

# Understanding the Bible

*A Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper*

by Keith Stanglin

## **Lesson 1. Scripture: Clarity and Obscurity**

Why should we study the Bible, and is it an impossible or easy task? The majority of what we read in Scripture is clear, but there are some obscurities that Bible study works to clarify.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Why is it important to study the Bible? Give as many good reasons as you can.
2. Do you think it is usually difficult or easy to understand the Bible? Why? Are there any obstacles?
3. What are some ways to overcome those obstacles?

## **Lesson 2. The Aims and Steps of Biblical Interpretation**

What is exegesis, and what should we expect to gain from it? This lecture introduces the primary aims and steps of exegesis.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Define “exegesis” and “hermeneutics.” How are they distinct from one another?
2. What should we expect to gain from reading the Bible?
3. Review the steps of exegesis. Do any steps strike you as interesting, thought-provoking, or puzzling in some way?

## **Lesson 3. Genre: Narrative**

It is essential for the interpreter to know a book’s literary type and the expectations and intentions that accompany it. This lecture discusses certain principles for interpreting narrative in Scripture. It also addresses the problem of historicity.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Listen to “Fat Albert,” at <https://youtu.be/42yGK7pvgVc>. How do you know that this is supposed to be comedy? In light of the author’s/comedian’s intentions, do you come to expect certain features? How do these stories differ from a straight historical report?
2. When you tell a story about something that happened to you, is it all fact without interpretation?

3. Read and compare Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:9-18. What are the differences, and what do you make of them?

4. Read and discuss James Bury's "Thoughts on Historical Writings in the Bible."

#### **Lesson 4. Genre: Law**

This lecture discusses some of the main features of law in Scripture. How should Christians understand Old Testament laws?

##### *Discussion Questions:*

1. What use is a Christian to make of the laws in the Torah? Are they still binding on us? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of any commands in Scripture that seem to be aimed especially at a fallen, less than ideal situation?
3. Can you think of some OT laws that seem strange or difficult to apply today? What moral or spiritual lesson can you draw from them?

#### **Lesson 5. Genre: Poetry, Proverb, Prophecy, Epistle, Apocalyptic**

This lecture discusses other major genres in Scripture. It addresses the characteristics of poetry, wisdom literature, the types of prophetic oracles, the structure of epistles, and the features of apocalyptic.

##### *Discussion Questions:*

1. What makes a text poetic?
2. Complete the worksheet "Writing Classical Hebrew Poetry." Compare and discuss your answers and your original poem with others.
3. What are some examples of our cultural wisdom? Can you think of a proverb that you grew up hearing?
4. What are the characteristics of wisdom literature? Reflect on these or discuss them with others.
5. How are the epistles like and unlike love letters?
6. Listen to Don McLean's "American Pie" (with lyrics at <https://youtu.be/uAsV5-Hv-7U>). What does the song mean? How is this song similar to apocalyptic? (For one fairly lengthy interpretation of the lyrics, see <http://enetlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Understanding-American-Pie.pdf>. See also the Chevy commercial at <https://youtu.be/boertpylK0M?t=69>.)

#### **Lesson 6. A Pericope and Its Contexts**

When presenting a biblical message, choose a pericope or passage that contains its own sub-point or is a discrete episode. Each statement must be viewed in light of its larger literary and historical contexts. Is the document's intention more occasional or universal in scope?

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Skim through the book of Ephesians. If you were teaching or preaching a series of eleven lessons through Ephesians, how would you divide up the eleven sections?
2. Can you recall a time when someone took a biblical verse out of its context to make an erroneous point? What was the verse, and what was that person trying to prove?
3. What does it mean to say that each book of the Bible is "occasional?"

### **Lesson 7. Historical and Cultural Settings**

The historical context of the writing must be considered in interpretation. What can be known about the author and audience? What situation and significant events are in the background? An example is given from the letter to the Romans. This lecture also discusses the importance of geography and the significance and limits of archaeology for biblical study, as well as the relevance of knowing about the cultures of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Why is it important to know something about the author and audience?
2. How can archaeology be helpful?
3. Read the book of Ruth. List some specific questions about its historical context and culture that a reader should ask and answer to better understand the story and message of the book.

### **Lesson 8. Language and Grammar**

Remember that there is a language barrier in biblical interpretation. When possible, use tools to study the vocabulary and grammar of the Bible's original languages. Note also figures of speech and other rhetorical features.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Read Ephesians 1:3-14. What are the key words that stand out in this passage? Which words do you think would be important to know more about?
2. Do you take the Bible literally or figuratively? Why is that the wrong question?
3. Try putting Eph. 1:3-14 in your own words. That is, provide a paraphrase.

### **Lesson 9. Canonical Context: The Analogy of Scripture**

Other aids in biblical interpretation are external to the specific passage in question. Other Scriptures with similar content and themes can illumine difficult texts.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Can you think of any examples of one Scripture helping clarify another?
2. What are the threads that run through all of Scripture and unite all the diverse parts?
3. What is a canon within the canon? Is it permissible to have one? What is yours?

### **Lesson 10. Theological Context: The Analogy of the Faith**

In addition to other biblical passages, certain theological principles that are fundamental to Christian faith should help guide biblical interpretation.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Read Eph. 1:3-14. What does this text teach about God and what he values? What does it say about God's relationship with his people?
2. How can the theological tradition of the church act as a guide in biblical interpretation? And as a guardrail?
3. Do you agree that it is important to hear the voices from church history? Why or why not?

### **Lesson 11. Application: The "Why" Question**

Specific application is one of the goals of biblical interpretation. In order to move beyond the historical point toward current application, it is important to ask the "why" question.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Do you think it is legitimate to interpret Song of Songs as an allegory of the love between God and his people? Why or why not?
2. Describe the two-step and three-step methods of hermeneutics. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages of each approach. Give examples.
3. Why is it important to distinguish between the "what" and "why" of a command?
4. Short of literal kissing, how should we follow the command to "greet one another with a holy kiss"?

### **Lesson 12. Application: Quadrigal Questions**

The fourfold sense of Scripture can help interpreters ask the right questions of any biblical passage. Interpreters who begin with the literal sense must also engage the spiritual senses of Scripture.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. What are the dangers of opening up biblical meanings beyond what the human author intended?
2. Read Rom. 8:26-27. Discuss the literary context of the surrounding verses. Then go through and discuss the three spiritual senses in relation to this text. What do these verses teach about faith, love, and hope?
3. How should the genre or mood of a passage affect the way you present it in a class lesson or sermon?

## FOR FURTHER READING AND STUDY IN UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

- Berkhof, Louis. *Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.
- Duvall, J. Scott and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.
- Enns, Peter. *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Fee, Gordon D. *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991.
- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.
- Goldingay, John. *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Gorman, Michael. *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001.
- Hayes, John H. and Carl R. Holladay. *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007.
- Hicks, John Mark. *Searching for the Pattern: My Journey in Interpreting the Bible*. 2019.
- Jasper, David. *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004.
- Leithart, Peter J. *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009.
- Osborne, Grant. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Poythress, Vern S. *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999.
- Stanglin, Keith D. "Ecclesial Unity, Biblical Interpretation, and the Rule of Faith." In *Scripture First: Biblical Interpretation that Fosters Christian Unity*. Ed. Daniel B. Oden and J. David Stark, 77-102. Abilene: ACU Press, 2020.
- . *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018.
- Stein, Robert H. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Volf, Miroslav. *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

## **Eight Steps to Developing Exegetical Messages**

1. Prayerfully conduct a careful **Initial Reading**.
  - a. Read through the entire book of Scripture (or at least the few chapters surrounding your passage) in at least two reliable translations (e.g., RSV, NIV, NASB, NRSV, REB, NJB, ESV, CEB, KJV, NKJV). Use the footnotes of these translations to identify significant textual or translation variants in your passage.
  - b. Note the primary themes of the book and its genre, e.g.:
    - i. Narrative
    - ii. Law
    - iii. Poetry
    - iv. Proverb
    - v. Prophecy
    - vi. Epistle
  - c. Define the pericope (passage) from which you will develop a message and note its “fit” in its immediate context and in the flow of the book.
  - d. Identify the specific genre of the passage.
  - e. Begin compiling three lists to be updated and revised in the course of your investigation:
    - i. a list of everything in the text you and your audience need to know more about in order to comprehend the passage.
    - ii. a list of discoveries you make in your study that have promise of being mentioned in your sermon or class.
    - iii. a list of possible “theme statements” summarizing the message(s) the text conveys, around which you might organize your sermon or class.
2. Examine the **Historical Context** of the passage.
  - a. Author/audience
  - b. Situation, significant events
  - c. Geography
  - d. Culture
3. Investigate the **Language and Structure** of the passage.
  - a. Select three or four words to investigate in detail, in the original language to the extent possible, and especially as used in the book and author under investigation.
  - b. Grammar (e.g., pronouns and antecedents, verb tenses)
  - c. Figures (metaphor, parable, hyperbole, apocalyptic, typology)
  - d. Sketch the rhetorical flow of the passage, identifying the narrative or argumentative “turning points” in the text.
4. Compose a preliminary **Paraphrase** of the passage, incorporating what you have learned thus far, and prioritize your list of possible theme statements in light of this paraphrase.

5. Consider the **Canonical Context** of the passage. Apply the “Rule of Scripture” and consider how other Scriptures might clarify or sharpen the significance of your text.
  - a. Parallel passages and similar content
  - b. Themes throughout Scripture
  
6. Explore the **Theological Implications** of the passage. Consider how the teaching of your passage relates to the great Christian theological traditions, to the theological tradition in which you stand, and to the “Rule of Faith.”
  - a. Teaching about God and his relationship with his people
  - b. Theological principles
  - c. Ask the “why” question
  
7. Consider your audience and make appropriate **Application(s)**.
  - a. What to believe (and which current beliefs / assumptions stand in contrast)
  - b. What to do (and what habitual actions / dispositions this will change)
  - c. What to hope for (and which underlying fears, hesitations, or competing godless hopes this hope will dislodge)
  
8. Prayerfully **outline and compose** a sermon or lesson.
  - a. Choose and refine one of the Theme Statements you have formulated (1.e.iii above) as the main point from the text around which you will construct a message for the church.
  - b. Incorporate as appropriate points from your “information needed” and “message possibilities” lists (1.e.i–ii above)



**“Thoughts on the Historical Writings and Passages in the Bible”  
by James Bury (used with permission)**

The historical books and narrative materials in Scripture describe past events, but they do so in ways that may differ from certain expectations about how history should be written. A map typically adds information that is not actually visible (e.g. borders), but it may lack information that could be considered vital (e.g. terrain, vegetation, climate). In a similar way, the narration of an event does not include everything that took place and may include information that an eye-witnesses did not see or realize. In other words, any account of the past often tells more *and* less than what a video of the past might capture. This holds true whether that account comes from contemporary historians or from biblical authors. This insight correlates with several features of historical writing (ancient and recent):

1. Historical accounts are shaped by the concerns and purposes of the writer. Contemporary historians may place more emphasis on a thorough and complete account, but they are also interested in more than a chronicle of events. They want to explain why things happened as they did (often in light of personal, social, or political factors) and what can be learned from it all. Biblical writers are likewise interested in more than preserving history. They want to highlight its theological dimension and show what it reveals about God’s perspective and purpose.
2. Historical writing should be interpreted and measured by the standards and methods of its own world. Ancient historians do not have to conform to the practices of contemporary ones. In our day they typically draw on as many firsthand accounts as possible. Biblical authors may do something similar (cf. Luke 1:1-4), but in line with the practices of their own day, they are also likely to summarize and synthesize earlier accounts.
3. Those telling the stories of the past are allowed to have personal commitments and loyalties. Authors are not required to claim a detached or neutral stance in order for the account to be considered trustworthy. The fact that biblical authors believe that God is at work in the events they describe does not invalidate their account of those events.
4. In conveying what was said or done, authors may paraphrase, interpret, and adapt their report to their audiences (cf. idiomatic equivalency in translation). Historical reliability does not require *verbatim* quotations or “HD” depictions.
5. All historical description necessarily involves selection and exclusion, resulting in partial and abridged accounts. A record of the past does not need to be comprehensive in scope or perspective.
6. Historical accuracy allows for varying degrees of precision; accuracy should not be equated with specificity.
7. Historical writing can employ various methods of organization; it is not always arranged in chronological order.

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**WORKSHEET – WRITING CLASSICAL HEBREW POETRY<sup>1</sup>**  
**by Charles William Miller**

**Part A:**

In each example below, the first line of the parallel structure appears. Complete the poem by writing a second line that represents the type of relationship suggested by each heading (the third pair under each numeral is a biblical verse; see if you can guess how it goes):

1. Synonymous Parallelism: line B restates line A in similar words

A     Go home to the land you love  
B     Return \_\_\_\_\_

A     The city glows like a jewel at dawn  
B     The town \_\_\_\_\_

A     Make the lightning flash and scatter them  
B     Send out \_\_\_\_\_

2. Antithetical Parallelism: line B repeats line A, but with opposing words

A     The mountains rise to the heavens  
B     [But] the valley \_\_\_\_\_

A     Smooth as silk is the surface of the lake  
B     [But] the ocean \_\_\_\_\_

A     The wealth of the rich is their fortress  
B     [But] the poverty \_\_\_\_\_

3. Synonymous or Antithetical

A     The leaders of the world are mighty  
B     \_\_\_\_\_

A     Books are the door to understanding  
B     \_\_\_\_\_

A     Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts  
B     \_\_\_\_\_

**Part B:**

Write a short poem, in classical Hebrew style (parallelisms), that focuses on your experience at your local church. It should contain at least three pairs of parallel lines.

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<sup>1</sup> This worksheet is adapted from Charles William Miller, “Psalms Are Not Interesting?: Learner-Centered Approaches to Teaching Biblical Poetry and the Psalms,” in *Foster Biblical Scholarship: Essays in Honor of Kent Harold Richards*, ed. Frank Ritzel Ames and Charles William Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 210.