



# How to Get More Out of Your Bible

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# **PART 1 HERMENEUTICS**

# 1 WHY STUDY THE BIBLE?

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*I*t has been said about the Bible: “This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.” For many years the Barna Research Group has measured how often Christians actually read the Bible on a regular basis. The number is extremely low. Yet, here are four reasons why regular Bible

study is critical to the believer:

- Bible study is essential to growth (1 Pet. 2:2)
- Bible study is essential to spiritual maturity (Heb. 5:11-14)
- Spiritual “age” does not necessarily mean spiritual maturity
- Bible study is essential to spiritual effectiveness (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Some of the most common reasons for not studying the Bible today are:<sup>1</sup>

- It doesn't seem to apply to my everyday life
- It appears to be out-of-date
- It doesn't make sense to me
- The word “study” sounds like too much work
- I don't have time
- It's hard to believe
- You can make it say just about anything you want
- It's just not interesting
- I just don't read anything—it's not just the Bible

Do any of these sound familiar? Check yourself by completing the questionnaire on the following page.

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<sup>1</sup>Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1991) pp. 9-10.

## **SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Try this simple exercise to help you evaluate your Bible reading practices.

### **1) HOW OFTEN DO YOU READ THE BIBLE? (CHECK ONE)**

- Never
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Two to three times a week
- Every day

### **2) WHEN YOU READ IT, HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND READING?**

- 5 Minutes or less
- 15 Minutes
- 30 Minutes
- 45 Minutes
- 1 hour or more

### **3) WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING OBSTACLES DO YOU FACE MOST OFTEN WHEN READING THE BIBLE?**

- It doesn't seem relevant to me
- It is confusing and hard to understand
- I don't have time. I'm just too busy
- It's boring. I don't find it interesting
- I just don't read anything...it's not just the Bible
- It's difficult to remember what I've read
- I don't know how to study the Bible

## HOW THIS BOOKLET WILL HELP YOU

While this booklet is only an introduction to hermeneutics, and bible study methods, it offers practical ways to get the most out of God's Word without getting too technical. Interested readers who are looking for more are encouraged to obtain any of the excellent resources listed in the bibliography. Nevertheless, this booklet will help you to:

- Learn a simple, proven process
- Gain a valuable sense of self-confidence in your ability to handle Scripture
- Experience the joy of personal discovery
- Deepen your relationship with God

## WHAT IS “HERMENEUTICS”?

Hermeneutics is the science of proper interpretation, especially of the Bible.

The word hermeneutics is a term derived from the Greek word (*hermēneia*) for *interpreter*. This is related to the name of the Greek god, Hermes, in his role as the interpreter of the messages of the gods. Hermes was believed to play tricks on those he was supposed to give messages to, often changing the messages and influencing the interpretation thereof. The Greek word thus has the basic meaning of one who makes the meaning clear.<sup>2</sup>

Hermeneutics is both a science and an art. It is a *science* because it is guided by rules. It is an *art* because the application of the rules will often be unique to each reader.<sup>3</sup>

By using sound hermeneutical methods, the interpreter is seeking to understand the unique roles and relationships between the author, the text, and the original audience.

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia; Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group, 1993), p.5.

## **WHY DO I NEED HERMENEUTICS?**

Without an organized approach, the modern reader will not always clearly understand the intended meaning of the Bible. For example:

- Should we cut off our hands and feet if we sin (Mark 9:43-45)?
- Are women never allowed to speak in church (1 Cor. 14:34)?
- Are men to have many wives because Solomon did, and God blessed him (1 Kings 11:3)?
- Is salvation based on faith plus works (Phil. 2:12; Jas 2:24)?

## **HERMENEUTICAL METHODS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR:**

- Your spiritual growth. (1 Pet. 2:2)
- Your ethics (Heb. 5:11-14)
- Your equipping (2 Tim. 3:16-17)
- Your defense against false teaching (Titus 1:9)
- Knowing God's will for your life (Col. 1:9)<sup>4</sup>

## **BUT DOESN'T THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVE ME THE MEANING?**

Using John 16:13, and 14:26, some may say, "I just read the Bible and the Holy Spirit shows me the meaning." They feel that if the Holy Spirit is our teacher, then we need not study in depth. Yet, they can draw the wrong conclusions from the Bible and feel that they are from the Holy Spirit.

Although the Bible is meant to be understood with regard to essential beliefs, it must be pointed out that the Holy Spirit's help does not replace the need to interpret Bible passages according to sound principles of language communication.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hendricks, 18-22.

<sup>5</sup> Klein, 4-5.

The Bible also tells us to use our minds:

*“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.” 1 Pet. 1:13.*

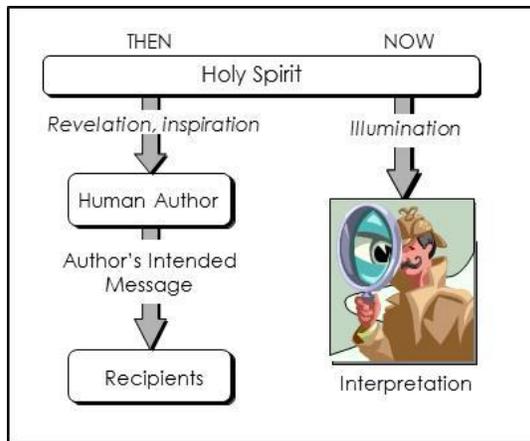
*“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’” Matt. 22:37.*

### **HERMENEUTICS PRODUCES AN ADEQUATE BUT NOT A PERFECT UNDERSTANDING.**

Hermeneutics, while necessary, will not give us an understanding to everything in the Bible, nor will it answer every question, or solve all problems of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Some problem passages are still unclear. For example:

- What does “Baptized on behalf of the dead” mean in 1 Corinthians 15:29?
- What does “Christ’s preaching to the spirits in prison” mean in 1 Peter 3:19?

There are many interpretations of these phrases, but no Bible student can be sure what they mean. To force a meaning can produce an inaccurate understanding, but everything God intended for us to understand is understandable!



### **THE GOAL OF HERMENEUTICS**

The goal of hermeneutics is to discover the author's intended message (AIM).<sup>7</sup> T. Norton Sterrett puts it this way, “Interpret according to the author's purpose and plan. The purpose of the author is the object he has in mind for writing. When John writes in 1 John 5:13, ‘I write this to you...that you may know that you have

eternal life,’ he plainly states his purpose.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hendricks, 16-18.

<sup>7</sup> The term “author” while referring to the human author understands the message originator to be God himself.

<sup>8</sup> T. Norton Sterrett, *How to Understand Your Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), p. 71

## DIVING DEEP INTO THE BIBLE

Many Bible readers are either like snorkelers or scuba divers. Snorkelers float on the surface but never see the beauty of the ocean in its fullness. Scuba divers, on the other hand, dive deeper and enjoy a beauty otherwise unforeseen.



In the same way, the Christian who makes the effort to dive deeper into the Bible will reap all the benefits of truly knowing God's Word, and God promises to honor your diligence (Prov. 8:34-35). The greater the effort, the greater the reward.

### QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INTERPRETER

In order to be an effective interpreter of the Scriptures one must have certain qualifications, including the following:

- A new heart (2 Cor. 5:17)
- A hungry heart (Ps. 42:1)
- An obedient heart (Ps. 119:34)
- A disciplined heart (Prov. 1:3)
- A teachable heart (Ps. 25:4-5)

### TEN PITFALLS TO AVOID

Because it is easy to misinterpret the Bible, the careful Bible interpreter must avoid the following ten pitfalls:

- 1) Avoid giving Bible study a low priority
- 2) Avoid reading into the Bible (eisegesis) instead of reading out of the Bible (exegesis)
- 3) Avoid assuming you already know what it says (pre-assumptions)
- 4) Avoid becoming overly dependent on extra-biblical books
- 5) Avoid accepting popular social thinking in place of accurate biblical truths
- 6) Avoid interpreting biblical passages out of context

*When man doesn't understand something he falls back on assumptions.*

- 7) Avoid failing to observe what the Bible is really saying
- 8) Avoid interpreting before observing
- 9) Avoid interpreting only from the perspective of today's culture and conditions
- 10) Avoid neglecting to respond properly

# 2 HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE

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## FIVE RULES OF INTERPRETATION

Proper interpretation, hermeneutics, is based on specific rules. They may appear to be overwhelming and complex at first, but after familiarizing yourself with them, you'll find them easy to use.



Rule No. 1: A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its readers.

Be careful at this point that you don't read your personal interpretation into the passage.

Rule No. 2: Interpret according to the correct meaning of the words and grammar.

Is it literal or figurative language? Remember, words change their meaning over a period of time. For example, in 1 Thess. 4:15, the word "prevent" meant to "go before." Is the passage or verse in prescriptive or descriptive language? (Prescriptive language means "do it like this." Descriptive language means, "here's what they did at that time"). Look for conditional promises

("if/then"). For example, 1 John 4:15, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, (then) God lives in him and he in God."

Rule No. 3: Interpret according to the historical and cultural context.

The word "dude" fifty years ago meant something different from the word today. "Don we now our gay apparel" can mean something entirely different today. In England, calling a woman homely (home loving) is a compliment. In India, calling a person an owl is an insult; in America, it means wise. "Psaltery" in Daniel 3:5 (KJV, NAU) is not a salt factory; it is a harp. Use study Bibles, commentaries, and Bible handbooks to gain an understanding of the cultural and historical context. Concerning commentaries, Ronald Wallace cautions us to look with them and not

at them.<sup>9</sup> Scripture itself is always to be our primary focus.

Rule No. 4: Interpret each passage in light of the Bible's teaching as a whole. John 14:13-14 states that if you ask for anything, you'll get it. By itself, this passage could be interpreted to mean "name it and claim it." In other words, ask God for anything and he'll give it to you. But I John 5:14-15 states that we are to ask in accordance with God's will. James 5:16 states that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. By itself, this might mean that our prayers are always powerful and effective; however, I Peter 3:7 states that a husband's prayers can be hindered by the way he treats his wife.

Rule No. 5: Correct interpretations will be consistently confirmed. When earnest believers interpret the Bible correctly, they will always find the consistent original meaning. Many small Bible study groups often end up exchanging different opinions about what a passage means because they haven't observed and interpreted it correctly. Having a Bible study with at least three others who practice proper hermeneutics can make a big difference in discovering the correct interpretation.

## SOME CHALLENGES TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Distance becomes a great challenge to the modern day interpreter. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard offer at least four "distances" that create these challenges.<sup>10</sup>

### DISTANCE OF TIME



One of the greatest challenges to biblical interpretation is *distance*. This is not physical distance it is the distance of time that exists between the ancient texts and our modern world. It has been about 1900 years since the last words of the Bible were written, and the world has since changed in many ways.

Additionally, most modern readers lack essential information about the world as it was

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<sup>9</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *On the Interpretation and Use of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999) 67

<sup>10</sup> Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, pp. 12-16.

when the Bible was written.

### **CULTURAL DISTANCE**

Another challenge facing the interpreter is the cultural distance that separates today's reader from the world of the biblical texts. In biblical times most of the world was basically agrarian, made up of landowners and tenant farmers. Machinery was primitive from our view, and modes of travel were slow and wearying. As we read the Bible we encounter customs, practices, and beliefs that may make little sense to us.

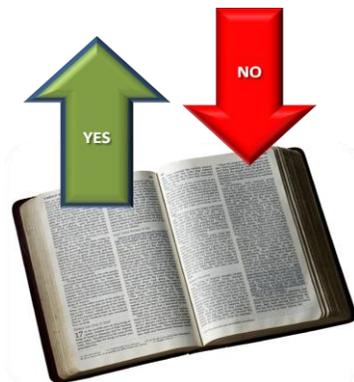
### **GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE**

Because most people living in America are physically separated from the Ancient Near East there is a geographical distance that creates another challenge to the American reader. We may have difficulty picturing why the New Testament speaks of people going up to Jerusalem when it is not situated in northern Israel. We may not fully grasp the difficulty the Philistines had militarily when fighting certain battles until we realize that their chariots were useless in the central mountains of Israel.

### **DISTANCE OF LANGUAGE**

Another great challenge to us is the language gap between the author's written language and the modern day interpreter's language. Biblical writers wrote in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, languages that are not easily understood by most people today. Even those who speak Hebrew or Greek today have difficulty understanding these ancient languages.

### **EXEGESIS, NOT EISEGESIS**



There is a need for intellectual honesty and education. One may have the rules memorized, but may not be able to apply them, or may seek to apply them in a biased manner. The objective of the interpreter is to read out of the text (exegesis) not to read one's own viewpoints in to the text (eisegesis). One way to become as objective as possible is prayerfully and thoughtfully consider any and all alternatives in a given passage.

Interpreters should approach the text in humility, meaning that the interpreter must be teachable and realize that he should never stop learning. Interpreters must also recognize that inspiration (which comes from God) is infallible, but personal illumination is not.

### INTERPRETING BIBLE GENRES



A genre is a type of literature and often refers to a group of texts similar in their mood, content, structure or phraseology.<sup>11</sup> Literary genres of the Bible include narratives, prophecies, parables, poetry, proverbs, epistles, biographies, apocalyptic, and more. As you become more proficient in interpreting Scripture, you will want to gain a deeper understanding of biblical genres and how to interpret them. Interpreting literary genres of the Bible will be addressed in this chapter.

## HOW TO INTERPRET HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Historical narratives are stories—of the historical *past*, intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the *present*. Their characters are captivating and often bring an immediate connection with the modern reader. People like to read stories about other people who go through experiences much like their own. Stories and their meanings are also easy to remember.

Narratives are the most common type of literature found in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> There are many kinds of narrative in the Old Testament, not simply one kind. Old Testament books such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah and Haggai—are entirely narrative. In the New Testament books such as the Gospels and Acts are narratives.

Narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings, nor are they intended to directly teach moral lessons (explicitly); instead they are stories that teach moral lessons

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<sup>11</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Klein, 261.

indirectly (implicitly). Implicit teaching is that which is clearly present in the story but not stated in so many words—it is implied. For example, the book of Ruth is not a “love story,” it is about God’s loyal love (Heb. *hesed*).

Fee and Stuart offer excellent insights into the nature and interpretation of historical narratives. Following is a brief summary of their guideline.<sup>13</sup>

### **THE NATURE OF NARRATIVES**

Narratives usually have three basic parts: 1) characters which consist of a protagonist (primary person), an antagonist (person who brings about conflict or tension), and sometimes an agonist (other major characters), 2) a plot, which usually moves along faster than modern narratives, and 3) a plot resolution.

Interpreters should be alert to the various devices used to slow the pace of the story such as a sudden elaboration of detail, or repetition, which signals something the narrator wants to emphasize.

### **THREE LEVELS OF NARRATIVES**

Narratives are presented at three levels in the Bible. Level 1 addresses the whole universal plot of God—the story of redemption. Remember, the one crucial thing to keep in mind is the presence of God in the story! Level 2 addresses Old Covenant & New Covenant contexts. Level 3 stories are on the individual basis.



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<sup>13</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1981, 1993, 2003). Pp. 93-106.

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW NARRATIVES**

FEATURE	CHARACTERISTIC
Narrator	He is comparatively “omniscient”—knows everything about the story, but he never shares all he knows—he usually does not explain the story. He is responsible for the “point of view.”
Scene	Most stories are moved along by a series of scenes that make up the whole. Each scene stands on its own, yet progressively they make up the story as a whole.
Character	The characters are the central elements. Physical appearances are rarely described—status (wealthy, wise, cupbearer, baker) are described. Tribes (Midianites) are often included. Characters often appear either in contrast or in parallel. Descriptions of characters is often revealed by the characters’ words and actions, not by the narrator’s own descriptions.
Dialog	The first point of dialog is often a significant clue to both the story plot and to the character of the speaker. Contrastive dialog often functions as a way of characterization as well. The narrator will often emphasize by summarizing or repeating something.
Features	<p>Features of the story are intended primarily for the hearers, not the readers. Features, such as the following are often designed to be easily remembered.</p> <p>Repetition of key words.</p> <p>Inclusion: begins and ends the same way.</p> <p>Chiasms: ABCBA patterns.</p> <p>Foreshadowing which is something briefly noted but then picked up in more detail later in the story.</p>

## **PITFALLS TO AVOID**

When reading biblical narratives the reader is cautioned to avoid certain specific interpretive pitfalls:

- Allegorizing: reflecting a meaning that is not part of the story—seeing stories as symbolic of something else.
- Decontextualizing: Ignoring the historical context of the story.
- Selectivity: Picking & choosing specific words and phrases while ignoring others and ignoring the overall story—e.g. God's plan of redemption.
- Moralizing: The assumption that principles for living can be derived from all passages. Hebrew narratives are historical narratives, not illustrative narratives.
- Personalizing: Assuming that all parts of the story apply to you.
- Misappropriation: Seeing Gideon's "fleece story" as prescriptive rather than descriptive.
- False Appropriation: Forcing contemporary culture onto the historical context.
- Redefinition: Redefining the meaning of the story especially when the plain meaning leaves people cold—when it produces no spiritual delight. (e.g., 2 Chron. 7:14, "...heal their land..."not heal the USA).

## **TEN PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVES**

Knowing this, the following ten principles are suggested by Fee and Stuart:<sup>14</sup>

- Old Testament narratives usually do not directly teach a doctrine.
- An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
- Narratives record what happened—not what should have happened. Therefore, not every narrative has an identifiable moral application.

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<sup>14</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 203) 106

- What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.
- Most of the Old Testament characters are far from perfect—as are their actions as well.
- We are not always told at the end of the story whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to judge this on the basis of what God taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in the Scripture.
- All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all relevant details are always given. What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.
- 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.
- Narratives may teach either explicitly or implicitly.
- In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.

## HOW TO INTERPRET OLD TESTAMENT LAW

### THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW



The Old Testament contains 613 laws, including the 10 Commandments, but only four of the thirty-nine Old Testament Books (Gen. Exod. Lev. Deut), and a few verses in the NT, contain these laws.<sup>15</sup> Most of the laws are found in Exodus 20 through Deuteronomy 33. The question is often raised, “Do these laws apply today?”

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<sup>15</sup> The 613 commandments is the number of mitzvot listed in the Torah, first codified by Rabbi Simlai in Talmud Makkot. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613\\_commandments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments)>. Accessed March 27, 2013.

## **It's CONFUSING**

The term "Old Testament Law" is essentially referring to the Mosaic Law. The question today is does it apply to us? Are we to sacrifice animals? Obviously, no! What about wearing clothes with blended fabric since Deuteronomy 22:11 states, "Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together"? What about the laws concerning lying and murdering? They appear to be applicable today.

Joshua 1:8 says, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it." Matthew 5:18 says, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Why do some laws appear to apply to Christians today and others not? How do you make your distinction?

## **THE ANSWER IS CHRISTIANITY**

Point #1: The Old Testament Law is a bilateral covenant, or one that is a binding agreement between two parties. Both have an obligation spelled out in the contract. The Old Testament Law was a contract between God (suzerain) and Israel (vassal).

Point #2: The Old Testament Law is not our contract. If a famous football player gets a \$10 million contract, but it's not your contract. It's his!

Point #3: In Old Testament days, God promised that a new contract would come.

- Jer. 31:31-32 "'The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers..."
- Luke 22:20, "In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."
- Heb. 8:13, "By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear." (Soon disappear—written during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century as the NT was replacing the Old Testament. As time went on, new Christians gradually replaced Old Testament laws with NT practices—circumcision, etc.).

- Rom. 6:14 “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

Point #4: Only those Old Testament stipulations renewed in the NT are to be followed.<sup>16</sup>

### HOW DOES THE LAW APPLY TO CHRISTIANS TODAY?

First, it provides timeless absolute truths, such as murder, stealing, adultery, and lying are wrong. Second, it provides transferable principles as illustrated in the table below.<sup>17</sup>

LAW	CULTURAL SETTING	TRANSFERABLE PRINCIPLE
Do not reap the edges of your field but leave them for the poor (Lev. 19:9).	Fertility cults practiced this to leave the edges of their fields as offerings to their pagan deities. <sup>18</sup>	Take a portion of your income and give it to the Lord's work which is to include caring for the poor (Matt. 19:21. Luke 14:13; 19:8; John 13:29; 2 Cor. 9:7-9; Gal. 2:8).
Do not wear clothing of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19).	The mixture of wool and linen was used in the tabernacle and in the high priest's outer garments—it was thus reserved for sacred use.	Do not abuse the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:20-22).
Do not eat meat with the blood still in it (Lev. 19:26).	It was a belief of some pagan religions that one's strength or power was in the blood or the flesh of the individual. Thus, it was thought that by eating the still-warm heart, or some other bloody organ, of a warrior (or animal) you had killed you could incorporate into yourself that person's power or strength. This was a disgusting and heathen	Avoid disgusting and heathen practices of witchcraft and sorcery. (This does not mean avoiding blood transfusions).

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<sup>16</sup> Rene Schlaepfer, *How to Study the Bible*, Twin Lakes Church, Aptos, CA. 1997

<sup>17</sup> This author is indebted to Rene Schlaepfer for the examples shown which are based on his series, “How to Study the Bible,” 1997. Additional examples can be found in Dave Veerman's *How to Apply the Bible*, pp. 153 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 133.

	practice, and God outlawed it unequivocally. <sup>19</sup>	
Don't cut the air at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard (Lev. 19:27).	Pagans would cut off part of their beards and offer them to their gods. In other cases, hair from the beard was used for divination. Still other cases include the cutting of hair from a man's beard as a shameful penalty for not paying back a debt.	Keep your personal appearance from being associated with pagan practices or groups (e.g. men dressing to look like women, or wearing insignias such as swastikas—white supremacists).
Do not put tattoo marks on yourselves (Lev. 19:28).	Tattoos were used by pagan nations to ward off evil spirits, or demonstrate membership in a pagan group. <sup>20</sup>	Do not use tattoos that might identify you with a cult, or pagan group.

**CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING OLD TESTAMENT LAW**

- Observation: Observe what the law states and any conditions tied to it.
- Interpretation: Interpret the law as it applied to the culture of its day.
- Application: Look for a transferable principle that can be applied today.

**HOW TO INTERPRET PROPHETIC MESSAGES**

Berkeley Mickelsen offers the following hermeneutic practices when interpreting prophetic messages.<sup>21</sup>

Know the historical background of the prophet and the people to whom the prophet ministers. Know the context that precedes and follows the passage.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://precepts.wordpress.com/2008/03/05/224/>

<sup>20</sup> Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 299ff.

State clearly to whom or to what the statement or passage refers.

- Is the passage addressed to the hearers and about them?
- Or is it proclaimed to them but about someone else?
- Is the passage predictive or instructive?
  - If predictive, what are the conditions attached to the message?
  - Some predictive messages have multiple fulfillments (e. g. the language describing Antiochus Epiphanes in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 may also characterize the final Antichrist (Matt. 24; Mark 13).

Where fulfillment is found in the NT differentiate between direct and typological prediction.

- Direct: Fulfilled in the NT. Example: the birth of Christ at Bethlehem (Micah 5:2 --> Matt. 2:5-6).
- Typological: An event in the OT which is also a "type" of something later in the NT.
  - Example: Zechariah's value of 30 pieces of silver is a type of the 30 pieces of silver valued for betraying Jesus (Zech. 11:12-13; Matt. 27:9-10). [Note: even though Jeremiah made a *direct* prediction of the 30 pieces of silver (Jer. 32:25), it was also predicted *typologically* by Zechariah].
  - Typological predictions are very common throughout the NT so knowing the OT context is important.

When interpreting symbols in prophetic messages follow these principles (Mickelsen 278-9):

- Principle #1 – Keep the interpretation based on the context.
- Principle #2 – The symbol may be explained in the context.
  - If the symbol is not explained, then use every clue found in the immediate context or in any part of the book where the symbol is used.
  - Try to state what the symbol meant to the original hearers or readers.
- Principle #3: The symbol may also be used in other passages.
- Principle #4: Don't force meaning into a symbol that isn't there.

**EXAMPLE: EZEKIEL IS TOLD TO EAT THE SCROLL (EZEK. 2:8--3:3)**

*"But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth." Ezek. 2:8--3:3 (NIV)*

- Principle #1 - Context: God's judgment of a rebellious people (Israel) is coming (Ezek. 2:3)

*"He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day." Ezek. 2:3 (NIV)*

- Principle #2 - Explanation of the symbol in the context.
  - Scroll in Ezekiel 2:10 describes coming lament and mourning and woe.
  - Meaning of eating the scroll --> Explanation is not given in the context but it suggests that the prophet's message is to be internalized. He is not reading a prepared script, like a radio announcer.
  - The stress on sweetness suggests the joy of receiving God's words (Ps. 119:103).
- Principle No. 3 - How symbol is used in other passages.
  - This same act is duplicated in Revelation 10:2; 8-11.

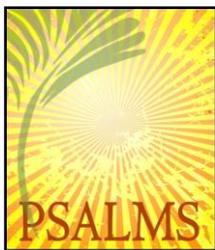
*Rev. 10:2, 8-11 (NIV) "He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey." I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.*

- The bitterness of John's eating the scroll in Revelation suggests the psychological impact of identifying himself with his readers and taking seriously what God says concerning the coming judgment (Tribulation) on the many peoples, nations, languages and kings (Mickelsen 276).
- It may also represent the perishing of the wicked (Job 20:5-14).

*"...that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though his pride reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?' 'Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night. The eye that saw him will not see him again; his place will look on him no more. His children must make amends to the poor; his own hands must give back his wealth. The youthful vigor that fills his bones will lie with him in the dust. 'Though evil is sweet in his mouth and he hides it under his tongue, though he cannot bear to let it go and keeps it in his mouth, yet his food will turn sour in his stomach..."*  
Job 20:5-14

- The lack of bitterness in Ezekiel suggests that Israel will not be destroyed but will someday be spiritually restored. This interpretation would be consistent with Romans 11:26 ("all Israel will be saved").
- Principle No. 4: Examine your conclusions to see if you've forced your meaning into the text.

## HOW TO INTERPRET THE PSALMS



Psalms was the hymnbook of the Jewish people. Psalms are not only informative they are also uniquely emotive. They enable us to express our inner lives to God. They put us in touch with our deepest emotions, and make us sensitive to the emotional struggles of others. They help us discipline our emotions (express, not repress), and they stimulate our imagination.

### HOW THE PSALMS TOUCH US

They inform our intellect about God, and about ourselves. They direct our volition through

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wisdom psalms (Ps. 1:1; 32:1), and show us that:

- We should thank God for who he is (Ps. 7:17).
- We should trust God when facing fear (Ps. 23:4).
- We should tell others about God (Ps. 9:1).
- We should pray when we are in trouble (Ps. 86:7).

They arouse emotions such as:

- Reverence (Ps. 5:7).
- Shame (Ps. 44).
- Fear (Ps. 56:3).
- Sadness (Ps. 6:6-7).
- Anger (Ps. 5:10; 109:8-10).
- Doubt (Ps. 14:1; 73).
- Love (Ps. 18:1; 116:1; 26:8).

### **THE UNIQUENESS OF THE PSALMS.**

In the Psalms we discover how the negative leads to the positive. How doubt leads to trust. How anger leads to love, and how sadness leads to joy. Within the Psalms are seven types: the hymn, the lament, the thanksgiving psalm, psalms of remembrance, psalms of confidence, wisdom psalms and kingship psalms.<sup>22</sup>

### **HEBREW POETRY IN PSALMS.**

Jeff A. Benner explains how Hebrew poetry is written much differently than our own Western style of poetry.<sup>23</sup> Many do not recognize the poetry which can cause problems when translating or interpreting these passages.

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<sup>22</sup> Longman, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Jeff A. Benner, *Hebrew Parallelism* (Ancient Hebrew Research Center, 1999-2007). <[http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/23\\_parallel.html](http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/23_parallel.html)>. Accessed March 2011.

Approximately 75% of the Old Testament is poetry. All of Psalms and Proverbs are Hebrew poetry. Even the book of Genesis is full of Poetry. There are several reasons the Hebrews used poetry, much of the Torah was sung and was easier to sing too, poetry and songs are easier to memorize than straight texts, Parallel poetry (as in Genesis 1) emphasizes something of great importance, as the creation story is. The rabbis believed that if something is worth saying, it is worth saying beautifully." There is much more poetry in the Bible than most realize because most people do not understand it.

Parallelism is most commonly found in the book of Psalms and Proverbs but is found throughout the whole of the Hebrew Bible. Parallelism is the expression of one idea in two or more different ways.

*"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path". (Psalms 119:105)*

The above example of a simple parallel and can be written in this manner;

*Your word is;*

- 1. a lamp to my feet*
- 2. a light for my path*

Notice the words "lamp" and "light" are paralleled as well as the words "my feet" and "my path". Following is another example of this style of poetry.

*"My son, my teachings you shall not forget and my commands your heart shall guard." (Proverbs 3:1)*

In this verse the words "my teachings" is paralleled with "my commands" and "you shall not forget" is paralleled with "your heart shall guard" and can be written as follows.

*My son;*

- 1. my teachings you shall not forget*
- 2. my commands your heart shall guard*

Following is Psalm 15:1-3 broken down into its poetic sequences. In this example each thought is represented by the letters A, B, C and D. Each expression of a thought is

represented by the numbers 1 and 2.

*A1. Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary?*

*A2. Who may live on your holy hill?*

*B1. He whose walk is blameless*

*B2. and who does what is righteous.*

*C1. who speaks the truth from his heart*

*C2. and has no slander on his tongue.*

*D1. who does his neighbor no wrong*

*D2. and casts no slur on his fellow man.*

### HOW THE PSALMS ARE ORGANIZED

Psalms have been redacted into five major books which may parallel the Pentateuch, shown as follows:<sup>24</sup>

Book	Seam Chapter	Similar to	Theme
Book 1 (1-41)	41	Genesis	Creation, man sins, redeemer redemption promised.
Book 2 (42-72)	72	Exodus	God rescues just as he did with Israel.
Book 3 (73-89)	89	Leviticus	Tabernacle, God's holiness deserving of worship.
Book 4 (90-106)	106	Numbers	Israel's relation with other nations, God's overruling kingdom, keeping events and troubles in perspective.
Book 5 (107-150)	145	Deuteronomy	Praise and thanksgiving for God and his Word.

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<sup>24</sup> John H. Walton, and Andrew Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from Original Meaning to Contemporary Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 356. See also *Life Application Bible* (NIV) 898.

### **CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING PSALMS**

- Observation: Let the psalm title initially inform the reading of a psalm. As you read a psalm, explore the author's emotional expression. Download and use the chart, "How to Read the Psalms" from: [www.TaylorNotes.Info](http://www.TaylorNotes.Info). Try the exercises presented in this chart.
- Interpretation: Be careful not to bend the interpretation of a psalm unnaturally to make it conform to the title. Interpret in the context of the author's setting and mood.
- Application: Ask yourself, "How can I learn from the author's example?"

## **HOW TO INTERPRET THE GOSPELS**

### **THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS**

Almost all difficulties in interpreting the Gospels stem from two obvious facts. First, Jesus himself did not write them. Jesus' native tongue was Aramaic; his teachings come to us only in Greek. His sayings are not always found with the exact same wording in the Gospels. Second, there are four Gospels. Three are synoptic (seeing together), Matthew, Mark, Luke. John wrote independently of the other three, and thus his Gospel has little material in common with them.<sup>25</sup> John's Gospel was written about thirty years after the synoptics and presents a view that is different. Scholars believe that because the synoptics had been circulated for many years he wanted to offer his unique aspects.

Why four Gospels? The Jews looked for a king; Matthew presents Jesus the Messiah (King). Romans looked for a powerful leader; Mark presents Jesus the Servant-leader. Greeks looked for truth; Luke presents Jesus the Source of Truth. All men look for immortality; John presents Jesus the Giver of eternal life.

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<sup>25</sup> Fee and Stuart, p. 137.

## JESUS' TEACHINGS IN THE GOSPELS

The forms of Jesus' teachings were common to his day. He used hyperbole which were purposeful overstatements (Matt. 5:29-30), proverbs (Matt. 6:21; Mark 3:24), similes and metaphors (Matt. 10:16; 5:13), poetry (Matt. 7:6-8; Luke 6:27-28), questions (Matt. 17:25), periscopes which are short self-contained stories (John 8:1-11), and irony (Matt. 16:2-3).

Jesus' teachings were orally given—written Gospels did not exist for about twenty to thirty years after his death and resurrection. Many stories were transmitted without giving their original context. The Gospel authors often placed them in their immediate contexts some thirty years later. They adapted them to their audience.

## READ HORIZONTALLY AND VERTICALLY



Fee and Stuart offer sage guidance for reading the Gospels. First, read them horizontally, then vertically.<sup>26</sup> To think horizontally means that when studying a particular passage (periscope) in one gospel, it is usually helpful to be aware of the parallels in the other gospels. Johnston M. Cheney's book, "The Life of Christ in Stereo," offers a convenient way to read and compare parallels in the four Gospels.<sup>27</sup>

To think vertically means that when reading or studying a narrative or teaching in the Gospels, one should try to be aware of both historical contexts—that of Jesus and that of the Gospel writer. Remember, the context and culture of Jesus' time was about twenty to thirty years before that of the Gospel writers.

## CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPELS

- Observation:** First read the Gospels as a whole, then read them vertically and horizontally. Observe the form of Jesus' teachings that was common to his day (hyperbole, proverbs, similes and metaphors, poetry, questions (Matt. 17:25), periscopes, and irony).

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<sup>26</sup> Fee and Stuart, pp. 135-140.

<sup>27</sup> Johnston M. Cheney, *The Life of Christ in Stereo* (Multnomah: Multnomah Publishers, 1984).

- ☑ Interpretation: Look for culturally transferable principles. (e.g. Mark 10:17-22, rich young man. The point is not for believers everywhere to sell what they have but to put Jesus first, not money first). Keep in mind that many of Jesus' imperatives are set in the context of expounding the OT Law, they sound like "law" in the sense that we must keep obey them in order to remain a Christian, but we must keep in mind that we are under grace—our salvation does not depend on them. They are to be lived out of love for God. You cannot understand the Gospels without a clear understanding of the concept of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. Remember too that the basic theological framework of the entire NT is eschatological (this age/already→the age to come/not yet).
  
- ☑ Application: Take these culturally transferable principles and adapt them to today's setting, identifying specific actions you might take in your own life.

## HOW TO INTERPRET THE EPISTLES

Careful exegesis of scripture will prevent the sharing of unfounded interpretive opinions that are often inconsistent with each other. Small groups that study the Bible will sometimes find themselves at a loss when each individual has an interpretation of a given passage. This leads to a degree of frustration and can impede a healthy interest in the Bible. The underlying cause is poor exegesis. Fee and Stuart point out that "the big issue among Christians committed to Scripture as God's Word has to do with the problems of cultural relativity—what is cultural and therefore belongs to the first century alone and what transcends culture and is thus a Word for all seasons."<sup>28</sup> To overcome these pitfalls they offer several sound hermeneutic rules.<sup>29</sup>

### BASIC RULES OF INTERPRETATION

Rule No. 1: A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her

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<sup>28</sup> Fee and Stuart, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Fee and Stuart, pp. 74-76.

readers. For example, when Paul wrote, “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience” (1 Cor. 10:25), we cannot take this verse and interpret it to mean that being a vegetarian is unscriptural. This rule may not always enable someone to discover what a text means, but it does help to set limits on what it cannot mean.

Rule No. 2: Whenever we share common 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. Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Phil. 2:3-4). This practice applied to these first century believers and it still applies to twenty-first century Christians.

### **CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EPISTLES**

- Observation: First read the Epistle as a whole. Then research the first-century cultural setting, the nature of the recipients, and the date of the Epistle to gain a clear understanding of its background.
- Interpretation: Follow the two rules of interpretation described previously. In matters of indifference use the following guidelines:<sup>30</sup>
  - What the Epistles specifically indicate as matters of indifference may still be regarded as such: food, drink, observance of holidays, etc. See Romans 14 and Colossians 2:16-23.
  - Matters of indifference are not inherently moral but are cultural—even if they stem from religious culture. Matters that tend to differ from culture to culture, therefore, even among genuine believers, may usually be considered to be matters of indifference (e.g., wine and non-wine cultures).

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<sup>30</sup> Fee and Stuart, pp. 79-80.

- The sin-lists in the Epistles (e.g., Rom. 1:29-30; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:2-4) never include the first-century equivalents such as length of dresses, ties, women's slacks, dyed hair, body piercing, tattoos, cosmetics, jewelry, entertainment and recreation (movies, TV, cards, dancing, mixed swimming), athletics, food, and drink.

Application: Take these culturally transferable principles and adapt them to today's setting, identifying specific actions you might take in your own life.

## HOW TO INTERPRET PARABLES

### WHAT IS A PARABLE?



The term for parable is from the Greek word *paraballo*. The term means to place by the side of something. In other words a parable is where Jesus has taken a picture of the real world to picture something that is true in the spiritual world. Another way to state this is that a spiritual reality is placed next to a picture of the real world.

A parable is not an allegory. An allegory may be limited to one line where the meaning is clearly contained within the phrase itself. Parables are not allegories because the meaning of the parable is dependent upon information outside of itself, and a parable does not confuse the imaginary world with the real world.

The first question to be addressed is what is a parable? A parable is not a fable. There are no trees and rocks speaking and this is not Alice in wonderland or the Wizard of Oz. A parable is not a riddle. Though a few parables pose a challenge to the interpreter, Jesus was not trying to trick his listeners.

To begin a study of Jesus' parables it is essential that the interpreter keep in mind certain hermeneutical principles. These principles will aid the student in avoiding faulty interpretations or from misrepresenting the intention of Jesus' words.

### HOW DO PARABLES HELP ME?

- They give me visual images that are easy to remember.

- They grab my attention in a special way.
- They stimulate my thinking about biblical truths.
- They were intended to evoke a response.

### **WHY DID JESUS SPEAK IN PARABLES?**

- To reveal truths to his followers (Matt. 13:10-11, 16).
- To conceal truths from his adversaries (Matt. 13:10-11, 13-15).

### **PITFALLS TO AVOID.**

- Interpreting parables apart from what precedes and follows them.
- Seeking to find some spiritual truth in every little detail.
- Not responding to them.

### **KNOW THE CONTEXT AND OCCASION OF THE PARABLE**

Jesus did not just teach parables at random. Many of the parables plainly state the occasion for their existence. Luke 14:7 declares that the reason for this parable was because of people seeking seats of honor. Luke 15:1-2 shows that the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and the lost son all stem from the fact that the Pharisees and scribes grumbled at Christ's eating with sinners.

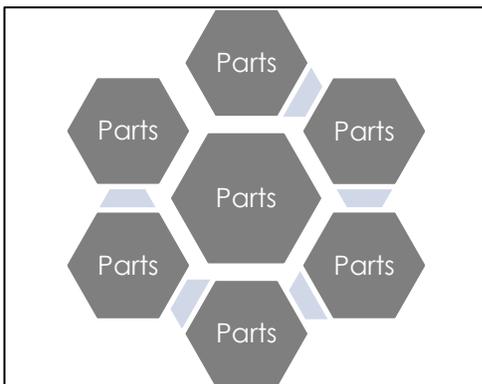
The interpreter should note that three parables are used by Christ on two separate occasions. The parable of the lost sheep is found in Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:1-7. The Matthew text follows the rejection of the little children by the disciples, while the Luke text follows the complaining of the Pharisees about Jesus befriending sinners. The parables of the mustard seed and leaven are found in Luke 13:10-21 and then in Matthew 13:31-33 and Mark 4:30-32. The Luke text follows the healing of the crippled woman, while the Matthew and Mark texts are Christ speaking from the boat. In both cases the student should note that although the occasion is different, the intent of the parable is the same in both instances.

### **DETERMINE THE MAIN SCOPE OR POINT OF THE PARABLE**

Knowledge of the occasion will greatly aid in determining the main lesson of the parable. This is not to say that there may not be secondary lessons in a parable, but to keep from abusing the text, all things must be kept in line with the main scope of the parable. The interpreter must make a distinction between what older interpreters would call the “body and the soul” of the parable or the “shell versus the marrow.”

Parables are not meant to show examples of character nor do they necessarily recommend certain kinds of behavior, such as usury (Matt. 25:14-29), but rather cite the instance to illustrate the main point. Do not get lost in the details. The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7) is not a model for pastoral theology. The pastor does not ignore his flock to chase one potential convert. The main scope of the parable is to declare that God the Father revealed in God the Son loves to love sinners over and against the opinions and practice of the Pharisees.

### **SEE THE PARTS IN LIGHT OF THE WHOLE**



All the parts must always be seen in light of the big picture. In the parable of the prodigal son all the secondary props should be viewed underneath the umbrella of God's rejoicing love over the repentant sinner. This is not to say that the secondary props are useless, but they are there only to add to the main picture painted by the Lord. The secondary lessons should always be viewed within the scope of the primary lesson.

### **DON'T GET BOGGED DOWN IN THE SECONDARY PROPS**

If the main scope of the parable is not affected by the determination of the meaning of a secondary prop, then do not sweat it out trying to uncover the hidden, secret meaning. For example, the parable of the wheat and the tares is not a mystery without determining what kind of sleep the Lord was referring to in Matt. 13:25. (Is this slothful Christians, unregenerate man, or is this soul sleep?) In the parable of the vine-growers from Mark 12, uncovering the identity of the wall is not mandatory in understanding the main lesson. Jesus in interpreting

the sower and the seed did not identify every object in the parable. But do pay attention to specific identifications such as the “Son of Man” or the “Kingdom of Heaven” which are clearly stated, and are key to the best interpretation.

### **NEVER BUILD A DOCTRINE SOLELY ON A PARABLE**

A parable may reflect a clearly taught doctrine from another portion of Scripture, but should never be the main text in formulating a doctrine. A false doctrine that one could draw from the prodigal son is that salvation is primarily based upon our repentance and God sits as an impotent sovereign waiting for wayward children to come home.

### **CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING PARABLES**

- Observation: Ask yourself, “What is the context and occasion of the parable, and what are the central elements?”
- Interpretation: Next, Look to see if an interpretation already given? What do the central elements represent? What is the main point of the parable? Is the main point consistent with other Scripture?
- Application: What response does Jesus expect from this parable, and how can I translate this response into specific actions?

## **HOW TO INTERPRET APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE**

### **WHAT IS APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE?**

Apocalyptic literature describes prophecies in which God “reveals” his hidden future plans, usually through dreams or visions with elaborate and at times strange symbolism or numbers. Interpreting apocalyptic literature can be very challenging since its form is usually

in dreams, visions, and symbols).<sup>31</sup>

Richard J. Krejcir of *With the Word* explains how “apocalyptic,” as a term in the common vernacular or dictionary definition, means something that is written in an ominous, threatening way.<sup>32</sup> It is scary, thwarting, and about boding evil. The dictionary tells us it is presaging people of imminent disaster, exaggerated predictions, or allusions of the last days.

However, this is not what it meant in the original Greek or Hebrew or in the time this term was penned. What did it mean? It means “discourser of events,” and that is what it literally and truly means to us today, too. It also means an “uncovering” or “unveiling,” and “Revelation” means “discourser of the apocalypse.” Apocalyptic is not meant to scare us or keep us away from interpreting Scripture; rather, it is meant to help us understand God, victory, hope, grace, God’s plan, and that He is indeed in control. The only people who should be scared are those who reject and hate Christ.

### THE GOAL OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE



When we see how this literature operates, it will help us greatly as it discloses for us the unfolding of historical events—past, present, and future, with God’s plan and purpose being the ultimate goal. Thus, if we take the time and effort to understand this type of genre, it will make things clearer for us—it will expose, not conceal what God has for us.

Books such as Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation contain the most apocalyptic literature in the Bible. Revelation is almost entirely apocalyptic. John W. Carter points out how apocalyptic literature has been the subject of intense interest for centuries.

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<sup>31</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, p. 311.

<sup>32</sup> Richard J. Krejcir, *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature*, February, 2007 <[http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID34418%7CCHID137699%7CCIID2304042,00.html](http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID34418%7CCHID137699%7CCIID2304042,00.html)>. Accessed March 2011.

## WHY SO MANY VIEWS?

Many different models for interpretation of this unique literary genre have been employed during this time, and have led to different and conflicting conclusions as to the text's meaning. Adamant adherence to some of these conclusions has come to divide the church and lead people astray. An appropriate exegesis of apocalyptic literature can be attained if the student understands the form and function of the apocalyptic style, the background and purpose for its writing, and the meaning of the imagery understood by ancient readers.<sup>33</sup>

## CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

- Observation: Look for similes (words such as "like," or "as"). What John saw in many cases, was indescribable, so he used illustrations to show what it was "like" (Rev. 1:13-16; 8:8; 9:7; 10:1; 13:2, 11). When reading this symbolic language, we don't have to understand every detail. John himself didn't.
- Interpretation: Keep in mind that events are not always disclosed in chronological order. Revelation is not to be interpreted apart from the entire Word of God (II Peter 1:20). The principle that "scripture is its own best interpreter" is to be also here taken to be true on the ground that the entire Bible is an inspired unity.<sup>34</sup> The reader must be careful to read *out of* the scripture (*exegesis*) rather than *into* (*eisegesis*) the scripture. It is best to take the symbolism and numbers seriously but not literally. Move beyond the detail to determine the main points.<sup>35</sup>
- Application: Application to the modern reader is to be based on the text's main points. The book of Revelation points to the return of Jesus Christ at any time. The believer is, therefore, then to live life with this hope and expectancy.

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<sup>33</sup> John W. Carter, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature*, 2007  
<<http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/CarterJ08.pdf>>. Accessed March 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, p.6

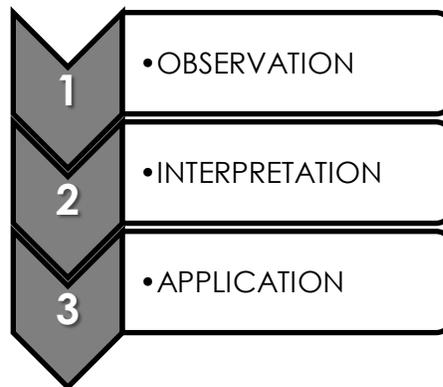
<sup>35</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, p. 312

**PART 2 BIBLE STUDY  
METHODS**

# 3 THE THREE-STEP BIBLE STUDY PROCESS

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Getting the most out of God's Word can be accomplished using an effective three-step method summarized as follows and expanded in the following chapters. This three step process is based on Howard Hendricks' book, "Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible."<sup>36</sup>



Step 1 is observation: In this stage you want to ask yourself, "What do I see?" In a sense you want to be like a detective, looking for what is in the text. The more time you spend in observing the Bible text, the less time you'll need to spend in the next stage.

Step 2 is interpretation: In this stage you want to ask yourself, "What does the Bible text mean?" Your goal here is to discover the author's intended meaning (A.I.M.). This method of interpretation is based on the historical-grammatical method which is a Christian hermeneutical method that strives to discover the Biblical author's original intended meaning in the text.

Step 3 is application: Finally, you want to ask yourself, "How does the Bible text affect my life?" Studying the Bible to satisfy one's intellectual curiosity is not enough. It must produce a change in your life. It must have relevancy.

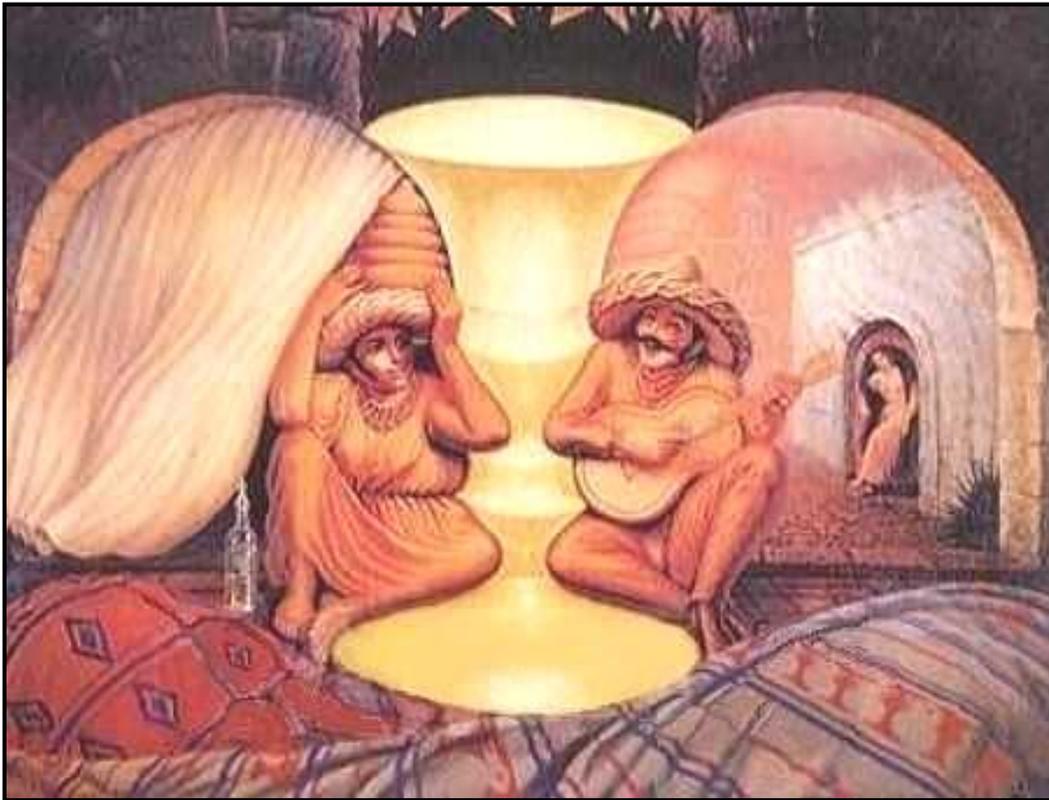
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<sup>36</sup> Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991, 2007).

## STEP 1: OBSERVATION-WHAT DOES IT SAY?

*“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” Psalm 119:18*

In this stage of Bible study you want to ask the question, “What do I see?” It is important that you resist the temptation to interpret the text at this stage, and simply observe what you see. For instance, how many things do you see in the picture below.



### **OBSERVATION IS A DEVELOPED SKILL**

Observation is often a skill that needs practice to become efficient, as exemplified in the following article, “The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz,” by Samuel H. Scudder.

### THE STUDENT, THE FISH, AND AGASSIZ



It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I

wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

"When do you wish to begin?" he asked.

"Now," I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic "Very well," he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.

"Take this fish," he said, "and look at it; we call it a Haemulon; by and by I will ask what you have seen."

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

"No man is fit to be a naturalist," said he, "who does not know how to take care of specimens."

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly. Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-besmeared corks, half-eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish was infectious; and though this alcohol had "a very ancient and fish-like smell," I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of eau de cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of a normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face -- ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters view -- just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour, I concluded that lunch was necessary; so with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my fingers down its throat to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me -- I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

"That is right," said he, "a pencil is one of the best eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked."

With these encouraging words he added --

"Well, what is it like?"



He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me; the fringed gill-arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment:

"You have not looked very carefully; why," he continued, more earnestly, "you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself. Look again; look again!" And he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish? But now I set myself to the task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired,

"Do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied. "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he earnestly, "but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be, but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

His thoroughly pleased, "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically -- as he always did -- upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

"That is good, that is good!" he repeated, "but that is not all; go on." And so for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had -- a lesson whose influence was extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterwards, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the blackboard. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydro-headed worms; stately crawl-fishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after, and was as much amused as any at our experiments. He looked at the fishes.



"Haemulons, every one of them," he said; "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ drew them."

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old six-inch worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought into review; and whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts in their orderly arrangement, was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

"Facts are stupid things," he would say, "until brought into connection with some general law."

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Samuel H. Scudder. *From American Poems*, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton, Osgood & Co., 1879): pp. 450-54

## THE OBSERVATION PROCESS

Before studying any Bible text, make sure that you have an overview of the entire Bible book. Remember, do macro before doing micro. This can be accomplished in four steps:

Step 1: Read the entire Bible book, preferably in one sitting.

Step 2: Discover the purpose of the book.

Step 3: Discover the setting of the book.

Step 4: Develop an outline of the book.

After you've gained the "big picture," read the selected text several times. Keep in mind that the smallest unit of study should be a paragraph.

## ASK QUESTIONS

Bombard the selected text with questions. Curiosity will automatically drive you deeper into the Bible text. Most of the time, you will discover that the answers to your questions are already in the Bible. These questions will be addressed during the interpretation stage.

## LOOK FOR CLUES



Like a detective who looks for clues, you too want to look for clues in the Bible text that reveal the author's intended message. Here are five things to look for:

- Look for things that are emphasized. Bible authors often emphasize something by giving it a large amount of space, or stating the purpose straight out. They may also call attention to something by its order in the text, or move from something lesser to something greater.

- Look for things that are repeated. Watch for repeated terms, phrases, and clauses. Notice what the author of Psalm 136 emphasizes by repeating a certain phrase. What repeated phrase do you see in Hebrews 11? Sometimes the author may repeat a Bible character in order to make a point. Look for repeated incidents or circumstances. For example, notice the repeated phrase, "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD," in the book of Judges. Look also for patterns<sup>38</sup>, and New Testament usage of the Old Testament passages.
- Look for things that are related. These include things that have some connection or relationship with each other. For instance, Jesus often follows a principle he taught with illustrations of the principle in real life situations or stories. Look for questions followed by answers such as that in Romans 6:1. Look for cause-effect relationships such as the great persecution, recorded in Acts 8:1, that arose against the church in Jerusalem (effect), resulting from the stoning of Stephen (cause).
- Look for things that are alike and unlike. Bible authors will often describe two things that are alike to draw an emphasis. Notice the similarity between the panting of a thirsty deer in Psalm 42:1 to the panting of the author toward knowing God. Look for similes, such as, "like," or "as." Can you see the simile in 1 Peter 2:2? Metaphors will also be used to emphasize a point. Authors will also show two things that are unlike each other, such as that in Galatians 5:19 and 5:22. What two things are unlike in these two verses?
- Look for things that are true to life. Bible authors will sometimes describe true-to-life situations to emphasize something. By describing the lives of people like Abraham, Moses, David, and Peter, the reader is drawn to see something being emphasized.

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<sup>38</sup> Some Bible authors resort to chiasmic patterns to emphasize a point. Hebrew poetry writers may use poetic parallelism to emphasize points.

## OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Continue your detective work by using the following checklist of six observation "Ws."

- Who? Record the name of the text's author, if the author is quoting someone else, such as Matthew recording the words of Jesus, then record the name of the speaker also. Describe the original audience.
- What? Next, record the setting (background) of the text, and what is being said in the text. This is a good time to look for clues, things the author is emphasizing.
- Where? Where is the author/speaker, and where is the intended audience? It may be helpful to look up the location in a Bible atlas.
- When? Determine when the event took place, and when the author recorded it. In many cases these two will be identical, but in others they may be taking place at two different times. For instance, Matthew wrote his book around A.D. 60-65, but he recorded what Jesus had said some thirty years earlier. This becomes important during the interpretation stage.
- Why? This is where you can record your questions as you read the selected text. If the author/speaker presents any questions, record them too, but resist the temptation to look for the answers at this stage because they will be pursued later.
- Wherefore? Is there a stated response in the text? If so, record it. Try to answer the question, "So what?" Look for verbs that might suggest an action to be taken.

### OBSERVATION EXERCISE

Using the selected text below, begin by reading the entire book (about 30 minutes) then try observing what it says by answering the questions below.

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*Hebrews 10:19-25 (NIV)*

*“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

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- Who:** Who is the author? Who is the speaker? Who is the original audience?
- What:** What is the setting (background) of the text? What is being said in the text? What things are being repeated in the text? What things are being emphasized in the text? What is the author's intended message (AIM) in the text?
- Where:** Where is the author/speaker? (Hint: Use a Bible atlas for this.) Where is the audience?
- When:** When did the event take place? (Hint: Use a Bible handbook for this.) When did the author write about the event?
- Why:** What questions come to mind about this text? Does the author/speaker present any questions?
- Wherefore:** What response does the author/speaker state, if any, from the original audience? Look for verbs.

## **STEP 2: INTERPRETATION-WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

*“Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.” Ps. 119:34*

Now that you know what the text says, the next step is to discover what the text means. The goal of interpretation is to discover the author's intended meaning (A.I.M). Avoid forcing your own meaning into the text. Whenever people have vastly different interpretations, it is usually because they are reading their meaning into the text (*eisegesis*) rather than reading the author's meaning out of the text (*exegesis*).

### **IS IT FIGURATIVE OR LITERAL LANGUAGE?**

How do we know when to read the Bible literally and when to read it figuratively? If something is written in literal language, then you can read it in its normal sense and accept it at face value. A good guideline to follow is, “When the plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the fact of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages clearly indicate otherwise.

When Jesus referred to the Pharisees as whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:27), or Herod as a fox (Luke 13:32), he was using figurative language to make a point. But when can we know if the author is using figurative language?

Howard G. Hendricks offers ten ways for knowing when the author is using figurative language:<sup>40</sup>

- Use literal sense unless there is some good reason not to.
- Use figurative language when the passage tells you to do so.
- Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd.
- Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning would involve something immoral.

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<sup>39</sup> This is the so called “golden rule” of Dr. L Cooper, the late director of the Biblical Research Society.

<sup>40</sup> Hendricks, 260-264.

- Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech.
- Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the context and scope of the passage.
- Use the figurative if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the general character and style of the book.
- Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation goes contrary to the plan and purpose of the author.
- Use the figurative sense if the literal interpretation involves a contradiction of other Scripture.
- Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation would involve a contradiction in doctrine.

#### **IS IT DESCRIPTIVE OR PRESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE?**

Just because Solomon had many wives and concubines and God blessed him, it doesn't



mean that men today should also have many wives and concubines. It was the norm for his time and culture, but it was not meant to be the norm for everyone. This is called descriptive language in contrast to prescriptive language which is intended to be didactic, as a norm for all. Interpretation must take into account which type of language is being used.

Descriptive texts are those that simply describe what is happening without giving a command or instructing us on how to behave. The book of Exodus is mostly descriptive. It talks about the Israelites in slavery in Egypt and how God rescues them out of Pharaoh's hand and brings them to Mt. Sinai.

Prescriptive texts are instructive. They are commands either of what to do or what not to do. In Exodus we have the Ten Commandments. These fall in the prescriptive category because they "prescribe" certain behaviors. It is important not to get these two confused. Just because something is descriptive does not make it prescriptive. There are many things that people do in the Bible that we should not do. It seems obvious that statements that simply describe what is going on are not the same as commands, but there can be some

confusion. The confusion comes when we bring in the idea of modeling or examples. There are many people in the Bible that did great things and so we want to emulate them. The question is how far do we take it. Should we make rash vows like Jephthah (Judges 11:30-31) or sacrifice our children to prove our faith in God like Abraham (Gen. 22)? Obviously not. If we are going to use people in the Bible as models, we want to model their character and their faith, and bring those ideals into our own culture. We should have the perseverance and trust in God like Joseph to believe the promises spoken over them, even when his situation didn't match up. We should look to the boldness of Caleb, who saw big giants but believed that if God was for them, then no one could be against them. We can take the principals and learn from them without copying their exact behavior.

#### **INTERPRETING LITERARY GENRES OF THE BIBLE**

Proper interpretation must also be based on the type of literary form, or genre, used by the author. Literary genres of the Bible include narratives, prophecies, parables, poetry, proverbs, epistles, biographies, apocalyptic, and more. As you become more proficient in interpreting Scripture, you will want to gain a deeper understanding of biblical genres and how to interpret them. Interpreting literary genres of the Bible will be addressed later.

#### **INTERPRETATION CHECKLIST**

After carefully completing the observation stage, begin the interpretation stage using the following six "Cs" which conveniently incorporate the previous rules of interpretation.

- Content:** Based on the content of the selected text, ask yourself, "What is the author's intended meaning (A.I.M)?" For example, the A.I.M in John 15:1-8 is:

*"Just as each branch must remain connected to the vine to produce fruit, so too must Christ's disciples remain connected to Christ and His words to be productive spiritually."*

- Context:** One of the central aspects of sound biblical interpretation is to gain an understanding of the context. Context is to find understood at three levels: 1) The context of the whole Bible, 2) the context of the book, and 3) the context of the immediate text. See the diagram below. The reader should ask, "Is my interpreted A.I.M consistent with the overall context of the Bible, and in particular, the Bible book? Is it consistent with the preceding text, and is it consistent with the following text?"

- Comparison: Compare Scripture with Scripture by comparing the A.I.M of this text to other related texts in the Bible. (Hint: Look for cross-references in your Bible margins). Compare the meaning of key words with other related texts in the Bible. (Hint: Use a concordance to chase down terms and concepts from one book of the Bible to the next. Use Bible dictionaries to understand the meaning of specific words in the original languages).
- Culture: Ask yourself, "Does my interpreted A.I.M of the text fit into the cultural background of the text?" (Hint: Use a Bible handbook to understand the cultural background). What bearing does the cultural background have on the text?
- Consultation: Consult with other secondary sources in order to find answers to the questions you listed during the observation stage. In what ways do the answers to your questions add more meaning to the text?<sup>41</sup>
- Central Principle: Finally, look for the central principle, or the main idea that can be transmitted from culture to culture. This is sometimes called the "transferable principle." Ask yourself, "What is the author talking about?" The answer to this question is the subject of the text. Then ask yourself, "What is the author saying about what he is talking about?" This is the complement.<sup>42</sup> Write the central principle as a single sentence containing the subject and the complement. For example, the central principle for John 15:1-8 may be written as: "Apart from Christ--we cannot be spiritually productive."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hendricks, Chapters 30-34.

<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see *Expository Preaching* by Haddon W. Robinson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980), pp.31-48.

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1998), p. 70.

### INTERPRETATION EXERCISE

Continuing with Hebrews 10:19-25 as the selected text, try interpreting the text using the six Cs described above.

Content

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Context

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Comparison

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Culture

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Consultation

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Central principle (Subject/Complement)

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Complement \_\_\_\_\_

## STEP 3: APPLICATION- HOW DOES IT AFFECT MY LIFE?

*“Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” James 1:23-24*

### WHAT IS APPLICATION?

Dave Veerman states that application is answering the question, “So what?” another way of putting it is asking yourself, “Why should I know these facts? How can I use this information? What am I going to do about what I’ve just learned? What should I do about it?”<sup>44</sup>

### AVOIDING THE “MIRROR EFFECT”



James points out that if we observe and interpret God's Word but do not apply it, it is like looking in a mirror, and then forgetting what we saw. Application is the most neglected stage in the Bible study process, but it is the most important stage. Too often Bible study ends with interpretation, and it becomes merely a satisfying of intellectual curiosity.

### FOUR SUBSTITUTES FOR APPLICATION

Even when we think we are applying the Scripture to our lives, we are often substituting something else in its place. Hendricks lists them as follows:

- We substitute interpretation for application.
- We substitute superficial obedience for application.
- We substitute rationalization for application.
- We substitute emotional experience for a volitional decision.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Dave Veerman, *How to Apply the Bible* (Minneapolis: Quarry Publishing, 1993), 14.

<sup>45</sup> Hendricks, 285-289.

## **HOW ARE YOU TO RESPOND?**

As you observe what the Bible says and interpret its meaning, you can also respond by:

- Depending on the Holy Spirit to illuminate your understanding of the Bible.
- Acting on direct teachings (prescriptive language).
- Applying sound biblical principles from indirect teachings (descriptive language).
- Choosing to act positively to the Bible's conditional promises.
- Learning from biblical examples, both good and bad.
- Believing the Bible's statements of truth.
- Keeping your Bible study time at a high priority.

## **TEN QUESTIONS TO ASK**

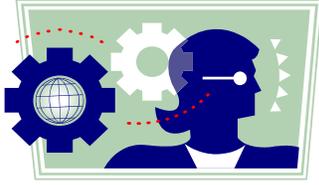
To help you think about applying the central principle to your life, try answering the following questions:<sup>46</sup>

- Is there an example for me to follow?
- Is there a sin to avoid?
- Is there a promise to claim?
- Is there a prayer to repeat?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a condition to meet?
- Is there a verse to memorize?
- Is there an error to mark?
- Is there a challenge to face?
- Is there an attitude to change?

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Chapter 41

## YOU NEED “SOAK TIME”

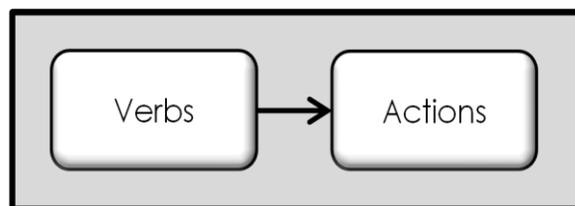


One interpretation, many applications! In most cases, application will be specific to you—not all applications will be universal. Sometimes, seeing how to apply the Bible takes time and it may not jump out at you right away. Discovering application takes “soak time,” time to reflect, pray, and meditate. In our modern hurried culture, this can often be difficult, but it is necessary for a solid Bible study.

## APPLICATION CHECKLIST

*Interpretation always precedes application!* The Bible must be applied as God intended. Here is a simple three-step sequence for applying the central principle to your life.

- Meditate: Meditate on the central principle of the text from the interpretation stage. Take some time to let the central principle of the text “soak in.”
- Identify: Identify with Biblical men and women as they heard God's Word and responded—or failed to respond—in their situation.<sup>47</sup> Ask yourself, “What traits do modern men and women share in common with that of the original audience?”
- Actions: Look for specific responses that are already stated in the text. Verbs often imply actions. Using the ten questions listed above, write down the specific actions you can take to apply the central principle to your life. Include dates for each action, otherwise, they probably won't get done.



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<sup>47</sup> Richards and Bredfeldt, 72

### APPLICATION EXERCISE

Based on your observation and interpretation of Hebrews 10:19-25 as the selected text, use the above checklist to determine how it applies it to your life. Fill in the action plan below.

Meditate

Identify

Actions

No.	SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO TAKE	TARGET DATE
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

### THREE-STEP METHOD EXAMPLE

Rick Warren offers the following example<sup>48</sup> using the O-I-A Method on Ephesians Chapter 1.

EPHESIANS CHAPTER 1		
OBSERVATION What does it say?	INTERPRETATION What does it mean?	APPLICATION How does it affect my life?
1:3 God has blessed me with every spiritual blessing.	God thinks the world of me.	Thank God for what he has done for me.
1:4 God chose me to live a life of holiness.	I must obey God and his commandments.	I must make sure I'm leading a holy life.
1:5 God has adopted me into his family.	This means I belong to him forever.	I need to act as belonging to God's family.
1:7 Through Christ I have been forgiven.	Christ is the only one who can forgive sins.	I must thank God for the totality of his forgiveness.
1:9 God has revealed his will to us through Jesus Christ.	Christ is God's total revelation of himself.	Bible study is essential if I am to know God's will.
1:11 I am an heir of God through Christ.	I have all privileges of being an heir.	I should thank God for this great gift.
1:13-14 The Holy Spirit in me is a guarantee of my salvation and acceptance.	This means I am important, that God gave me so great a guarantee.	I need to live my life in such a way as not to offend the Spirit who lives in me.
1:16 Paul prays for the Ephesians.	I need to pray for fellow Christians.	I need to pray for John, Sue, and Bob.
1:18 Paul prays for other's enlightenment.	I need to pray that others may know God's will.	I need to pray this for Charlie and Gail.

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<sup>48</sup> Rick Warren, *Personal Bible Study Methods: 12 Ways to Study the Bible on Your Own* (Rick Warren, 1997) 183-184.

NOTES

# 4 BIBLE STUDY METHODS

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Now that you have a basic understanding for interpreting the Bible, the next step is to select a Bible study method. Try several methods to see which ones interest you most. Varying your Bible study methods will also keep God's Word fresh.

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE BY CHAPTERS

Chapter studies can be the most exciting way to study the Bible since they contain short but meaty passages that don't require much time yet they yield so much.<sup>49</sup>

### WRITE A CHAPTER SUMMARY.

- Chapter Title: Give a meaningful title to this chapter.
- Paraphrase it: Put the chapter in your own words. Summarize it in such a way that you could read your own paraphrase to another person, or...
- Outline it: Break the chapter into its major points, then break each major point into smaller subpoints.
  - Look for the main points of the chapter
  - Look for the subpoints under each main points
  - Look for paragraph breaks
  - Look for transitional words ("For," "therefore," "but," "then," "finally," "for this reason," "now," etc.)

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<sup>49</sup> Adapted from "Personal Bible Study," by Rick Warren (pastors.com, 1984).

### **LIST YOUR OBSERVATIONS.**

- Author: Who is the author?
- Recipients: To whom is the author writing?
- Context: What is the overall context of this chapter?
- Key Words: What key words are used?
- Key Phrases: Are there any repeated phrases?
- Key Verses: List your observations for the key verses in this chapter.

### **INTERPRET YOUR OBSERVATIONS.**

- Meaning: What does the observation mean?
- Difficult words or phrases: Are there any difficult words, or phrases in this chapter?

### **CORRELATE WITH OTHER SCRIPTURES.**

- Cross-references: Check for cross-references.
- Relevance: List how each cross-reference relates to this chapter.

### **WRITE DOWN SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.**

Summarize: Summarize your conclusions about the entire chapter.

### **LIST SOME POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS.**

Ask yourself: "What am I going to do about this *now*?"

## **HOW TO DO TOPICAL STUDIES**

Have you wondered what the Bible says about various topics such as anger, love, tithing, worship, baptism, etc.? Doing a biblical study on any given topic can be fun and very informative as long as basic hermeneutical principles are followed.

## WHAT TOPICAL STUDIES WILL DO FOR YOU



Topical studies will help you know what God thinks about any major issue, and help you to become familiar with God in a personal way. They will often stimulate your love for him and give you a deeper understanding of what God wants you to know about a given subject.

## A SIX-STEP PROCESS FOR DOING TOPICAL STUDIES

Tim LaHaye provides an effective process for conducting a study on any given topic. After selecting a topic of interest you can follow these simple steps:<sup>50</sup>

- Look up a topic (concordance). Several recommended concordances are:
  - The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance by Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III
  - Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible by James Strong
- Notice the various aspects of the topic listed in the concordance. For example, if you were studying the topic of *fasting* you might notice that aspects such as its benefits, when it is to be practiced, and what the right reasons are for it, are listed. Look up each reference shown in the concordance and note what each passage says about the topic, taking its context into account. Be sure to look up both Old and New Testament references. Also, consider using Bible study software, such as *BibleWorks* which can quickly list all verses related to a given topic, or a given phrase.
- Examine your notes carefully, reading them over several times observing what they say. Don't rush this step.
- Begin making a list of the concepts or basic principles that God is teaching on this topic.

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<sup>50</sup> Tim LaHaye, *How to Study the Bible for Yourself* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1976, 1998), pp. 137-139.

- Summarize. Try to reduce your analysis of the topic to about one paragraph, half a page at most. This is necessary so that you don't become overwhelmed by too much information but at the same time you are not oversimplifying your conclusions.
- Check against extra-biblical sources. Go to a good Bible dictionary, such as Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary, or Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Dictionary, and examine the definition of the same topic. If your analysis is inconsistent with theirs, then go back over your analysis to see why there might be a difference. Identify where you agree and where you disagree. (It might be tempting to skip Steps 3 through 6 and simply go directly to your dictionary but you'll miss some of the "meatier" aspects of doing a thorough biblical study on your own).

## HOW TO DO DEVOTIONAL READING



J. P. Moreland provides excellent guidelines for devotional readings.<sup>51</sup> The goal of devotional reading is not so much gathering of new information or mastering content, but to deepen and nourish the soul by entering into the passage and allowing it to be assimilated into one's whole personality. Certain steps are required in order to enter correctly into the process of devotional reading.

First, you must prepare yourself to listen to the Holy Spirit as he speaks to you quietly as you are reading. Be sure to find a place that is quiet and free of distractions as you do this. Invite God to speak to your heart about what you are reading.

Second, have a spirit of expectancy and openness as you read the passage slowly and deliberately with a sense of humility. The goal here is not to read lots of material but to focus on a small portion of the Scripture.

Third, feel free to periodically stop and reflect on what you've read. Don't rush the process. Talk to God about the passage and think deeply about its specific meaning.

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<sup>51</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), 164-165

Fourth, If the text you are reading is not moving you as you had hoped, stop reading and examine what is going on inside, and tell this God. After a short period of time, return to the passage and continue reading.

## TIPS FOR INTELLECTUAL READING



The goal in intellectual reading is different from devotional reading. The goal in intellectual reading is to learn something new from a book that relates to the Bible, to master specific content, and to grow in one's ability to think and reason. This approach will take more discipline than devotional reading but results in gains that are worth the effort. To develop your reading skills you may want to read Adler and Doren's book, "How to Read

a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading."<sup>52</sup>

First, get an overview of the book you are about to read. Begin by examining the table of contents and the inside and outside jackets. Second, scan the first paragraph of each chapter. This will provide a structural overview of the book. Third, select a chapter to read and begin by reading the first sentence in each paragraph. Finally, read the entire chapter. Moreland also provides practical steps for intellectual reading by explaining the benefits of writing notes in the margins, and writing a brief summary of the entire chapter at the top of the first page of that chapter.<sup>53</sup> This helps if you return to the book months later and want to get a quick summary.

When selecting Bible-related book to read, make certain it is published by a publisher or book distributor that is theologically sound. Here is a partial list of excellent publishers and sources:

- Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Broadman & Holman, Nashville, Tennessee

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<sup>52</sup> Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).

<sup>53</sup> Moreland, 166-169.

- Christian Book Distributors, Peabody, Massachusetts
- Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois
- Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Intervarsity Press and IVP Book Club, Westmont, Illinois
- Moody Press, Chicago, Illinois
- Mount Hermon Bookstore. Mount Hermon, California
- NavPress, Colorado Springs, Colorado
- Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee
- Zondervan Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan

# 5 HOW TO BEGIN

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Now that you understand the basics of hermeneutics, and how to get the most out of the Bible, the final step is to formulate a plan to begin studying the Bible. Here are five steps to follow.

## **DECIDE TO BEGIN**



Make a conscious decision to study the Bible on a regular basis using this three-step method. Make your Bible study time a high priority which may mean watching less television. If this is a new practice for you, begin with fifteen minutes a day, then move to thirty minutes a day, and more as you become more disciplined. Be patient and don't rush your study.

## **SET A SCHEDULE**

Decide when to study the Bible. Usually having a daily time works best, but select a time when you are the most alert and your mind is clear. Studying God's Word at the end of the day when you are tired and when your mind is filled with the activities of the day may not be the best time.

## **FIND A PRIVATE PLACE**

Find a private place where you will be free from distractions and interruptions. It should also be a comfortable place. This can often be the greatest challenge you face with your regular Bible study times.

## **BEGIN WITH PRAYER**

Begin with prayer asking God to guide you to a selected text and to help you work through it using the three steps of observation, interpretation, and application.

## KEEP A NOTEBOOK

As you carefully dig deeper into the Bible, you are going to discover exciting things about God, yourself, and life around you. Using the Bible study checklist found in the appendix of this booklet, record your observations, interpretations, and applications for each selected Bible text. You'll find yourself going back to them often, reaping the benefit of your previous studies. Remember, gaining Bible knowledge is not enough—you must apply it!

## BIBLE STUDY TOOLS



Lastly, a word about Bible study tools. They can be very insightful for your regular Bible studies, but use them only after you have spent time in the Bible. Remember, they are secondary sources and should always be viewed as such—the Bible is your primary source!

→ Many of the Bible Study resources listed below can be found at [www.TaylorNotes.Info](http://www.TaylorNotes.Info).

TOOL	DESCRIPTION
Bible Atlases	Bible atlases help to put Bible events into their geographical and historical context. They give a visual representation of nations and empires of the Ancient Near East.
Bible Charts	There are many books made up exclusively of charts, diagrams, summary tables, and timelines of Bible topics. With modern readers being more visually oriented these offer vast amounts of information in summary form.
Bible Commentaries	Commentaries provide helpful information on difficult passages. They can also provide insight into the broader message of the book. Use commentaries after you've done your own study.
Bible Dictionaries and Handbooks	Bible dictionaries and handbooks are helpful in providing information about cultural and historical backgrounds of a book. They can also provide insights into customs of the Ancient Near East and word definitions in their original context.
Bible Software	Bible software applications provide the Bible student with quick access to words or phrases. They are excellent for word studies and quick Bible text searches. Most software applications include

	other resources such as commentaries, handbooks, word definitions, and other secondary sources.
Bible Translations	Helpful for gaining a clear understanding of the text. Use at least three translation types (free, functional and formal). See "Bible Translations" in Chapter 6 for more about translations.
Concordances	A concordance is an index to Bible passages. By looking up a particular word or phrase, you can find the references where the phrase occurs in the Bible. Many Bible software applications also have this capability and are faster than looking up words manually in books.
Expository Dictionaries and Interlinear Texts	These are helpful when doing word studies based on original Greek and Hebrew word meanings (you don't have to know Greek or Hebrew). Some words in the Bible have meanings that are different from their modern English meanings.
Internet Sources	Excellent resources for any of the above tools, but make sure that the website you use is reliable and doctrinally sound.

Varying how you conduct your own personal Bible study can make it even more fun and interesting. Rick Warren describes how this can be done easily and effectively in his book "Personal Bible Study Methods: 12 Ways to Study the Bible on Your Own."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Rick Warren, *Personal Bible Study Methods: 12 Ways to Study the Bible on Your Own* (Rick Warren, 1997).

NOTES

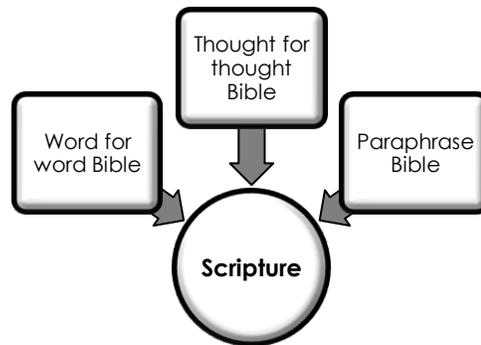
# 6 BIBLE TRANSLATION COMPARISONS

Below is a brief comparison of several popular Bible translations. For more information about Bible translations, see “Bible Translation Comparisons” by Rose Publishing.<sup>55</sup>

	New King James Version	New Revised Standard Version	New International Version	New American Standard Bible	English Standard Version	The Message	Today's New International Version
Method	Word-for-word	Word-for-word	Balance between Word-for-word and thought-for-thought	Word-for-word	Word-for-word	Paraphrase	Word-for-word
Year	1982	1989	1978	1971, revised 1995	2001	2002	2005
Grade Level	9	8	7	11	8	6	Unstated

## HOW TO CHOOSE A BIBLE

- 1) Use what your church, pastor, or Bible Study leader recommends.
- 2) Use the Bible with the readability you prefer. Understanding the Bible is important.
- 3) “Triangulate” by selecting a word-for-word, a thought-for-thought, and a paraphrase translation.



<sup>55</sup> *Bible Translation Comparisons* (Torrence: Rose Publishing, 2007)

NOTES

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