

SECTION 2: THE TOOLS THAT ARE NEEDED

Lesson 2: Exegetical Tools

Introduction (8)

In the first lesson we considered what *Biblical Theology* is—not merely theology that finds its source in the Bible, but *a theology that makes sense of the Bible as a whole*. Biblical Theology understands that the Bible is not just a collection of inspired religious books written by various prophets and apostles; but that it's a single story, a coherent narrative of the redemptive acts of God—that *this single story has God as both its author and primary actor, and that its center as well as its climax is the glory of God in salvation through judgment*.

But as soon as we say that we are confronted with a theological problem. *How can we be sure that we're reading and understanding the story correctly?* For that matter, how can we be sure that we're reading and understanding the various parts of the story right? Let's set aside for a moment the incredible idea that we could understand the mind and purposes of God fully and perfectly. And let's ask the question: How can we be confident that we can accurately understand the words of a Hebrew prophet living and writing 3,000 years ago? Aren't words, human words, much less divine words, incredibly slippery and malleable? Isn't the meaning of a text an incredibly subjective idea? I mean, unless an author is present to tell us what he meant authoritatively, *who's to say that one interpretation of a text is better or more accurate or more faithful or more meaningful than another?*

(underlined is the students four bullet points)

If you're at all familiar with current discussions of theories of interpretation, what scholars call "hermeneutics" (theories of interpretation), you'll know that these days, many are quite skeptical about our ability to know with any precision what an author meant when he wrote something, unless we have direct access to that author. Distance and discontinuity between author and reader in language and culture, historical context and even personal experiences, it is said, effectively cut the reader off from knowing objectively and certainly what the author meant. For some, that's caused a real crisis. For others, it's been cause for celebration. For them, the loss of what we call the "Author's Original Intent" means that finally we can be honest in our reading, and go ahead and acknowledge that we use texts for our own purposes, to mean what we want them to mean. "Meaning" no longer needs to be cleverly and dishonestly attached to the author's mind, but can simply be the "meaning" that the reading community finds there. What meaning do they find? They find the meaning that they need, that they want, the meaning that seems reasonable and serves their needs. In effect, this modern approach to interpretation based on the supposed inaccessibility of the AOI, means that there is no such thing as an authoritative text or interpretation, only an authoritative community. For thousands of years, societies have served texts, both sacred and political, usually to the benefit of those in power and to the detriment of minorities and the oppressed. Now, with what is known as the hermeneutical turn, there has been a great liberation. We don't serve texts anymore. The text serves us.

Now of course, there are some areas where this idea has not caught on. Most parties to written contracts want to insist that the contract has a stable and accessible meaning. But in other areas of law, especially constitutional law, as well as politics, more generally, ethics and religion, and especially modern pop

culture, this way of thinking, known as post-modernism, has taken hold with a vengeance and breathed a new and dangerous life into old fashioned relativism.

All of this brings me back to my original question. If the Bible is a story with God as its author, but a story whose component parts are texts written by people in different languages, cultures and historical periods, how can we be sure that we're reading the story correctly? Is there even such a thing as a correct reading?

*The conviction of this church is that there is such a thing as a correct meaning of a text, precisely because God, who created this world, our brains, and thus our ability to use language, is Himself a speaking God. It was God who created rationality and language so that language could accurately convey meaning from one mind to another mind. And He himself proved this by not only acting in history, but then condescending to use human language to authoritatively explain and interpret his own actions. We see this again and again on the pages of Scripture—God not only sends the 10 plagues against Egypt, but he **speaks** to Moses and Aaron explaining what He is doing. God not only parts the Red Sea, but he **speaks** and explains what he's about to do and why. God not only makes Israel into a nation, but he **speaks** audibly to the whole nation from Mt Sinai telling them so. I could continue to multiply examples, but perhaps most telling is the Incarnation of Christ himself. When God decided to once and for all definitively reveal himself, he didn't send angels or miraculous signs and wonders in the sky. He became a man and **spoke** to us in a language that people could understand. As the author to the Hebrews put it, **“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son...”** (Heb. 1:1) Also read 2 Peter 1:16-18, **“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.***

Practically, what this means is that words, when placed in sentences and paragraphs, convey meaning. And not just any meaning. They convey the meaning of the author who constructed the sentence and the paragraph, as a reflection of His authorial intent. *As readers of words, and particularly as readers of God's Word, that means that our obligation, and also our privilege, is to read in such a way as to recover and understand the meaning the Author wanted to communicate.*

Now of course, you read this way all the time, every day of your life. When you pick up a newspaper or magazine article, your goal is not to read into the story your own ideas. You're trying to understand what the person is saying. You may go on to reject it, or be inspired by it; you may think it was well-written or poorly written; you might think of all sorts of applications for your new-found knowledge that the author hadn't considered at all, or you might decide that the piece is nothing more than amusing, but useless trivia. But regardless of what you go on to do with what you've read, the first thing you do, quite unconsciously, is read for the Author's Original Intent. And when you do that, you are engaged in the process of exegesis.

What is exegesis? Exegesis = *The disciplined attempt to find the author's original intent*, rather than my own preference or experience or opinion. Jerome, who knew the Greek and Hebrew languages very well

long after most people had forgotten both and only read Latin, put it this way. *“The office of a commentator is to set forth not what he himself would prefer, but what his author says.”*

So all of you, every day, are exegetes of the texts you read, from recipes to instruction manuals, from Sports Illustrated to your favorite blog. And you’re also exegetes of Scripture. But while exegeting the newspaper is nearly automatic, since it’s written in our own language and within our own culture, exegeting Scripture, written in other languages and at other times, requires a more conscious approach on our part if we’re not to misread it and so misunderstand its meaning. What we’re going to do with the rest of this lesson is quickly look at the method of exegesis, what’s known as the grammatical-historical method, the various literary forms or genres that make up the Bible, and how we apply our method to those various genres.

Grammatical Historical Method (9)

The basic method of exegesis that we use to determine an author’s original intent has come to be known as the grammatical-historical method. John Owen described it this way: *“There is no other sense in [Scripture] than what is contained in the words whereof materially it doth consist... In the interpretation of the mind of anyone, it is necessary that the words he speaks or writes be rightly understood; and this we cannot do...unless we understand the language he speaks ...the [idiom] of that language, with the common use of an intention of its... expressions.”* This understanding of the task of interpretation immediately plunges us into an exploration and study of the grammar, syntax, and literary and historical context of the words we’re reading—thus the phrase: grammatical-historical method.

Now in discovering the author’s original intent, we need to avoid what is known as the *“Intentional Fallacy.”* That’s the idea that through the text, we can somehow get beyond the text into the thought world, feelings, and unexpressed intentions of the author, when in fact, we don’t have access to the author’s psyche or feelings or motives, unless he explicitly expresses those things through his words. The mind, and therefore the meaning, that we have access to, is the expressed mind, the mind that has revealed itself through words.

However, in focusing on words, we have to recognize that words by themselves don’t mean anything in particular. The word “set” has a wide range of possible meanings, according to the Oxford Dictionary, “Set” has 424 different definitions, the most in our language. But until I put the word “set” into the context of a sentence, and then that sentence in the context of a paragraph, you can’t be certain what I mean by the word. Let me give you some practical examples of how we use the word ‘set’ in many, many different ways.

“Set” has 119 definitions that are verbs: (to put something in a particular place) ex. I set my keys on the table. (to put or apply) ex. I set the house on fire. (to distribute china, silver) ex. I set the table. (to put a price upon something) ex. I set the price for my necklace at \$1,000,000. (to present as a model) ex. I set a good example for others at work.

The 119 different ways you can use set as a verb also includes several verb phrases like "set ahead", "set apart", "all set" and "set aside."

Set is also a noun, or at least in Egyptian religion it is. Set was the brother and murderer of Osiris in Egyptian religion and took the form of a donkey.

The word set can be used as an adjective when talking about a 'set time', 'set procedures' or 'set in his ways.' The word set can be used as a noun when talking about a 'set of golf clubs', a 'television set' or a 'set' in a tennis match.

So the basic unit of meaning is not the word, but the sentence. And the unit that determines what sentences mean, and therefore the words in them, is the paragraph.

This means that the primary question that the historical-grammatical method is seeking to answer is not, "What does that word mean?", but "What does that paragraph mean?" In answering that question, we quickly realize that context is king. So the first step of exegesis is to read the text, the whole text, over and over again. Interpretation actually begins with the whole, not the part. Then, in the context of the whole, we work backwards through the parts, back to sentences, back all the way down to individual words. What we learn and discover there then takes us back to the whole with a more accurate and intelligent understanding of meaning.

Grammatical (9)

All of this begins with a basic grammatical and structural analysis of the text.

1. First, how does the larger text break up into units?

This is a function of genre: for epistles it's the paragraph, for poetry it's the stanza, for narrative history it's the event or story.

2. What's the general flow of argument?

Is there a command in the text? Or is there a truth that is clearly proclaimed? Is a contrast being drawn between two things? Or is a principle being illustrated? Is a pattern being established? Or is a response being encouraged?

3. Looking at a particular sentence, what's the subject, the verb and the object, and how do they relate.

4. How are the sentences connected? Paying attention to the connections allows you to establish the detailed flow of thought.

For each of these steps, all that's needed is patient reading and a basic understanding of grammar and logic. No commentaries required at this point! But still lots of ways to go wrong!

Historical (9)

Next, how do the various larger contexts inform your understanding of the meaning of the text?

1. How does this fit within the larger argument of the book, or section of Scripture you're reading?
2. How does the historical context (author, date, audience), if known, throw light on your understanding of words or arguments?

Imagine if I were to set before you a letter. And in the letter you read, “I ran through the stop sign and the results were disastrous.” What do we think about when we read that? How do we interpret that? But what if I told you that letter was 250 years old? First of all the English would not have been structured that way, but that only further aids my point. When we read, we must search for the AOI. So it serves us well to learn the date the text was penned, since the words the author used will have different meanings sometimes than how we would use them. In this letter it was a young boy who has writing about a run that he was on, and in that run he came upon a dangerous situation. A by-stander saw the danger and put his hand up in the air, telling the boy to stop, but he ignored the signal and ran into danger anyways, injuring himself. We interpreted the word ‘ran’ immediately as ‘driving’. It is just that easy to assume that you know the proper definitions and meanings of the words in any given paragraph. Finding the AOI is key.

3. Is there a cultural context that you need to be aware of?
E.g., what are Pharisees; what rights did women have in the Roman world.
4. Are there issues of geography, politics or history that throw light on the meaning?
E.g., where is Tarshish in relation to Nineveh?

Now unless you’re a full-time Bible scholar, most of these sorts of issues won’t be in your category of general knowledge. Here’s where commentaries, Bible Dictionaries, Encyclopedias and Atlases are extremely helpful.

Biblical (11)

Finally, perhaps the most important contextual question is how this text relates to the rest of Scripture. I’m going to spend more time on this in a later class, but suffice it to say that *if the text quotes, alludes to, or resembles another part of the Bible, that’s significant for our understanding of what the author was intending to communicate.*

IMPORTANCE OF LITERARY FORMS

Earlier I mentioned that our interpretation of any given text would vary depending on the genre we’re dealing with, but I didn’t take the time to explain what I meant by genre.

1. *Distinct genres tend to have distinct rules or patterns of communicating.*
Genre is simply a word that literary types use to describe the different recognized forms of writing that exist. This is important for us in understanding the Bible for several reasons. We intuitively recognize this. On the whole, poetry doesn’t even look like a newspaper article. That’s in part because poetry and narrative are different genres, with their own unique set of internal rules. These rules and patterns have a real bearing on the meaning of the words and sentences an author writes. What’s more, certain word patterns are so closely associated with a genre, that their use almost immediately defines what we’re looking at and how we’re to interpret it. “Once upon a time...” signals fairy tale, not history, while “Dear Joe... love, Sally” signals epistle, not a legal brief. If we’re going to read a text literally, that is according to the sense of the words in the Author’s Original Intent, we’re going to need to know what genre we’re in.

2. The second reason this is important is because it doesn't take long to realize that the Bible consists of multiple genres. The entire Bible is true, and it all needs to be read literally, but what that looks like in the legal statutes of Exodus is going to look somewhat different than in the poetry of Psalm 17. Otherwise, we run the risk of having to say that David contradicted the second commandment when he imagined God as having wings like a mother hen that he could hide under.

3. A third reason this is important is it helps us with books or passages that seem culturally foreign to us and so difficult to grasp. Two obvious examples of this are genealogies and apocalyptic literature. Neither are types of text you come across in your daily reading, and yet the Bible has quite a few examples of both. Do we just apply the rules of genre from narrative or epistle? That's what some have done, and it produces rather boring genealogies and rather fantastical apocalyptic. But in fact, both of these genres have specific rules, and if we're going to read them literally (i.e., correctly), we need to understand those rules.

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE'S DIVERSE GENRES (11)

So what are the genres of Scripture? There are more than we have time to deal with during any one class, but let me conclude by laying out the 7 major forms, and demonstrate with each how we go about exegeting them using the grammatical-historical method.

1. Narrative

Narrative makes up the largest portion of the Bible- *40% of OT and 60% of NT*. Not only that, but narrative provides the overall framework within which we understand all the other genres. How do we go about interpreting narrative?

- First, we pay attention to the story and its details. The main point is in the plot and its development. And biblical narrative, like every other, is going to use all the devices you're used to—chronological development; plot and rhetorical devices, such as dialogue, shifting points of view and climax; character development; and scene arrangement (not always chronological!).
- Second, remember that the narrator has had to be selective in what he records. So the details that are present are significant. How do they contribute to the point of the narrative? How do they connect this narrative to what came before and what's coming after?
- Third, context is King. How does this narrative fit into the rest of the book, the rest of the section of Scripture, the narrative of the Bible as a whole?
- Fourth, what's the point of the narrative in light of the author's purpose in writing the book? The story is not an end in itself, and we (personal application) are not necessarily the point either! Example: 1 Samuel 17 – David and Goliath. Not a morality tale about courage against the odds, but our introduction to the unlikely King who in single combat will defeat the enemy and deliver God's people. Sets up the contrast with Saul, the obvious and apparent king, who turns out to be a fraud. Points us to Christ!

2. Parable (12)

Parable is an important and often misunderstood genre, largely found in the gospels, but also some in the prophets. Fundamentally, a pictorial comparison between something familiar and known and a spiritual

truth or reality. The picture is typically fictional, though realistic. They are not allegorical, even when various parts of the picture represent various spiritual truths. Many times the details just add vividness to the picture

- The most important question to ask a parable is, “What’s the main point or points?”
- Pay attention to repetition, which is like putting something in bold (e.g. Laborers in the Vineyard – Matt 20), the reversal of expectations (e.g. The Prodigal Son – Luke 15:11ff), or changes in voice from 1st to 3rd person (The Unforgiving Servant – Matt 18-21ff). These are all clues to the main emphasis.
- The conclusion/ main point is typically at the end, and centers on the nature of the Kingdom or the King.
- Interpret in light of the context of the larger narrative it’s in. Don’t rip them out of the context the Gospel author has placed them, as if they were Aesop’s Fables.
Example: Mark 4:30-31. Parable of the mustard seed. Point is the surprising and unexpected growth of the kingdom from tiny to huge. Application is therefore not to despise it, or grow discouraged. Don’t allegorize the birds in its branches, or be thrown off by the fact that there are in fact smaller seeds and larger garden plants.

3. Poetry (12)

One third of the Old Testament (larger than the whole NT) is poetry. It exists by itself (the Psalms), but is also throughout other genres such as Wisdom and Prophecy. The key here is to realize that like English poetry, Hebrew poetry is extremely compressed and image-rich language, designed to both communicate truth and evoke emotion. On the other hand, unlike English poetry, Hebrew poetry does not have rhyme and meter like ours. Instead, it uses other devices to “rhyme”.

- The most common feature of poetic structure is parallelism: synonymous, synthetic (builds), and antithetical (sharply contrasted in character).
- Other features include word play, alliteration (Use of the same consonant at the beginning of each stressed syllable in a line of verse) and alphabetic acrostic, repetition, hyperbole (extravagant exaggeration), contrast, metonymy (substitution) and synecdoche (the whole stands for the part or vice versa).
- Like English poetry, it uses metaphor (A figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity) and simile (showing similarity), figurative images, irony (saying one thing but implying the other) and euphemism (An inoffensive or indirect expression that is substituted for one that is considered offensive or too harsh).

Perhaps the most important key to interpreting poetry is to remember that it’s—poetry. A literal reading will look different than a literal reading of narrative. Example: Psalm 19:7-11. An extended example of synonymous parallelism. Not six different things, but one—the Word of God. The point is both to engender in us a high view and value of his word and to convince us of verse 11!

4. Wisdom (13)

For many, the wisdom literature is both a much loved and a problematic genre in Scripture. It’s loved because it seems so practical. It’s problematic because its least like the genres we interact with in the

modern world and often times seems strangely disconnected from the main point of Scripture, which is redemption in Christ.

In fact, wisdom literature is very practical precisely because it's so closely connected with the main point of Scripture. Wisdom literature is all *about how to live well in God's world and in light of God's character. Wisdom is the fruit of the fear of the Lord* and so is all about orienting us correctly toward God and toward the Creation He's made, which includes other people as well. It speaks of what is generally true; it also addresses what appears to be the exception to that general truth.

- There are lots of forms of Wisdom literature. It comes to us as drama (Job & Song of Solomon), as proverbs and sayings, as autobiographical confession and admonition (Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon).
- Whatever the form, the key in interpretation is to read it in context and according to its stated purpose.

So Job is intended to address the problem of unjust suffering. Ecclesiastes is intended to realistically address the point of life. The Proverbs are intended to engender the fear of God and then show how that generally demonstrates itself in all sorts of contexts (not give rigid codes). Song of Solomon is a celebration of human love in marriage that points beyond itself to God's love for his people.

Example: Proverbs 12:21 – “No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.” Not a contradiction of Job. But a general statement that in God's world, wickedness brings on itself trouble, and righteousness blessing. Also points to ultimate blessing and judgment from God.

5. Prophecy (13)

The prophetic books contain both narrative and poetry, but what sets this apart as its own genre is the presence of the prophetic oracle—“Thus says the Lord”—and the function they play in Scripture. *The prophets come as attorneys for the prosecution, arguing God's case in a covenant lawsuit against Israel for breaking the covenant.* But not only do they make the case, they prophetically warn of the judgment to come, calling for repentance, and prophetically proclaim the salvation to come, calling for faith.

- *The basic feature, and problem, of interpretation is the promise-fulfillment dynamic.* This is what divides interpreters. When, where and how is a prophecy fulfilled, thus helping us understand its meaning.
Important to understand the concept of prophetic foreshortening of events. The prophets see the mountains on the distant horizon as a single line. When we get there, realize there are multiple ranges.
- *Multiple horizons of fulfillment.* The “sign of Immanuel” in Is. 7 is fulfilled at one level in Is. 8 with Isaiah's own son, but ultimately with Christ. The apocalyptic judgment of Is 24-27 is fulfilled at first by the Babylonian invasion of Palestine, perhaps again with Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but ultimately at the end of the world.
- *The language and images of the past are used to describe the future.* Creation, Garden of Eden imagery, the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Exodus are all used to describe future events. *These provide a theological understanding of what's happening, not necessarily a literal understanding.*

- *Not all prophecies are unconditional.* Example of Jonah preaching to Nineveh.
- *Quite a bit of prophecy is not predictive, but descriptive* (typological).
- *Context is King.* Especially the shape of the story as a whole. Work from the story of the whole Bible back to the prophecy, not the other way around. Remember, revelation is progressive! The NT determines the ultimate meaning of OT prophecy, not the other way around.
Example: Isaiah 11: Draws on imagery from Gen 2 (Eden) and the Exodus. Describes the future as both a return to Eden, a second Exodus, and a completion of the unfinished work of conquering the Promised Land. These are theological points, not necessarily historical predictions. And all of this will be accomplished through the righteous judgment of a shoot from the stump of Jesse, who is described in terms taken from God's presence in the Exodus (vv.10-11). Fulfilled in Christ and the New Heavens and New Earth.

6. Epistles (13)

Most straightforward of the genres, because essentially written to people in the exact same part of the story as we are—believers in between the Resurrection of Christ and his Second Coming.

- *Context is extremely important.* Written by the apostles to real live Christians facing real problems, either moral or doctrinal or both.
- *Logical arguments.* So pay attention to both the flow of the argument and its details.
- *Self-consciously understand themselves to be the recipients and fulfillment of the OT promises because of what Christ had done.* Thus the primary 'context' is not Greco-Roman, but the OT!
- *Application is typically straight-forward,* but some cultural and redemptive historical continuity remains. Need to be sensitive to those questions.
Example: Ephesians 2:11-22. First about the reassurance of the division between Jew and Gentile. Only secondarily a point about reconciliation across other divides.

7. Apocalyptic (14)

Without doubt this is the most intriguing, but also the most difficult of all the genres. Science Fiction is the closest thing that we have to it! The point and purpose of apocalyptic literature is to give God's people hope in the midst of present sufferings in light of God's certain victory over their enemies, both now and in the future. To do that, it draws heavily on the images of the past, as well as other stylized imagery, in order to review the sweep of history and show its culmination in the victory of God's kingdom.

- *Two main examples of apocalyptic in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation.* But neither is merely apocalyptic. Daniel is prophetic literature and Revelation is a prophetic epistle.
- *Literary context is important.* Biblical apocalyptic draws specifically on biblical images from the OT (Babylon, plagues), as well as "stock" images from the wider genre (the horn, celestial bodies, etc).
- *Apocalyptic provides a chart of history, but not necessarily chronologically.* The book of Revelation records the plagues, but they are not one after the other in every case. Some are happening simultaneously, but all are leading to the climax of the last two chapters.
- God's people can endure present suffering because of the confidence that God wins. And they know he wins, not because of prophetic revelation, but because of what Christ has already accomplished in the past.

Example: Revelation 5. The lion of Judah is the Lamb that was slain. He is worthy of glory and honor, and able to open God's book of judgment, because he purchased God's people with his own blood.

Conclusion

So there it is. How to exegete every part of the Bible. Of course I'm being facetious. What I hope you see however is that interpreting a text is not simply the arbitrary imposition of meaning that I want it to have, nor is it whatever it means to me. It is in fact nothing more or less than a close and careful reading of a text in its context, both narrow and broad. It's as basic as observation (What does it say?) and interpretation (What did this mean to the original readers?). All of us need tools to do this well, but with patient and frequent reading, all of us can become faithful readers of the text, reading out of it what the original divine and human authors meant, rather than reading into it our own ideas. When we do this well, we'll find, as Peter declared, "We have the word of the prophets made more certain... a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts." (2 Peter 1:19)