

Interpreting the Bible

Interpreting the Bible: An Introduction by Daniel Doriani

The Bible contains 66 books, written in three languages over 1,500 years by dozens of authors writing in numerous genres for diverse audiences. Scripture is clear enough that anyone can grasp the essentials of the faith. At the same time, extensive reading leads to riddles: Why does Moses apparently condone polygamy and slavery? What is a denarius? Who is Apollyon? Why do the apostles care about meat that is offered to idols?

The Requirements for Interpretation

Skill in interpretation is needed to gain the most from the Bible. When Scriptures are read in the church, leaders can answer questions and orient listeners to its great themes. Still, people rightly desire to read and understand the Bible for themselves ([Jer. 31:31–34](#); [1 John 2:27](#)).

Interpretation of the Bible requires technical skill and spiritual receptivity. Though all God's people have a significant ability to read and understand the great teachings of the Bible in their own language (see [Deut. 6:6–7](#); [Ps. 1:1–2](#); [19: 7](#); [119:130](#); [1 Cor. 1:2](#); [Eph. 3:4](#); [Col. 4:16](#)), there also remain more detailed and precise questions about meaning that sometimes require technical knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, as well as of Scripture's historical, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds. Here interpretation resembles the reading of dense poetry or constitutional documents. Interpretation is also an art, mastered not by rigid adherence to procedures but by long practice conducted under tutors. Interpretation is also a spiritual task. To read the Bible is not to dissect a lifeless text that only contains marks on a page. As people read Scripture, Scripture reads them, questions them, reveals their thoughts ([Heb. 4:12](#))—and it leads to a Person, not just truths. All Scripture points to Jesus' death and resurrection, to forgiveness, and to personal knowledge of God through him.

To profit from Scripture, one must take the right posture. At one extreme, the skeptic questions and judges whatever he or she reads. At the other, the overconfident believer, convinced that he has mastered biblical or systematic theology, ignores or explains away whatever fails to support his system. Interpreters should come to Scripture humbly, expecting to learn and be corrected, willing to observe Scripture closely and accept whatever they find. All Scripture is breathed out by God ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)), so every word counts. If a biblical narrator mentions something as seemingly insignificant as a character's hair, this detail will probably be important—as the hair of Esau, Samson, and Absalom shows!

Interpreters also need skills. The remainder of this article explains the skills necessary to read the Bible in context, to find the main point of a passage, to develop a theme, and to apply Scripture.

Knowing the Context

It is a truism that one must read the Bible in context, but the truism hides a distinction. “Context” can refer to the historical or the literary context. The *literary context* includes the words, sentences, and paragraphs preceding and following a passage. The literary context locates a passage within the larger purposes of a book. Readers should ask why a particular passage is *here* and not elsewhere, how it builds upon prior passages, and how it prepares for the next. The disciples once said to Jesus, “Increase our faith” ([Luke 17:5](#)). Absent a context, it seems like a godly request (which it may be in some contexts). But here the disciples say it after they hear a difficult command and before Jesus tells them they merely need the faith of a mustard seed. Considering this context, some interpreters have seen “Increase our faith” as an excuse, not a godly request.

One should also locate a passage in *the context of its entire book*. Paul’s statement “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God ...” ([Rom. 12:1](#)) stands at a hinge in Romans. Paul had just finished recounting God’s mercies in [Romans 3–11](#). His “therefore” summons readers to see that God’s abundant mercies lead them into heartfelt service.

The *historical context* includes knowledge of the culture, economy, geography, climate, agriculture, architecture, family life, morals, and social structure of the Bible’s actors, authors, and readers. Over the centuries, climate and topography hardly vary, but other factors shift more. For example, Israel was poor and weak under Samuel and Saul, strong and rich under David and Solomon.

Historical contexts help readers make sense of passages like [Deuteronomy 22:8](#), which says a builder “shall make a parapet” around the roof of a new home, lest someone fall from it and “bring the guilt of blood” upon the house. A parapet is a retaining wall around the edge of a flat roof. Since Israelites worked, ate, and slept on their roofs, parapets kept reckless boys and restless sleepers from tumbling off. The law taught Israel how to preserve life and to love neighbors.

Again, in [Luke 11:27–28](#) a woman called out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed.” The woman’s mind-set explains her odd-sounding speech. In antiquity, women gained honor by marrying a great man or bearing great children. The woman praised Jesus by praising his mother—only a great woman could bear such a great son. Jesus nudges her in another direction: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” In other words, a woman finds greatness in discipleship more than in matrimony or maternity.

Interpreters must read carefully to recognize both obvious and hidden riddles. Some matters are less clear than they seem. Do contemporary readers know precisely what judges, elders, and talents are? Study resources include a study Bible, and also, in

increasing depth, a Bible dictionary, an encyclopedia, and scholarly commentaries. The quality of sources, not the quantity, is paramount.

Background studies permit more accurate study of a text's line of thought. The genre of the passage must be noted, since narrative, law, prophecy, visions, wisdom literature, and epistles all have distinct modes of operation, with subtypes within each genre. To simplify, however, the most basic distinction in terms of genre is between *narrative* and *discourse*.

Interpreting Narratives

Narratives can be long or short, complex or simple. They can be distinguished as speech stories, reports, and dramatic narratives. A speech story sets up a significant teaching, usually delivered near the end. Consider Jesus' encounters with a centurion ([Matt. 8:5–13](#)) and with Zacchaeus ([Luke 19:1–10](#)). Reports briefly describe battles, travels, or minor kings. They lack drama and reveal their secrets through patterns. For example, taken together, the reports of Solomon's reign show gold slowly becoming more prominent, and more highly valued, than wisdom. Solomon spent more on his palace than on the temple, and his adherence to the law steadily declined ([1 Kings 4–11](#)). Readers can draw conclusions as they read the reports in canonical perspective.

Many narratives feature complex characters and dramatic tension. To interpret narrative, one must note the story's time and place, its characters, and their interests. Soon conflict develops, leading to a crisis, then resolution. The reader should enter the story as if he or she were there, especially at the dramatic climax—when Abraham's knife is poised, when David strides toward Goliath. The resolution follows—the angel calls out, the stone finds its mark. Narratives convey moral, spiritual, and theological truths ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)), but one must first look for God's action. He is the prime character in biblical narratives. Readers should ask therefore how God reveals himself, and how he fulfills his covenant promises, in this or that particular story.

The main point of a narrative typically appears in the climax-resolution nexus. The narrator or a character in the story will often reveal that central truth. Dialogue discloses character and motivation (e.g., [Luke 15:28–32](#)). In the Abraham-Isaac account, both Abraham and the narrator say that the Lord will provide, and he does ([Gen. 22:8, 14](#)). In the David-Goliath narrative, David says, "The battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand," and he does ([1 Sam. 17:45–49](#)). The main point in these narratives is not "Abraham obeyed a hard command and believers should, too," or "David was brave and Christians should be, too." The lessons are that "the Lord provides" and "the battle is the Lord's" (and then, also, that he is certainly worthy of trust!). The stories' characters go on quests, face choices, and respond to God faithfully or unfaithfully—but the Lord is the main agent, and believers, unbelievers, and bystanders are always responding to him. In the process they show how people tend to respond, for good or ill, and Bible readers should imitate their good responses and avoid their mistakes.

Interpreting Discourse

In discourse, which is the other main type of text in the Bible, the search for the main point (not necessarily the point that most interests the reader) remains central as well. This is true whether the text is poetry, prophecy, or an epistle. The point commonly appears first or last in a passage. (Whole books also have themes that are stated first or last; see [Matt. 28:18–20](#) and [Rom. 1:16–17](#).) Many Psalms reveal their theme at once: “Bless the Lord, O my soul” ([103:1](#); cf. [42:1](#); [107:1](#)). Passages in the Epistles sometimes start with the main point and then elaborate on it. James, for instance, says straight off that not many should aspire to be teachers ([3:1a](#)) because they face stricter judgment ([3:1b](#)) and because the tongue is beyond control ([3:2–8](#)). Other passages build to a climax, as in Jesus’ teaching on the law, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” ([Matt. 5:48](#)). On numerous occasions, writers repeat the main point. The author of Judges says twice that “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” ([17:6](#); [21:25](#)). Paul tells the Corinthians three times to be content in their assigned calling ([1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 24](#)). Careful students of Scripture will reread a passage, both to find the main point and to observe the way the biblical authors think. Illustrations, elaborations, and answers to foes are best understood by seeing how they serve the principal lesson.

This is not to say that the main point should be considered the only point or the only important point. For example, though [Romans 1:16–17](#) is the overall theme of Romans, literally hundreds of other theological and ethical truths are taught throughout the pages of this letter. The individual parts are best understood in light of how they contribute to the whole.

Tracing Specific Themes Throughout the Bible

Interpreters also need to learn how to search through Scripture to collect its comprehensive teaching on various specific themes. Students can start topical studies by reading passages listed in their Bibles’ cross-references. Concordances are valuable, but they can mislead if readers simply limit their scope to verses that use a particular word. Students of the Bible must locate concepts, not just words, to develop a theme. For example, a concordance search on “pray/prayer/praying” would turn up only one verse in John’s Gospel ([John 17:9](#)), but several other verses tell how to “ask” God for various things, and those verses also teach a number of particular lessons about prayer. Ideas also unfold progressively within the OT, into the NT, and sometimes even within a single book. Wise interpreters still locate every verse in its context and ask how the original audience understood it. For great topics such as work, marriage, or the love of God, it helps to note what the Bible says within the frame of each of the four great epochs: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Applying God’s Word

Biblical application chiefly requires careful prayer and meditation, but one must realize that application is more than following commands. Applying Scripture means accepting and fulfilling God-given duties, seeking a godly character, pursuing goals that the Lord

bleses, and seeing the world his way. This produces four questions readers can ask themselves that often lead to helpful application: What should I do? Who should I be (or who should I realize that I am, in Christ)? Where should I go? How can I see?

People also apply the Bible when they let it lead them to Christ. After the fall, the Lord promised a redeemer. Every good prophet, priest, king, and judge points to one who would perfectly fulfill their roles, and every false leader causes the reader to cry out for one who would be true. (For further development of this idea throughout the OT, see *The History of Salvation in the Old Testament: [Preparing the Way for Christ](#)*.) From the start of the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as Son of God and Son of Man. Each phase in the Gospel accounts leads toward the climax in the crucifixion and its resolution in the resurrection. Each epistle interprets that great event until Scripture ends in Revelation's songs of praise to the Lamb and the Lion, the King of kings and Lord of lords, contemplated, trusted, and adored. Thus interpretative skills must lead beyond conceptual knowledge to a Person, and a vital relationship with him.

Interpreting the Bible: A Historical Overview by John Hannah

Is there any benefit to reading the Bible as it was understood by previous generations of Christians? Yes, certainly, because the Bible was written for them as well as us. God spoke to them through the Bible as he does to us today, and the spiritual gift of teaching was given to individuals then as it is now. Therefore when we read the biblical interpretations of previous generations, going all the way back to the earliest days of the church, we can often gain insight and perspectives that we might otherwise overlook because of the cultural biases of our own time.

However, before we seek to benefit from the interpretations of previous generations, it is helpful to have a broad overview of the dominant methods of biblical interpretation from various periods in church history.

The earliest followers of Christ interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures (the OT) as Jesus taught them—as a book of anticipations pointing to Christ himself. He was the long-promised Messiah, the Redeemer who would reverse the effects of the primal fall and restore the world to pristine holiness. Jesus taught that the OT spoke of him. To his critics he said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” ([John 5:39](#)). The Gospel accounts suggest that Jesus understood the OT from a Christocentric, typological perspective; he is repeatedly cast as the fulfillment of the Scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear that his views did not contradict Moses, but he had come to invest the Law and the Prophets with their proper and full meaning ([Matt. 5:17](#)). Two themes run through Jesus' teaching: (1) the Law was the perfect revelation of God to humanity, and (2) Jesus came to fulfill the Law by meeting its exacting demands for a righteous standing before God.

This approach to the OT is how the earliest writers of the Christian Scriptures (the NT) approached their own writings. They spoke of the OT in the same way that Jesus had: as a book not merely telling the pre-Christian history of Israel but telling that history in a way that had present and future significance for Christians. The OT was the original sacred book of the church, giving assurance that Jesus was the promised and anointed one predicted by the prophets.

Marcion

Not everyone in the early church grasped the concept of continuity between the two Testaments, as evidenced by Marcion, who taught in Rome between a.d. 140 and 160. He argued that the OT was vastly inferior to the writings of the apostles, most notably Paul. He adopted a literal approach to interpretation, but his dualistic grid discounted the OT, which he believed set forth a different God from the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was not to be read in the churches. His approach pitted law against grace, and the OT God against a God of love. The wider church, however, soon recognized Marcion's innovations as a mistake.

Justin Martyr and Irenaeus

In reaction to Marcion, other Christian teachers formulated a more orthodox way of approaching the sacred writings. Justin Martyr (c. a.d. 100–165), an early defender of Christianity, argued that the difference between the OT and NT is only a matter of degree. The OT anticipated and foretold events, and was superseded by the NT writings because they represented the fulfillment of earlier anticipations. Thus, Justin Martyr, particularly in his *Dialogue*, stressed a messianic continuity and utilized a literal-historical approach to interpretation.

However, it was Irenaeus (c. a.d. 130–200) who gathered the threads of interpretation more systematically. Though his approach to the OT was more literal than that of his predecessors, he also saw a typological meaning in the text. In Irenaeus's view the Scriptures are like "treasure hidden in a field" ([Matt. 13:44](#)) in that the literal was also the typological: the Bible is full of prefigurements, especially of the Messiah. Irenaeus also championed ideas that are still generally accepted by modern interpreters: (1) exegesis should pay careful attention to context; (2) unclear or obscure texts should be interpreted by clearer ones; and (3) a nonliteral reading of some passages may be warranted. Irenaeus held that the true meaning of the Scriptures is the interpretation of the apostles as presented in the NT and is embodied in the Rule of Faith (that is, the established and widely accepted understanding of the main doctrines of Scripture) as preserved through the teachings of the church.

Clement and Origen

Christian teachers in Alexandria, such as Clement (c. a.d. 150–215) and Origen (c. 185–254), were profoundly influenced by the work of Philo (a Jewish philosopher who wrote, and thought, in Greek; d. 50) and Plato's philosophy of Idealism. Clement and Origen read the Bible as having multiple levels of meaning. The surface meaning was literal, but it often hid a deeper, spiritual meaning. They held the Bible to be verbally accurate, and in this manner the integrity of the text was preserved; but where the literal meaning was obscure, this was thought to suggest a more profound, allegorical meaning. To Origen, who systematized this newer approach, the literal or simple meaning of the text was for those who could not grasp the intricate nature of languages (i.e., figures of speech, mysterious sayings), while the deeper meaning was for the learned or more spiritual. Using the body-soul-spirit analogy, he argued that the Bible should be interpreted literally, morally, and mystically. As a result, the historical meaning of Scripture was devalued. The deep meaning of the text could be separated from the literal meaning, resulting in theological speculation. This approach, therefore, was marked by subjectivity, depending more upon the insight of the interpreter rather than seeking consistency with other established doctrines of Scripture. Though Origen never contradicted the Rule of Faith, he did in fact speculate beyond it.

Theodore, Jerome, and Augustine

Later teachers such as Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. a.d. 350–428), Jerome (c. 342–420), and Augustine (354–430) criticized the allegorical method of the Alexandrians as being arbitrary and nonrational. These teachers argued that the Scriptures are to be interpreted in both a literal and a Christocentric sense. They insisted that their method was not the same as the allegorical approach, because it was rooted in the text of Scripture itself. They refused to disconnect the literal, historical meaning of the text from its spiritual meaning. Jerome, though initially a proponent of allegorization, later embraced the literal-historical approach to Scripture without abandoning the deeper spiritual meaning of the text that had been championed by Theodore and others. Jerome insisted that scriptural texts should be read in a historical context, something the allegorical approach had de-emphasized.

The greatest theologian of the early church was Augustine. He championed a literal, historical approach to reading the Bible, insisting that a proper understanding must begin with the mind of the writer, which required knowing the biblical languages and paying attention to context. The fourfold approach to Scripture that he put forth (see below) was widely used, and abused, in the Medieval era.

Medieval Churchmen

The Medieval church gradually became enamored of the allegorical method of interpretation, which was used to buttress church dogma that lacked a strong basis in Scripture. Medievalists developed a fourfold approach to interpreting the Bible: the

literal, showing what God did; the *allegorical*, showing what at surface level God hid; the *moral*, revealing what believers should do; and the *mystical*, or *anagogical*, showing the heavenly life in which, for Christians, things will end. In effect, the method obscured the true meaning of the Bible by imposing arbitrary meanings on it. Theology took precedence over careful literal-historical exegesis.

In the high Middle Ages, the great scholastic Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) embraced the literal-historical (as opposed to allegorical) approach. In his skillful hands the proper approach to the Bible was an exegetical method that assumed the primacy of the literal meaning of the text. To Aquinas, multiplying levels of meaning in a single text was confusing in that it would blunt the force of any biblical argument; further, he thought that a parabolic sense of Scripture could be part of its proper meaning. He recognized that the intended meaning of a text is contained in words, and words can be used both literally (in a narrow sense, excluding images and metaphors) and figuratively.

The Reformers

The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century reacted against the misuse of the Bible in Late Medieval theology. They insisted that authority rested not in the leaders or fathers of the church but in a proper understanding of the text derived from correct methods of literary interpretation. Reformers starting with John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384) insisted on a grammatical-historical approach to the Bible. The German reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) broke with the nonliteral, allegorical approach that was dominant in his training and returned to the patristic emphasis on the centrality of Christ in the Scriptures. He was adamant that the Bible be approached not through fanciful allegories or merely to support established dogma but through ordinary language and literal, historical, and grammatical exegesis. A proper understanding of the Bible should be the product of such interpretation of the scriptural texts and should lead to healthy theology and a robust Christian life.

The most prolific expositor of Scripture, as well as the first major systematizer of Protestant theology, was John Calvin (1509–1564). Calvin stressed Scripture over theology and saw theology as the fruit resulting from the proper interpretation of Scripture. He was a skilled linguist who approached the Bible from the viewpoint of its historical veracity, literal interpretation, and contextual analysis. He often interpreted prophetic texts in a typological manner (as looking forward to Christ), yet he strenuously opposed arbitrary allegorization, which he believed undermined the certainty and clarity of Scripture. Some assign to Calvin the designation “the founder of modern grammatical-historical exegesis,” which is confirmed by the continued popularity of his commentaries and the way in which modern interpreters still interact with him as a sober, accurate exegete.

The Enlightenment

In the generations following Calvin, the role of tradition in biblical interpretation was increasingly limited by a growing emphasis on the individual interpreter, a trend seen in the rise of the Enlightenment. (The Renaissance led to two great movements: the *Protestant Reformation*, which emancipated the Bible from ecclesiastical imprisonment, and the *Enlightenment*, which carried forward the attack on authority structures to ridicule the authority of the Bible, birthing the Modern era.) The essence of the Enlightenment was a rejection of the biblical doctrine of the utter brokenness of humanity and a belief that the human mind was capable of arriving at truth when unhindered by external authorities such as the church, tradition, or the Bible.

To many Enlightenment thinkers, the Bible became an untrustworthy book created by churchmen to keep minds captive under the threat of punishment. Thus, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, university scholarship embraced the intellectual and philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment, turning its full force against the veracity of the Scriptures. The Bible became viewed as a parched landscape with an occasional oasis. At best, it merely contained truth; it was not itself truth. The lasting effects of this approach have contributed to the dissolution of the Christian worldview, at least in Western industrialized nations.

The Heirs of the Reformation: Evangelical Protestantism

However, from the Reformation until today, the large central core of the Protestant church worldwide has held to an “evangelical” view of Scripture, rejecting the skepticism of post-Enlightenment Naturalism and Rationalism, and continuing to believe in the complete truthfulness and reliability of the Bible. In answer to the attacks of rationalism, evangelicals have shown that there is no contradiction between full trust in the Bible and intellectual integrity. With respect to proper biblical interpretation, they have appreciated the various understandings of Scripture held by previous generations but have also sought to correct previous misunderstandings by developing more precise standards for right interpretation (see [Interpreting the Bible: An Introduction](#)). This Study Bible is written from within this broad post-Reformation evangelical Protestant tradition.

Conclusion

After centuries of the most rigorous scrutiny, the Bible is still the most widely read book in the world. The God of the Scriptures has preserved his divine Word—recorded in human language and illumined by the Spirit. This Word reveals the Savior of the world to the hungry hearts who affectionately embrace him and walk in his ways. Some may argue that the Bible is not true, yet the Holy Scriptures will remain an eternal testimony to God’s truthfulness long after the last critic is silenced. While not perfect, the long history of interpretation by those who read the Bible as God’s Word in previous centuries is still a storehouse of great riches for modern readers. Because the Bible uses ordinary language and teaches through concepts and experiences common to all

human life, interpreters of previous centuries often were accurate in their understanding of vast parts of Scripture. For those who will read the Bible in the light of this long tradition (yet correcting and supplementing that tradition's inadequacies), it promises to reveal the truth of a divine Redeemer and to instruct us in walking humbly before him in reverence and awe.