

Session 7

Interpreting the Bible

God has revealed himself to us in the Bible and he wants us to understand his message. In this session, we will look at how you can go about interpreting the Bible for yourself. We will introduce some ideas and methods which will help you interpret the Bible accurately and confidently. We will look at the great variety of literary styles used in the Bible and how you can decide what is figurative and what is literal.

The Bible interprets itself

The key to easier (not easy) understanding of the Bible is found within its own pages. Our tendency is to not look far enough for answers within the book when we encounter something we do not understand. A basic principle in reading the Bible more effectively lies in this simple fact:

Your questions about what the Bible teaches are answered in the Bible.

Answers are found near and far. Look in the same chapter or surrounding chapters:

Jesus' explanation of the parable of the Sower
Matthew 13:3–8 compare Matthew 13:18–23
(note they are not adjacent)
Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the image
Daniel 2:31–45

Sometimes it is helpful to look in other books of the Bible too (especially New vs Old Testament).

How long was Moses in Midian?
Exodus 2:15; 3:1–4 compare Acts 7:30–31

Finding answers

DO

- Look first to the Bible for answers to questions
- Read all of the Bible to find answers to your questions
- Write down your question (it may be a while before you get an answer)

DON'T

- Expect quick answers
- Look at isolated passages and draw conclusions

Why the Bible is difficult to read

If you find the Bible difficult to read, it's probably because it is difficult to read! Once we accept this fact and realize that God has a purpose for it, then frustration turns to challenge. Millions of readers work on the Sunday Crossword puzzle. How many spend a few minutes to unlock small puzzles of Scripture?

After all, God wrote the book and has told us

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways
higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your
thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

In fact, God has given us a Bible which contains some things which are clear on first reading, and some things which he has deliberately made difficult.

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a
matter is the glory of kings. (Proverbs 25:2)

Why did Jesus speak in parables?

The disciples posed this question to him in Matthew 13:10. His answer reveals that it is a separation process.

"The knowledge of the kingdom of heaven has been given to
you, but not to them."

In other words, by speaking in parables he was sifting out the people who were not willing to search out their meaning. (If you wonder if this is fair, consider Paul's comment in Romans 9:18-21.)

How does one gain understanding?

1. By application of time and energy.
Social status or financial position will not give anyone an advantage over another. Understanding requires a purchase 'without money'.
Isaiah 55:1–3; Proverbs 23:23
2. Slowly!
God never revealed anything all at once and has always taught a sure slow effective method of achieving a task. You cannot speed-read the Bible.
Hebrews 1:1; Exodus 23:29
3. With faith
We must ask God through prayer to help us understand. Understanding is assured if we believe and are patient.
Matthew 7:7–8; James 1:5–6

Literary styles

The Bible is written using many different literary styles. God has chosen to use a great range of literary styles, probably because different styles appeal to different people and because some styles are better for conveying certain ideas than others. Some Bible books contain examples of different literary styles within the same book. Some of the literary styles found in the Bible are given below.

Narrative

Stories of people, events and nations are narrated in many Bible books. However, the Bible is not intended to be a general history and the events recorded are highly selective. The sections of the Bible which are narrative are usually the easiest to read. For example, the book of Esther is a wonderful story to read right through in one sitting.

Examples: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts

Laws

God gave laws to Israel via Moses when they were camped at Mt Sinai after crossing the Red Sea. Reading Israel's

laws is obviously not as easy as reading stories about people and events. However, it is worth understanding what God required of Israel. Although many of the laws are no longer applicable, they do teach us what God is like and help us understand what he requires of us.

Examples: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel

Genealogies

The Bible records several genealogies. These are lists of names over many generations, showing lines of descent. For example, Jesus' genealogy shows he was a descendant of David. Most modern versions print genealogies in a list making it easy to follow the structure of the list.

Examples: 1 Chronicles 1–9, Matthew 1, Luke 3

Poetry

Hebrew poetry is found in many of the books of the Old Testament. Some books are written entirely in poetry. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme in the way some English poetry does. Instead, it is based on the structure of the text. A common form of poetry is **parallel (or rhyming) thoughts**.

For example, Psalm 95:1–6.

1. Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
2. Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
3. For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
4. In his hand are the depths of the earth
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
5. The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
6. Come let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

Each of these verses consists of a couplet (two lines). In some verses, the couplet consists of lines which mean almost the same thing, but expressed in different words (e.g. v1,6). Other verses have related things expressed in the two lines (e.g. v4).

Another common poetic structure is an **acrostic poem**. This is a poem based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in Psalm 145 each of the verses consists

Common poetic structures in the Bible

Synonymous parallelism

Second line repeats or reinforces first line.

e.g. Psalm 95:1,6.

Antithetical parallelism

Second line contrasts the first line.

e.g. Psalm 95:4,5.

Synthetic parallelism

Second line adds to the first line.

e.g. Psalm 95:2.

Types of Psalms

Laments e.g. 3, 42, 44.

Thanksgiving e.g. 118, 124.

Hymns of praise e.g. 33, 100, 104.

Salvation history psalms e.g. 78, 105, 136.

Psalms of celebration or affirmation e.g. 2, 50, 72, 89, 144.

Wisdom psalms e.g. 36, 112, 133, Proverbs 8.

Songs of trust e.g. 11, 91, 131.

of one couplet which begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (v13 contains two couplets). Psalm 119 consists of 22 stanzas, each consisting of 8 couplets; the couplets within each stanza begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

It is helpful to understand something of the poetic structure as it makes a difference in how we interpret poetry.

It is also important to recognise when the Bible is using poetry, because the sort of language used in poetry is often figurative. For example, Psalm 91:4 speaks of God having wings and feathers, meaning he will protect us as a bird protects her young.

Most modern versions of the Bible print poetry showing its structure in verses, stanzas, etc. This makes it easy to decide if a passage is poetic or not.

Examples: Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is a collection of proverbs about many aspects of daily living. In general, they have not been arranged in any particular order.

Prophecy

A large part of the Bible contains prophecy. In fact, almost every book of the Bible contains some prophecy. Much of this is written as poetry although some of it is in prose. Usually, a prophecy was of immediate relevance to the people to whom it was first given. So when we read prophecy, it is important to ask “how would the original readers have understood this?” Placing prophecies in their context prevents the common mistake of looking for modern ‘fulfilments’ in prophecies which were never intended.

Many prophecies have two fulfilments. They had an initial fulfilment shortly after they were given, and they have a longer-term fulfilment. For example, Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote at the time the Jews were in captivity in Babylon and predicted that the Jews would return to their own land of Israel. (For example, Jer 30:1–3; Ezek 20:41–42.) This was fulfilled when the Jews did return to Israel at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, they were later scattered throughout the world and the prophecy was fulfilled a second time when the Jews returned to Israel to establish the modern nation of Israel in 1948. See Chapter 5 for more details of these prophecies.

The biblical prophets did not only foretell the future. The word translated “prophesy” can mean to foretell or proclaim. The prophets were God’s spokesmen and they proclaimed his message to the people as well as predicted the future.

When studying prophecy...
Ask the following questions: 1. How would the original readers have understood this? 2. Was it fulfilled shortly after being given? 3. What evidence is there that it is to be fulfilled in the future?

Apocalyptic prophecy

Apocalyptic prophecy is a particular style of prophecy which is highly symbolic. It often involves strange animals representing nations or organisations.

Examples: Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation

Letters

The New Testament contains a number of letters written by the apostle Paul and others. Some of the letters are to churches and other groups of people, and some are to individuals. When reading a letter, it is worth remembering that often the letter is a reply to a previous letter. It is rather like listening to one side of a telephone conversation! Because the letters were written to a specific group of people and often deal with specific problems, it is sometimes helpful to look at who the people were and what problems are addressed in the letter. The letters have been preserved because they have something to teach us about dealing with our difficulties.

The biblical letters follow the standard format for ancient letters. Many thousands of letters have been uncovered from the time of the New Testament and they generally follow the same structure:

1. Name of writer
2. Name of recipient
3. Greeting
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving
5. Body of letter
6. Final greeting and farewell.

When studying letters . . .
1. Find out about the recipients (e.g. use a Bible dictionary) 2. Read the whole letter through in one sitting (use a modern version). 3. Make notes about ● recipients ● writer's attitudes ● purpose of the letter ● letter's natural divisions

Paul's letters to churches:

Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians,
Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians

Paul's letters to individuals:

1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Other letters:

Hebrews, James, 1&2 Peter, 1,2&3 John, Jude

Literal and figurative language

How do you decide if a given part of the Bible is literal or figurative? The Bible does contain much figurative language, but if you take it on balance, about 95% is literal and only a very small part (overall) figurative. It can be adopted as a maxim for the Bible, as for any book, that it should be taken literally unless there is a direct statement or very strong indirect evidence that it is indeed figurative.

For example, whenever Jesus described a story he told as a “parable” or said “The ... is like ...”, it is clear—not literal.

In other places the use of metaphor is clear. For example Isaiah 11:1 says “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse”. Now Jesse was the father of King David. Describing him as a stump is an obvious metaphor. The verse is a reference to a descendant of Jesse. The rest of the chapter makes it clear that it is referring to Jesus Christ, who was descended from King David.

The general principle is that the Bible should be understood literally unless there is a good reason not to.

Literal or Figurative?
Are the following passages symbolic or literal? How can you tell? Exodus 14:21–22 Zechariah 13:1 Zechariah 14:2 Matthew 5:13 Revelation 20:14

Basic principles for interpreting the Bible

1. Study every passage within its literary context. Literary context includes both a text's immediate setting (the verses around it) and its relationship to the entire book.
2. Recognise that the social, historical, and cultural environment of a biblical passage differs from that of today, and then try to understand a passage in light of those differences.
3. Translations often reflect the translator's understanding. Therefore, when studying a passage, compare several versions to try and discover the most likely meaning of a word or phrase.
4. Interpret any single passage in light of what the author has written elsewhere.
5. Interpret the Bible as a whole. That is, interpret the Bible in light of the entire message of the Bible.

Homework

1. Read Isaiah 40:27–31.

- (a) What is the passage teaching us?

- (b) All but one verse consists of one or more poetic couplets. Which verse is different?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 12:1–8.

- (a) What shows the passage is an allegory?

- (b) What is it about?

- (c) Interpret each of the symbols.