

# Essential Skills

*The art of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures*

## SESSION LEARNING GOALS

- Learners will identify the key problems, principles and practices in the task of responsible bible interpretation.
- Learners will reflect on the appropriateness of a hermeneutical model involving authors, texts and readers.

## TWO TENSIONS

### The task

If we believe that the Bible is the written record of God's self-revelation in history, with authority for faith and conduct, then reading and understanding Scripture must be a primary task for every Christian. It is an endeavour that is energised and undergirded by two tensions:

- the necessity to do the work properly; discovering truth and avoiding error;
- the excitement of life-changing consequences when it is carried out correctly.

### The necessity

'You can make the Bible prove almost anything you want it to.'

How often history has shown this statement to be true; so very many times with tragic consequences. The fact that Scripture can be so easily misused highlights the seriousness with which we must approach the Bible and its interpretation. Conflict over the true meaning of the biblical text, and therefore its teaching, remains one of the major stumbling blocks between Christians of different streams and traditions. It has been shrewdly observed that one of the testimonies as to the greatness of Scripture is that it has remained credible in spite of the numerous ways in which it has been perverted.

For a true interpretation of the Bible it is not sufficient simply to claim that we believe it reveals God's word and submit to its authority. One of the disturbing illusions among some Christians is the belief that the key to an understanding of Scripture is simply a greater emphasis upon its full inspiration. It simply isn't true and denies the serious hard work that is actually involved.

There is a popular belief that the interpretation of Scripture is really very straightforward. This is based upon two assumptions:

- That the meaning of a statement is to be found in the meaning of the words used;



- That readers are neutral and objective in their assessment of what they read.

Both these assumptions are untrue, as we shall see. Three practical but vital steps are required on our part:

- **The first step:** we must hear what Scripture is saying, and have an honest openness to this written record of God's word;
- **The second step:** we must heed the dangers of 'private interpretation' (2 Pet 1:20) and be open to the influence from the wider church;
- **The third step:** we must learn the basic skills that are required to interpret Scripture correctly.

## The excitement

The joyful discovery of the truth at the heart of biblical revelation is the goal of interpreting Scripture. It brings liberating and transfiguring change to ourselves, and life-giving results to those with whom it is shared.<sup>1</sup> This excitement is found again and again within the pages of Scripture. Two examples must suffice:

- **Jesus on the road to Emmaus** (Luke 24:13-35)
  - 'Beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them all the scriptures concerning himself' (v27)
  - 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?' (v32)
- **Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch** (Acts 8:26-40)
  - 'Do you understanding what you are reading?' (v30)
  - 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' (v31)
  - 'Then Philip ... beginning with this scripture ...' (see Isa 53:7-8)

This is Bible interpretation! Tapping into the life sources of God's truth through the text of Scripture. Unlocking the storehouses to release the food within. It is harmonising the mind, the spirit, life experience and the biblical text. It involves removing the veil that is cast over both the Scriptures and the understanding of so many people (cf. 2 Cor 3:15).

This is why the two themes – of the necessity of developing the skills required for careful biblical interpretation and the excitement of discovering the truth which God has revealed – run in creative double tension throughout this whole subject.

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<sup>1</sup> JB Phillips said that translating the New Testament from Greek into modern English was like rewiring a house with the mains still left on! That should be the impact of true Bible interpretation.



## HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is the art of biblical interpretation. When approaching this subject we have to bear in mind two questions:

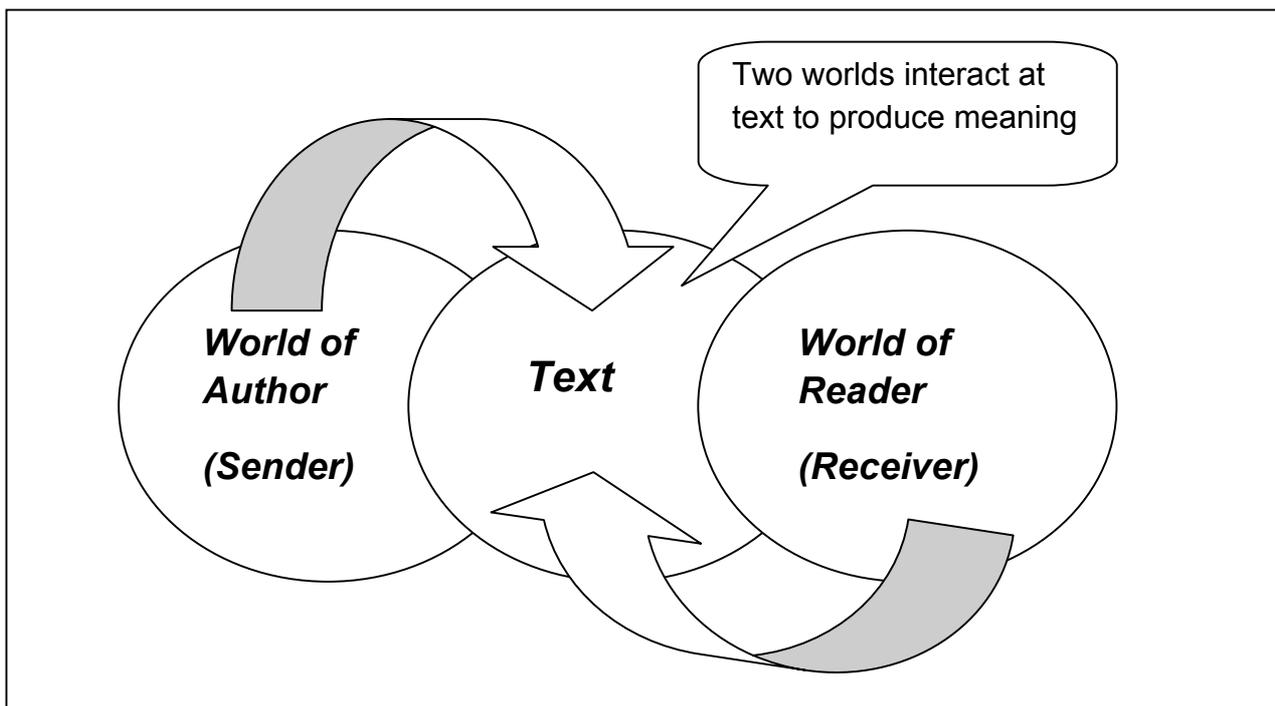
1. If a text has a single meaning (the meaning its author intended) why are there so many disagreements over that meaning?
2. If a text is indeterminate in meaning why is there as much agreement over interpretation as there is?

When we read a biblical text we must remember that:

- the biblical author is attempting
- to communicate a message
- to an audience.

The vehicle for that communication is the text but we as readers inhabit a very different world from that of the author and the original audience. We, therefore, need a model of interpretation that takes all three elements of the communication seriously.

### The Hermeneutical Model



### *The World of the Author*

In order to understand the world of the author we need to know the context in which the text was written. This involves at least the four following elements:



- **The historical situation**
- **The cultural context:** Does this text express the perspective of:
  - The dominant culture (culture espoused by those with power in society)
  - A subculture (culture of subgroups within society)
  - A counterculture (rejects the central values of the dominant culture)
  - A contraculture (a short-lived reaction to the dominant culture in which members have more negative than positive ideas in common)
  - A liminal culture (a momentary, transitional position as groups experience the transition from one cultural identity to another)
- **The ideological context:** what were the prevailing ideological alternatives of the day and what is the ideological perspective of the text?
- **The sociological context:** how was society constituted in terms of such areas as:
  - honour/shame
  - patron/client relationships
  - kinship
  - the notion of limited goods
  - the notion of the evil eye
  - sickness and healing
  - notions of purity, etc.

### ***The World of the Text***

At the heart of good biblical interpretation is close reading of the text, paying attention to:

- **Linguistics:** we have to remember that we are usually reading texts in translation so we need some tools to aid us with the following:
    - The range of meanings of the underlying words bearing in mind that the actual meaning of any word depends on the context in which it occurs.
    - The best text using the results of textual criticism as there may be differences in various manuscript traditions.
    - Syntax - how words are connected and related at the clause level
    - Presupposition pools: modern linguistics recognises that effective communication is heavily context laden. Where sender and receiver share similar contexts there is no need to spell out shared concepts. For example:
      - A computer group would not explain a 'modem';
      - A gardening group would not explain 'top dressing';
      - A mechanics group would not explain a 'tappet'.
- Relevance theory, a significant theoretical perspective in communication and cognition studies, maintains that the most important aspect of effective communication is to be relevant. Consequently, effective communication carries with it a range of unstated explicatures and implicatures. To give an example: a parent has just prepared a meal for their child who is showing extreme reluctance to come to the meal table



as they are glued to the television. The parent shouts: 'It will get cold!' This is an effective communication according to relevance theory as it conveys the maximum amount of information with the minimum of effort. The explicature in this utterance is: 'The meal will get cold soon!' The implicature is: 'I want you to come immediately!' Notice how completely different the actual text 'It will get cold!' is to the underlying sentiment 'I want you to come immediately!' The problem is that we face exactly the same issues when reading biblical texts in which much between sender and receiver is simply assumed and we have to uncover the underlying explicatures and implicatures.

- **Genre:** it would be a mistake to read a scientific treatise in the same way as one would read a novel or a poem. In the same way it is important to recognise the genre of the biblical text. The following genres appear in the Hebrew Scriptures:
  - Narrative (discussed below)
  - Poetry (discussed in Session 6)
  - Wisdom literature (discussed in Session 6)
  - Prophecy (discussed in Session 5)
  - Apocalyptic (discussed in Session 7)
- **Media:** One of the defining characteristics of Scripture is the way God has revealed his truth by using such a wide range of media. As a consequence the pages of the Bible are filled with, not only a wide variety of literary types and styles, but also records of a host of other different mediums used for divine communication. An example of just *some* of the literary and media types are:

proclamation : dream : interpretation : discussion : drama :  
 history : law : riddle : biography : song : vision : parable : story :  
 miracle : poem : allegory : cipher : ritual : voice : letter : sermon :  
 speech : genealogy : psalm : graffiti : proverb : symbol : music :  
 dance : hymn : theophany : oracle : prophecy : wisdom saying :  
 official record :

The reason for the wide range of biblical media is that:

- it gives a variety of emotional impact;
- it communicates with people at different levels and with different effect;
- it speaks to every human condition.

God's creative communication impacts individuals and communities with truth from every angle and from every level. The implications and requirements of this vast array of biblical media in terms of Bible interpretation is that:

- each needs to be particularly identified;
- each requires special handling;
- each raises distinct issues and problems;
- each demands specific questions to be asked.
- **Compositional patterns:** as texts originated in predominantly oral cultures it is important to study the techniques used for emphasis such as:



- Key phrases or sentences
- Motif - e.g. stones in the Jacob story; water in the Moses narrative; fire in the Sampson account
- Themes
- Repetition
- Inclusion - this is where the limits of a textual unit are marked by repeating words and phrases from the beginning of the unit at the end (e.g. Deut 1:1; 29:1)
- Chiastic patterns (e.g. ABCDC/B'A') - this is a sophisticated form of repetition where the text builds to a central point (D) and each step up to the central point is reflected back in reverse order
- **Rhetoric:** evaluating the techniques of argumentation used in the text
- **Intratextuality:** the interaction of this text with other texts in the Hebrew canon:
  - Reapplying earlier texts to later situations
  - Inner-canonical dialogue (e.g. Ecclesiastes in dialogue with Proverbs and Job)
  - Allusion

### ***The World of the Reader***

As readers we bring our own history, social location, church background, political and ideological perspectives, etc. to our reading of the text. This is inevitable and needs to be consciously recognised in the hermeneutical process. Relevance theory informs us that readers continually 'make sense' of utterances and, in doing so, they infer an author's intention to communicate relevantly (i.e. conveying maximum information with minimum effort). Authorial intention is thus a readerly construct! Understanding that readers bring their own perspective to the interpretive task does not mean that 'anything goes' so that a text can mean anything. This is because reading strategies are inevitably constrained by the interpretive communities to which we belong. Readers, therefore, change their interpretation of a text by being persuaded by a different reading. There can never be a straightforward appeal to the 'bare text' for there is no such thing - every such appeal is, in fact, just another interpretation. As Stanley Fish has famously said: 'like it or not, interpretation is the only game in town'.<sup>2</sup> Many conservative scholars are suspicious of this approach to hermeneutics, believing it leads to a multiplicity of private interpretations.<sup>3</sup> In particular, they tend to be critical of Fish's work (but often display signs of not having read Fish closely)!

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<sup>2</sup> S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1980) 355.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, scholars of all persuasions still often work with the notion that there is a difference between meaning and significance. The meaning of a text is the single meaning the original author intended for the original audience. This should be distinguished from its significance for the reader today which, of course, can have many dimensions. However, contemporary hermeneutical theory renders this distinction between meaning and significance extremely problematic. If you are interested in this

However, Fish is clear that his position does not lead to the notion of infinite meaning and, in fact, for Christians this opens up the whole question of reading in communion and the role of the Holy Spirit in the believing interpretive community.<sup>4</sup> It should also make us more sensitive as to how a particular text has been received by the church in different ages.<sup>5</sup>

## Interpreting Hebrew Narrative

Our English text from Genesis to Esther consists primarily of narrative. There are also narrative sections in Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Jonah and Haggai. It is very important, therefore, that we have the tools to interpret narrative, particularly, as discussed above, as these narratives cannot be construed as history in the modern sense of the word.

### The Scene

The scene is the basic building block of Hebrew narrative. Each scene is like a frame in a film; it exists separately but has no real life of its own outside the narrative as a whole. The scene 'presents the happenings of a particular place and time, concentrating the attention of the audience on the deeds and the words spoken'.<sup>6</sup> Typically, biblical scenes involve just two characters. Where there are more than two characters, the twofold division usually still applies with one individual and a group which functions as a collective character. God is often one of the two characters in the scene.

A number of typical scenes have been identified. Each type-scene has its own distinctive characteristics:

- the annunciation of the birth of a child to a previously barren mother;
- the encounter with the future betrothed at a well;
- the epiphany in the field;
- being wronged by a close relative;
- the initiatory trial;
- danger in the desert and the subsequent discovery of a source of sustenance;
- the testament of the dying hero, etc.

As the characteristics of a type-scene are identified it is instructive to analyse the points at which any particular text departs from the typical characteristics.

subject you may wish to consider doing Advanced Workshop where hermeneutics is studied in great depth.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent example of this approach see S. E. Fowl and L. G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Reception history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is now a major emphasis in biblical studies. There is an entire commentary series devoted to it (Blackwell Biblical Commentaries).

<sup>6</sup> S. Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/IVP, 1988) 199.



An important example in the NT is Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4. This has all the ingredients of the typical betrothal-at-the-well scene, except that there is not usually a discussion about the water and Jesus does not propose marriage - instead there is a discussion concerning the woman's own marital status.

### **Characterisation**

The Hebrew scriptures generally lack detailed physical or physiological descriptions of characters. Nevertheless, characters are described in various ways and in three overall degrees of detail:

- full-fledged (multi-dimensional and complex) - e.g. Moses, David
- type (one dimensional focussing on a single character trait) - e.g. Sampson
- agent (minimal characterisation - used simply to fill out the narrative)

### **Plot**

Every narrative has a plot - a beginning, middle and end. Plots can be simple or complex with the latter consisting of a series of sub-plots. A simple plot consists of:

- Introduction - setting the scene
- Conflict of some sort
- Complications arising out of conflict
- Resolution
- Conclusion

### **Pace**

The plot in Hebrew narrative generally moves at a fast pace due to the lack of detail, the use of short sentences and the absence of detailed character description. However, a number of devices are used to slow the pace down. For example, the use of direct speech rather than summary statements, verbatim repetition of speeches and exceptional description of detail. Whenever the pace slows down we can be sure that this is where the narrative emphasis lies.

### **The Narrator**

We view the narrative through the eyes of the narrator. The narrator is usually inconspicuous but we need to pay attention whenever we become aware of the narrator's presence, particularly how an event is evaluated:

- **Omniscience.** The narrator usually knows everything and is present everywhere. For example, intimate conversations are overheard and



innermost thoughts are revealed. However, the narrator does not share everything with the reader. We need to ask '[w]hy does the narrator evaluate certain characters and actions but not others? What is the narrator's point of view?'

- **Point of View.** This concerns the perspective from which a story is told. This is usually the narrator's point of view but sometimes the story is told from the perspective of characters in the plot. For example, 2 Samuel 11 is framed by the narrator's point of view (vv. 1, 27b) but the rest of the narrative gives different characters' perspectives: David, Uriah, Joab, the messengers and Bathsheba.

## USEFUL TOOLS

There are a range of important tools available to aid the study of the Hebrew scriptures.

### Bibles

If at all possible it is useful to have a number of translations to compare texts. It is important that these are translations and not paraphrases. We recommend at least the NRSV and NIV.

### The ESV English-Hebrew Reverse Interlinear

Reverse interlinears are extremely useful for those who do not read Hebrew or Greek. Unlike standard interlinears they start with the English translation and have the underlying Hebrew words underneath indicating the order in which the words appear in the Hebrew text.

### Introductions

Introductions provide background information to each book of the Bible. They typically deal with issues such as authorship, date, provenance, purpose, intended audience, historical background, structure and summary of content. The best contemporary Introductions are, from the perspective of critical scholarship, John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) and, from an Evangelical perspective, the *Exploring the Old Testament* series published by SPCK.

### Bible Dictionaries

These provide a great deal of information on a host of biblical topics. The best is the six volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary* published by Doubleday. If you own a PC (not Mac) the *Essential IVP Collection on CD-ROM* is outstanding value as it contains at least the following works:

*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*

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<sup>7</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 207.



*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*  
*Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*  
*Dictionary of New Testament Background*  
*IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*  
*IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*  
*New Bible Dictionary*  
*New Bible Commentary*  
*Hard Sayings of the Bible*  
*The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*  
*New Bible Atlas*  
*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*  
*New Dictionary of Theology*

## Commentaries

It is best to avoid single volume commentaries as these invariably gloss over difficult interpretive issues. The best single volume commentary is probably *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*. It is also best not to read commentaries just from a single series as commentaries vary greatly in their quality and theological sensitivity. For that reason it is useful to have Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey* (3d ed.; Downers Grove: IVP, 2003). Commentaries are divided into two categories:

- **Critical:** these are comprehensive, often require knowledge of the original language, and will deal extensively with alternative interpretive possibilities. The best critical series are:
  - *International Critical Commentary*
  - *New International Commentary*
  - *Word Biblical Commentary*
- **Expository:** these are designed for preaching and personal bible study. The best expository series are:
  - *Interpretation*
  - *Westminster Bible Companion*

## Bible Atlases

These are very useful to gain an understanding of the geography and to see where places mentioned in the text are situated. There are two standard atlases:

- *The New Bible Atlas* (included on the IVP CD-ROM) - this is arranged primarily historically
- *The New Atlas of the Bible* - this is arranged geographically

## Bible Software

There is now an excellent range of study tools available for the computer.



## **Logos**

This has the most comprehensive range of study tools currently on the market. At the moment it is only available for the PC but a Mac version is being developed. For further details see [www.logos.com](http://www.logos.com).

## **BibleWorks**

This is another excellent product for PC users, and is highly regarded by biblical scholars, but does not have the range of resources that Logos has. For further details see [www.bibleworks.com](http://www.bibleworks.com).

## **QuickVerse**

The top of the range Deluxe version for PC users is suitable for serious bible study. For further details see [www.quickverse.com](http://www.quickverse.com).

## **Accordance**

This is the most highly regarded software of all by biblical scholars. It is only available on the Mac and again does not have the range of resources that Logos has. For further details see [www.accordancebible.com](http://www.accordancebible.com).

## **HAZARDS AND DANGERS**

When we embark on Bible interpretation we usually have the highest of aims, the strongest motivation and the very best of intentions. However, the task involved challenges us at every level, both directly and subtly. We must be clear in both our technique and integrity. Some of the key areas of danger and hazards to be alert to, are:

- **studying verses in isolation** from the rest of the passage and the whole body of Scripture
- **allegorising scriptures** that are either difficult to understand or appear morally embarrassing
- **spiritualising texts** that have a very specific and clear meaning in order personally to apply them to quite different circumstances
- **squeezing the text into frameworks** of preconceived biblical thinking and understanding
- **focusing on doctrinal proof texts** for which the Bible is treated as a hunting ground, thus destroying the integrity of particular passages as a whole
- **practising a selective overemphasis** which applies one principle at the expense of other contrasting principles
- **not recognising different types of biblical literature** and so ignoring their implications for interpretation
- **ignoring the natural sense of the text** with its grammar, the historical, geographical and social setting
  - **the symbolic and metaphorical treated as literal** (and vice versa) so
    - destroying the very character of the text and the nature of revelation
- **abandoning common sense and careful study** and failing to see the danger of allowing a superficial spirituality to determine the meaning



- **using the Bible as a spiritual ‘magic book’** with little regard to its literary and historical essence
- **ignoring the challenging implications** of passages that should practically impact our thinking, behaviour and lifestyle

## **SAFEGUARDS AND DEMANDS**

In the light of these dangers there are some personal and practical demands which need to be met whenever we engage in biblical interpretation:

- If you are unable to work with the original biblical languages then use a really good Bible translation, in fact several, to capture as closely as possible the original sense.
- Recognise the wide variety and contrast between the different types of biblical literature; remember that the Bible is a whole library, not a book.
- Get right into the heart of the passage being studied by learning to ask the right questions of the text.
- Remember that common sense is the basic starting tool, always make your initial question, ‘What is the most obvious meaning of this passage?’
- Discipline yourself to look for the plain meaning of the text, the essential truths will not be hidden from view.
- Avoid selectivity, study the passage in the light of the whole of Scripture not just those parts that are supporting your point of view.
- Subsequently be prepared to dig into the text and other parts of Scripture for a greater and deeper understanding of the passage.
- Learn how to consult experts (commentaries and Bible dictionaries) to highlight key issues with regard to the language and sociopolitical background.

Finally, the greatest demand of biblical study and interpretation must be our personal response of obedience to the spiritual insights we have gained. Without this commitment, biblical interpretation becomes just an intellectual exercise. However, both dimensions are vital. The true test of good Bible interpretation is that it both ‘satisfies the mind and stimulates the spirit’.

## **COMMUNITY, SPIRIT AND LIFE**

Traditionally Scripture has been interpreted by the priest, pastor, professor or preacher, with people being told what to understand. In contrast, individuals have increasingly read Scripture for themselves on the correct understanding that it is self-interpreting; that it is plain and clear and that the obscure portions were made clear by the self-evident passages. While the role of scholars and the responsibility of the individual are very important to Bible interpretation an over-emphasis of either will lead to authoritarianism or individualism. The New Testament demonstrates that the primary environment for coming to understand the meaning of Scripture is in the local community of faith under the power and enlightening of the Spirit; and by extension the wider church.

As individuals we are to interact with the biblical text, open to the Spirit (cf. John 16:13; 2 Cor 3:16-18), and then we share our insights with other members of the body. It is through dialogue within the Spirit-gifted community that truth is



understood and then demonstrated to be so in the lives of its members. So the Spirit-enlightened church is the key to Bible interpretation.

Some concluding principles are clear:

- biblical interpretation is too large and vital a task for one person alone;
- scholars will probably have important insights to bring;
- the Spirit-given gifts throughout the body are key to understanding;
- we need to be open to a wide variety of Christian reflection;
- my prejudices need to be exposed to the best arguments of others;
- test interpretations by their fruit in godly life and behaviour.

## **TWO TIMES**

### **Encircling horizons**

When we begin to interpret scripture we find ourselves standing encircled by two horizons that intersect within us as we engage in the task. They set the parameters for the overarching environment in which the work of exploring biblical meaning and application takes place. These vistas represent the two times – the biblical and the modern – that we are touching in our endeavour.

Properly understanding what is encountered at each horizon requires care, insight and effort on our part. It is easy to make general superficial assumptions which will then lead us to bland distorted conclusions:

- the ancient world in which the scriptures were written was intricate, mysterious and entirely alien to us and we must enter it with both alertness and care
- our modern world, to which biblical truth is to be applied, appears familiar to us but in reality its complexity, sophistication and speed of change demand serious wisdom and insight on our part if we are to impact it with the truth

To be able, to some extent, to hold both times within our embrace will demand hard work and a dependence on the Spirit's help.

### ***Biblical skyline***

If we are going to be able to walk confidently across the biblical skyline it inevitably involves us using very careful scholarship. While this will require a detailed study of the text in the light of the languages used, it will also demand an understanding of the ancient societies about which, and into which, it speaks. The biblical story is true, so if we are to encounter its reality it will depend on us experiencing the multi-dimensional connection between the rich elements that make up its cultures: the words, the ideas, the self-expression, the events, all flowing into one another. We also need to remember that the biblical story spans thousands of years with the rise and fall of empires with influence from many cultures and ideas. We are dealing with vast eras of time, each of which has its own dynamic. Far too often the social milieu of the biblical world has been viewed simply as a static and rather flat backcloth against which the actors in the drama play out their roles. Such a view bears no



relationship to reality and thus to truth. Too frequently the focus has also been on the particular words used in scripture rather than the substance of the whole of the narrative in the light of the times. Radical and realistic approaches are demanded.

One of the practical struggles we can have with scripture is the fact that it is the text of ancient peoples of another age and another time. How can our worlds touch each other? In answer to that we must remind ourselves of something that is often forgotten; there is in fact a deep link between themselves and us. A primal bond which makes a strong connection between their world and ours, between their experience and ours. This is found in the reality that we both share a common humanity - that personal experience of living. All people in all ages have known the same hopes and fears, the same appetites and emotions, the same experience of personhood. It is this existential unity we share that transcends our different world views and intellectual knowledge. This is why their encounter with God is the valid imperative for our encounter. The fact that the human person, and fundamental human experience, is the same in all ages is what makes the message of scripture universally true and why the horizon lines can intersect.

### ***Modern cityscape***

To apply biblical truth to our modern world involves very careful observation and analysis. We are often quite naive in our evaluation of the turbulent cityscape in which we live with its varieties, levels and power of its multi-media impact, fed by a multitude of cultural fragments, conflicting values and global perspectives. Many of us are of the opinion that we are worldly wise, when in reality we are usually cocooned in a sub-cultural bubble, determined by our age, sex, race and class.

We need to make full use of the observations and analytical skills of social science and its allied disciplines. They will help to give us a mature insight into, and understanding of, our own contemporary society. We need to be able to identify its essential characteristics, and the way its values influence us. We must identify the real issues of our age and hear the deep anxieties of our times. We must also work to discover the primary, as opposed to the superficial, differences between our urban society and those of the ancient world. What are the real ways in which these fundamental differences will influence both our interpretation and application of scripture?

Our task is to make direct links and connections across the two horizons. To allow the spirit of the biblical message to speak to our own circumstances in a way that is absolutely true and not through some cosmetic encounter. We are looking for the abiding and eternal truth that God has revealed to challenge and change our lives, and to give direction to our working for change in our society and the modern world.



## TWO TEXTS

### Scripture and life

There is a very real danger that biblical interpretation simply becomes an abstract exercise. Therefore we must be sure to reflect on the conclusions we come to in such a way that they practically affect our lives in the light of truth. Some of the most creative work done in this area has come from the two-thirds world where there is frequent reference to the 'two texts' of 'scripture and life':

- **scripture:** this is truth revealed: the written record of God's word which is authoritative in terms of faith and behaviour, providing the foundations for interpretation
- **life:** this is truth experienced: the living encounter with the realities of existence, which raises the central questions about faith and behaviour, setting the agenda for interpretation

This approach prevents the interpretation of scripture simply being a personal meditative exercise. It draws our insights into the centre of the life of the church where the whole community of faith can reflect creatively on it together. Finally, it thrusts our interpretation out into the world to test the validity of its ideas.

### The praxis spiral

The word 'praxis' comes from the Greek 'to do'; it is used with the sense of 'to put into practice'. This is the actual experience of engaging in interpreting the two texts of scripture and life. The challenges and questions of life should drive both individual Christians and the whole community of faith to study the biblical text in search of clear answers. Once they have discussed and reflected on the answers these are then put into action. The consequences and outcome of these actions are then observed. They are evaluated and measured against the demands of scripture and adjusted accordingly. They are then practised again and further observed and adjusted. So Bible interpretation is a continual 'spiral' of checking life against scripture and scripture against life.

## SUMMARY

- You must study the whole passage in its *immediate* context;
- You must read the whole book; you can only interpret individual parts when you know the complete picture;
- You must understand the *type* of literature you are reading;
- You need to know the historical context of the document;
- You need to know the purpose of the document;
- You must clarify what is assumed, but not specifically stated; identify the 'presupposition pools';
- You must recognise any links between a particular biblical passage and the deep themes that run throughout scripture;
- You can usually gain an initial understanding from the plain reading of the text; what is obvious and common sense;
- You will gain more precise understanding by regularly using commentaries and biblical aids; often you will not understand the text without their help;



- You must consciously recognise, as far as possible, the presuppositions you bring to the text from your own autobiography and the interpretive community to which you belong;
- You must, therefore, read interpretations of the passage from the perspective of different interpretive communities than your own (both in time and social location); these interpretations will either challenge your own or serve to convince you that your community's interpretation has more validity.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why do so many Christians think the Bible is so easy to interpret? Give four practical examples, you have observed, where well-intentioned Christians have mistreated scripture. Identify what errors they have made and why it resulted in distorting the text.
2. Human communication is more complex than we imagine. What do we need to understand about it to help us in the way we interpret the Bible?
3. What do we mean by the importance of reading something 'in context'? In what 'contexts' do we need to read the biblical text?
4. When you read a novel or play how important is the meaning of what you are reading? Which is the most important meaning: the meaning of the original author or the one you give to it? What would be the strongest clues to the author's original meaning? How important is the meaning you give to the story? How should these principles and observations influence us when we think about reading and interpreting the Bible?

## READING AND RESOURCES

- Adam, A. K. M., Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Francis Watson. *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.
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- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
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- Greidanus, Sidney. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature*. Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/IVP, 1988.
- Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. 2d ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.\*



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\* indicates more advanced texts for those who wish to pursue this subject further.

