God. Further, we are not to let the world system shape us but rather we are to seek the perfect will of God, allowing Him to transform us by renewing our minds.

Application

I must spend time with God in prayer and in His Word to learn His will and direction for my life. I must learn to discern how the world can influence me and be wise in following the path God has for me.

2. Literary Context

Read **Rom 3:23** *How would you describe the context of this verse?*

A simple explanation is justification by faith. He begins by laying the foundation that all are guilty before God, both Jew and Gentile. This is summarized by the verse in question. The passage concludes that people are justified before God, not by keeping the Law (which we can't keep), but by faith.

Read **James 2:24** *How would you describe the context of this verse?*

This passage presents the connection between faith and works. This verse summarizes the argument that works is the demonstration of faith: if a person has faith it will be shown by what they do.

3. Historical Context

Read **Acts 8:1-3** *What was the cause of the persecution against the church?*

The historical context was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the movement that followed. Those who were witnesses of the resurrection were bold in speaking out about the resurrection, but this was unacceptable to the Jewish leadership who wanted to stamp out any opposition to the status quo, including their position of authority and the stability under Roman rule.

4. Harmony of Scripture

Read **Matt 10:34-36** *How does this passage fit into the complete story of the Bible?*

Following the fall of man in Genesis the flow of scripture is the unfolding of the plan of God for the reconciliation of man to Himself. The coming of Jesus and His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross set before mankind the clear path toward reconciliation. Not everyone would accept the terms of reconciliation, hence division within families and cultures that often includes bloodshed. The story will ultimately end with reconciliation for many while those who refuse being sent to a Godless existence in the lake of fire.

6. Word Meaning

How is the cultural concept of hope different from that of scripture?

Hope is defined in the dictionary as a desire or belief in something to come with little or no evidence in support. It is often only wishful thinking. Biblical hope is based on faith that what God has promised will come to pass. It is evidenced by the historical accuracy and authority of God's Word plus the personal experience with God by believers.

7. The Bible Interprets itself

Read **Heb 11:7; 1Pet 3:20; 2Pet 2:5; 3:6** *What do these passages add to the story of Noah?*

- Noah acted in faith when he built the ark having only the warning of God about what was going to happen (**Heb 11:7**).
- God patiently waited during construction of the ark in which eight persons would be saved (**1Pet 3:20**).
- God only spared Noah and seven others when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly. Noah was a preacher of righteousness (**2Pet 2:5**).
- The world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water (**2Pet 3:6**).

8. Literal Interpretation

Psalm 109:29 This verse uses the symbolism of outer garments as dishonor and shame to portray the idea that David's enemies have put on, acquired, or enveloped themselves in dishonor and shame by their choices. It is expressed as a wish, a desire, and is also prophetic of what would come to pass.

Psalm 92:12 This verse uses simile to compare the growth and prosper of a righteous man to that of a tree, both the palm and cedar that are known for their towering presence.

Matt 10:14 This verse uses the common idiom of shaking dust off your feet to indicate several things including:

- Since their message was rejected they had no further responsibility to preach in that place
- It was a statement of testimony against those who refused to listen
- It was a warning of future judgment for their unbelief ([Matt 10:15](#))

Deut 1:28 This verse uses both metaphor and hyperbole to make their point. Hearts melting is a common phrase describing a condition of discouragement, depression, or loss of hope. Cities large and fortified to heaven is clearly an exaggeration. Both are used to make the case that trying to enter the promised land would be impossible.

Matt 5:29 This verse uses hyperbole to say that controlling what we see is of paramount importance. This verse is in the context of adultery that includes even looking lustfully at a woman. Allowing ourselves to be drawn away into sin by what we see must be avoided at all costs because of the potential consequences.

1Cor 4:10 In this verse Paul uses sarcasm and irony to challenge the worldly wisdom of the Corinthians and what they value, turning it upside down. They see the apostles as fools and spectacles and themselves as distinguished and honorable but in God's eyes it is exactly the reverse.

Matt 5:14-16 Jesus uses metaphor to encourage his followers to live in such a way that others see the fruit of their lives and give glory to God. His followers are not literally light but are to live a life that illuminates those around them. That is their purpose.

Isa 44:23 This verse uses personification giving the human ability to shout for joy to aspects of nature because of the promised redemption of Jacob for the glory of God. Nature is tied to the history of mankind being subject to the curse and is waiting to be set free ([Rom 8:19-22](#)).

Ezekiel 1 This chapter is literal in that Ezekiel describes in detail what he is actually seeing. The details are extensive and provide a vivid picture of what he saw. There are occasions, however, when Ezekiel doesn't have specific words to describe what he sees so he uses simile to explain providing explanations from descriptions that would be commonly understood. These occasions are clearly identified by the telltale use of the word, 'like.'

Gen 41:1-7 The description given as Pharaoh's dream is figurative. Cows don't eat each other and grain doesn't consume grain. This is a picture which represents a future reality where a period of plenty will be followed by a period of leanness which drains the resources stored during the time of plenty.