

Inductive Bible Study: Interpretation

THE THREE COMPONENTS OF INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY INTERPRETATION

- Introduction to Inductive Bible Study - Why do it?
 - Observation - What does it say?
 - Interpretation - What does it mean?:
 - Application - How do I respond?
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Introduction

We've all heard the following response when we have tried to share a truth from Scripture - *"Well, that's just your interpretation!"* This retort begs the question of whether there are in fact many valid interpretations or whether there is only one interpretation intended by the author (and the Author). While there is no doubt that genuine believers will differ in their interpretations on a number of difficult passages, the truth is that every passage has only one valid, correct interpretation. God did not stutter nor did He speak in ambiguities. He said what He said and meant what He said, regardless of whether we as finite creatures can agree on what He said. Biblical truth is the ultimate objective truth (Ps 119:160-note, Pr 30:5) for it is God's inerrant, plenary (complete in every aspect) inspired Word (2Ti 3:16-note). It therefore behooves all sincere believers to be very careful in our approach to handling and interpreting His precious truth (cp 2Ti 2:15-note, Paul in Acts 20:27, 2Co 4:2, He 5:14-note; Pr 30:6, Re 22:18-note, Re 22:19-note; Dt 4:2, 12:32 Jas 3:1). The apostle Peter issued a stern warning to those who play "fast and loose" with the Scriptures, noting that Paul's epistles contain

some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2Pe 3:16-note; cp Paul's parting warning to the Ephesian elders - Acts 20:29, 30 where "perverse" = twisted, distorted, perverted)

Webster defines **interpretation** as explaining or telling the **meaning** of something and presenting it in understandable terms. In Biblical interpretation you are seeking to place yourself in the writer's "sandals", setting aside any preconceived ideas, with the ultimate goal being to understand the writer's original intent, and God's intent which sometimes goes beyond even the understanding of the human writer (as pointed out by Peter -- 1Pe 1:10, 11, 12-notes).

A synonym for interpretation is **hermeneutics** which is derived from the name of the pagan god Hermes who brought messages from the pagan gods to mortals, "translating" them as it were. The related Greek verb **hermeneuo** (click Greek word study) means to bring someone to an understanding of what is conveyed in another language, making it clear and intelligible and thus in a sense "translating" it. **Hermeneutics** is the science (and art) of interpretation, in this case the interpretation of the Bible. The comments and "steps" below will enable you to practice good "hermeneutic" technique, but clearly cannot substitute for more in depth training and instruction in this area. If you want more (a whole lot more) on hermeneutics then I would highly recommend downloading (free) the 152 page Pdf by **Dr Stephen R Lewis** which is the "class handout" for "Bible 405: Hermeneutics: The Study of the Interpretation of Scriptures" offered at Chafer Theological Seminary. ([Hermeneutics - Study of Interpretation of Scriptures](#)) (See also [Axioms for Interpretation](#))

Listen to the wise warning from **Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones**...

There is nothing so dangerous as to come to the Bible with a theory, with preconceived ideas, with some pet idea of our own, because the moment we do so, we shall be tempted to over-emphasize one aspect and under-emphasize another. (from chapter 1 of "Studies in the Sermon on the Mount", a modern day classic)

Dr. Howard Hendricks reminds us that...

"Meaning" (of the Scriptural passage) is not our **subjective** thoughts read into the text but God's **objective** truth read out of the text. As someone has well said, the task of Bible study is to "think God's thoughts after Him." The miracle is that He used human authors to do so. Working through their personalities, their circumstances, and their concerns, the Holy Spirit superintended the crafting of a document. And each of the human authors—God's coauthors, we might call them—had a specific message in mind as he recorded his portion of the text. That's why I like to refer to the step of Interpretation as the recreation process. We're attempting to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his experience—to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as he decided. We're asking, What did this mean to him? before we ever ask, What does it mean to us?" (Under "Step 2" - The Value of Interpretation) ([Living by the Book](#) online)

Hendricks goes on to remark that

in **Observation** we excavate. In **Interpretation** we erect. And buildings are always determined by their foundations. The more substantial the foundation, the more substantial the superstructure... In the same way, the quality of your interpretation will always depend on the quality of your observation. It is impossible to understand what a writer means until you notice what the writer says. Therefore, to **observe** well is to **interpret** well. You always need to **observe** with a view to **interpreting** (and eventually to applying) the Scripture. **Observation** is never an end in itself but always a means to an end. ([Living by the Book](#) online) (Bolding added)

The proper **interpretation** of Scripture has long been a source of debate because many people consider the process too subjective. We've all heard remarks like "Doesn't everyone have their own view?" or "Aren't there many ways to interpret that passage?" The answer in fact is "**no**" there are not many ways to interpret the Bible. The Bible is not some abstract Picasso painting where everyone weighs in on their opinion as to what message the artist might have meant to convey. In contrast to the relativity so common in our world, it is comforting to know that God offers absolute truth and it follows that every passage of Scripture has **only one intended meaning** and **only one correct interpretation**.

On the other hand, the passage may have many **applications**, but it always has **only one** intended meaning. Therefore the next time you hear the objection, "There are so many interpretations of the Bible I don't think we can be sure of what it means. So why study it?", ask the objector to interpret a verse like John 3:16. You and (they) will usually find that they can understand the passage and that God's one intended message is very clear. Perhaps the obvious meaning of verses like John 3:16 is what lead the well known agnostic **Mark Twain** to quip...

It ain't those parts of the Bible that I **can't** understand that bother me, it is the parts that I **do** understand!

THE BIBLE HAS... ONE INTERPRETATION MANY APPLICATIONS

Milton S. Terry who authored the classic text [Biblical Hermeneutics](#) laid down a basic hermeneutical principle of single meaning writing that "A fundamental principle in **grammatico-historical** exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture." **Robert Thomas** adds that "**Bernard Ramm** advocated the same principle in different words: "But here we must remember the old adage: 'Interpretation is one, application is many.' This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study." Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (see related [Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#) and also on [Biblical Hermeneutics](#)) concurred with this principle: "We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application." (from [The Principle of Single Meaning by Robert Thomas](#) scroll down to page 7. As an aside Thomas has an interesting article on "Promises to Israel in the Apocalypse" on page 91)

Thomas goes on to quote Terry - We may readily admit that the Scriptures are capable of manifold practical applications; otherwise they would not be so useful for doctrine, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. iii, 16). But the moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult or double sense we introduce an element of uncertainty in the sacred volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation. "If the Scripture has more than one meaning," says Dr. Owen, "it has no meaning at all." "I hold," says Ryle, "that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense, and that our first object should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigidly to it. . . . To say that words do mean a thing merely because they can be tortured into meaning it is a most dishonorable and dangerous way of handling Scripture.....We have already seen that the Bible has its riddles, enigmas, and dark sayings, but whenever they are given the context clearly advises us of the fact. To assume, in the absence of any hint, that we have an enigma, and in the face of explicit statements to the contrary, that any specific prophecy has a double sense, a primary and

a secondary meaning, a near and a remote fulfilment, must necessarily introduce an element of uncertainty and confusion into biblical interpretation."

In short, as Berean Bible students we should [assiduously](#) avoid arriving at an interpretation of Scripture based on our personal opinion, popular consensus, gut feelings, the persuasiveness of an argument, and even what we have been taught by other respected teachers (including a specific "brand" of systematic theology). Sometimes the most difficult aspect of interpretation is to "unlearn" prior faulty, flawed interpretations!

Remember that **interpretation** is the bridge between **observation** and **application**. Accurate interpretation is not only possible but it is crucial lest we inappropriately apply the Bible (click here for a sad example). Acting on what God has said (application) assumes that you understand what He has said.

Is your approach to the interpretation of Scripture like a person casting lots? Do you prayerfully open your Bible to see what happens to catch your eye or even worse do you close your eyes, open your Bible, and insert your finger on the page, supposing that the passage you are pointing to is God's will and word you?

The renowned preacher, **G. Campbell Morgan**, told of the man who followed this method and came up with "Judas went out and hanged himself." (Mt 27:5) Finding these words unhelpful, he did it again and this time got "Go, and do thou likewise." (Lk 10:37) In desperation he tried once more and this time the words that jumped at him were, "What thou doest, do quickly." (Jn 13:27) The point of this humorous example is that even though this practice shows vast reverence for Scripture as God's means of communicating with us, it is essential mystical, superstitious and even dangerous.

J I Packer adds that "A misinterpreted Bible is a misunderstood Bible, which will lead us out of God's way rather than in it." [Truth and Power The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life](#) or [here](#))

Because we are human and now see in a mirror dimly (1Cor 13:12), there will always be Bible passages on which sincere Bible believers (even those who hold to literal interpretation) will not arrive at complete agreement. On the other hand, most of God's Holy Word can be confidently and accurately interpreted.

Related Resources:

- [Click for good summary of rules of interpretation](#)
- Summit I - [Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#)
- Summit II - [Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics](#)
- Summit III - [Chicago Statement on Biblical Application](#)
- [What is biblical literalism?](#)
- [How can we know what parts of the Bible apply to us today?](#)
- [What is the key to applying the Bible to my life?](#)
- [How much influence is the Bible supposed to have on society?](#)
- [Watch the incredible youtube video The Indestructible Book - How We Got our English Bible - 3 hours, 37 minutes - It will make you weep!](#)

HANDLING ACCURATELY THE WORD OF TRUTH

The goal of inductive Bible study is to understand what God meant by what He said through human authors. Paul spoke to this point in exhorting young Timothy to...

Be diligent (make every effort - aorist imperative = commands diligence and effort to be one's immediate response and can even convey a sense of urgency) to present (includes idea of yielding, surrendering to the disposal or service of another) yourself approved (tried as coins were assayed for purity and found to pass the test) to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing (making a straight cut - of a craftsman cutting a straight line, a farmer plowing a straight furrow, a mason setting a straight line of bricks, workmen building a straight road!) the word of truth (Truth is the correspondence between a reality and a declaration which professes to set it forth. Whatever God says is Truth. Truth is also a Person, Jesus). (2Ti 2:15-[note](#))

From this verse, it is clear that accurate interpretation takes some "holy sweat" so to speak. And why make this effort? What's the goal? To stand unashamed before our Lord someday. And how can we be certain we will be unashamed? Because during our life on earth, we handled (and lived out) God's Word of Truth with integrity and accuracy. Accurate interpretation therefore is an imminently

worthwhile goal.

In this same passage in 2 Timothy, you may have observed that the Greek word **forrightly dividing** literally means to cut straight and was used in ancient times to describe a craftsman cutting a straight line, a sewer sewing a straight seam, a farmer plowing a straight furrow, a surgeon dissecting a straight line (we all hope so!), a mason laying bricks in a straight line or a workman building a straight road. Figuratively the key point is that whatever the endeavor, careful attention is given to performance of the task to assure utmost accuracy.

The well known Christian speaker and writer **Charles Colson** sounds a similar caution as Paul does to Timothy writing that...

The longer I'm a Christian, the more I'm in fear of misinterpreting the Bible. It's an awesome responsibility.

Every devout Christian can understand the Bible for as **Martin Luther** wrote

There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than the Holy Scripture (Exposition of the 37th Psalm).

So how does someone without a seminary background **rightly divide** the Scripture? As you apply the simple principles discussed in the next section, you will learn how to cut the Scriptures straight. Crooked cutting of the Scripture can result in anything from minor errors to total chaos and confusion in the church (click example) or at worst a cult.

Some people want to have their ears tickled and therefore try to make the Bible say what they want to hear. We must align ourselves with the Bible, never the Bible with ourselves. Beloved, every time we go to the Scriptures, we need to treat them as a priceless gift from God and...

Handle With Care

Rightly dividing the Word of Truth (Interpretation) is vital if we are going to "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." (**Application**) (Colossians 1:10 notes)

Mark it down - the accuracy of your **interpretation** is directly proportional to the amount of time and effort taken to carefully observe the text.

The more time you spend in **observation** of the Scriptures, the less time you will have to spend on **interpretation** and the more accurate will be your **interpretation**.

The less time you spend observing the text, the more time you will have to spend in **Interpretation**, and the less accurate will be your result (at least potentially). And without accurate interpretation of the text, there can be no valid **application** of the Word to your life.

Accurate interpretation is possible but does require effort. Paul exhorted Timothy to

Think over these things (Ask "What things" for context see 2Ti 2:1,2,3, 4, 5, 6, 7-notes) I am saying [understand them and grasp their application], for the Lord will grant you full insight and understanding in everything." ([see note](#) 2 Timothy 2:7, Amplified Version).

Dr Roy Zuck observes that...

In recent years we have seen a great surge of interest in informal Bible study. Many small groups meet weekly in homes or in churches to discuss the Bible—what it means and how it applies. Do people in those groups always come away with the same understanding of the passage studied? Not necessarily. Some may say, "To me this verse means this," and another person in the group may respond, "To me the verse doesn't mean that; it means this." Studying the Bible in this way, without proper hermeneutical guidelines, can lead to confusion and interpretations that are even in direct conflict. Did God intend for the Bible to be treated in this way? If it can be made to mean anything we want, how can it be a reliable guide?... "You can make the Bible say anything you want," some argue. And yet how many of the same people say, "You can make Shakespeare say anything you want"? Of course it is true that people can make the Bible say anything they wish so long as they disregard normal approaches for understanding written documents.

When many people approach the Bible, they jump from observation to application, skipping the essential step of interpretation. This is wrong because interpretation logically follows after observation. In observing what the Bible says, you probe; in interpretation, you mull. Observation is discovery; interpreting is digesting. Observation means depicting what is there, and interpretation is deciding what it means. The one is to explore, the other is to explain. ([Basic Bible Interpretation](#) - this book

available to borrow and is highly recommended if you would like to read more on the vitally important topic of hermeneutics - it is authoritative, readable and very practical.)

To those detractors who say that Inductive Bible Study is too tedious, too technical, too demanding, **R C Sproul** would say...

The Word of God is deeper than a flannelgraph ([definition](#)). It demands the closest possible scrutiny. It calls for the most excellent scholarship. It makes the finest point of technical analysis worth the effort. The yield of such effort is truth.

Finally, the attitude with which we approach interpretation is vitally important. In Isaiah we read of the importance of **trembling heart**, God declaring...

My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who **trembles at My word**. (Is 66:2, cp Is 66:5, Ezra 9:4, 10:3)

As **Vance Havner** once said...

It is always easier to understand what the Bible says than to understand what somebody thinks it meant to say.

RESOURCES TO AID INTERPRETATION

Many resources are available to aid your study of Bible interpretation. Below are a few recommendations that are available online at no charge.

[How to Study Your Bible](#) by Kay Arthur - succinct, straightforward synopsis of inductive Bible study. (can borrow at [archive.org](#))

[The New How to Study Your Bible Workbook](#) (2010) by Arthur, Kay, - Note that this workbook is the companion to the [New How to Study Your Bible](#) book (not the same as the one linked above).

[Discover the Bible for Yourself](#) by Arthur, Kay [93 ratings](#) - Proven methods to read, mark, and study God's Word. Introductions to set the stage for each book of the Bible. Maps and charts to add historic and geographic dimension. Word studies for NASB and NIV translations. Definitions and explanations to simplify interpretation. "Things to Think About" for personal application. This resource will inspire and guide anyone interested in creating a personal study of God's Word.

[Living by the Book](#): by Dr Howard Hendricks - classic on inductive study. Read this one. It also has some practice exercises to hone your observational and interpretation skills. (can borrow at [archive.org](#))

[Basic Bible Interpretation](#) (can borrow at [archive.org](#) - DIFFERENT FROM BOB SMITH'S BOOK BELOW) - by Roy Zuck authoritative, well written, easy to understand textbook on hermeneutics

[Basics of Bible Interpretation](#) by Bob Smith - well written book available free of charge online. Excellent guidelines on interpretation of figurative language and practical guidelines on how to utilize the original languages, Greek and Hebrew.

[How to Study the Bible and Enjoy It](#) - Skip Heitzig (can borrow at [archive.org](#))

[Hermeneutics - Study of Interpretation of Scriptures](#) by Dr Robert Lewis. Online 152 page Pdf compilation of sound material in outline form. Used in a seminary course on hermeneutics.

[How to read the Bible book by book : a guided tour](#) by Fee, Gordon D - borrow this book

[How to read the Bible for all its worth](#) by Fee, Gordon D - borrow this book

[Listening to the Spirit in the text](#) by Fee, Gordon D - borrow this book

[New Testament exegesis : a handbook for students and pastors](#) - Online copy by Fee, Gordon D

[Josh McDowell's Guide to Understanding your Bible](#) - Josh McDowell (1982) (can borrow at [archive.org](#))

[How to get the most from God's word](#) - John MacArthur (can borrow at [archive.org](#))

[How to Study the English Bible](#) - R B Girdlestone (1887)

[Eerdmans' handbook to the Bible](#) (1983) 688 pages

[Tyndale handbook of Bible charts & maps](#) by Wilson, Neil [57 ratings](#)

[Bible handbook and A-Z bible encyclopedia](#)

[The illustrated guide to Bible customs & curiosities](#) by Knight, George W. (George William), [31 ratings](#)

Why did Bible people wash each other's feet? What was wrong with Leah's "tender eyes"? Why were the Israelites forbidden to boil a young goat in its mother's milk? What did Jesus mean about His "yoke" being "easy"? Where exactly was Jesus crucified? Find answers to these questions and many more in The Illustrated Guide to Bible Customs and Curiosities. More than 750 clear, concise entries are included, covering every book of the Bible in order. Full-color illustrations enhance the text, making The Illustrated Guide to Bible Customs and Curiosities both informative and entertaining.

[Today's handbook of Bible times & customs](#) by Coleman, William L [13 ratings](#)

[The Shaw pocket Bible handbook](#) - Editor - Walter Elwell (1984) 408 pages.

"This hardback is small in size but packed full of content: Brief summaries of every book of the bible, cultural, archaeological and historical info, word definitions, pictures, maps and charts." Worth checking!

[Encyclopedia of Bible difficulties](#) by Archer, Gleason L - or [here with no restrictions](#) [142 ratings](#)

[Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament \(Volume 2 - Isaiah - Malachi\)](#) by Unger, Merrill Frederick, 1909- (1981) 972 pages.

[The new Unger's Bible dictionary](#) by Unger, Merrill Frederick, 1909-

[Survey of the Bible : introductory insights, background studies, book-by- book survey](#) by Unger, Merrill Frederick [1 rating](#)

[The parallel New Testament and Unger's Bible handbook : produced for Moody monthly](#) by Unger, Merrill (1975) 744 pages [4 ratings](#)

[The Hodder Bible handbook](#) by Unger, Merrill [2 ratings](#)

[Nelson's expository dictionary of the Old Testament](#) by Unger, Merrill [9 ratings](#)

[Kregel Bible handbook : a full-color guide to every book of the Bible](#) by Kerr, William [3 ratings](#)

[The new encyclopedia of Christian quotations](#) by Water, Mark [15 ratings](#)

[Zondervan handbook to the Bible](#) [181 ratings](#)

[International children's Bible field guide : answering kids' questions from Genesis to Revelation](#) by Richards, Larry

[Zondervan illustrated Bible backgrounds commentary](#) - Matthew, Mark, Luke - 552 pages. (2002) [See user reviews](#).

[Zondervan illustrated Bible backgrounds commentary](#) - John

[Zondervan illustrated Bible backgrounds commentary](#) - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

[Dictionary of Paul and his letters](#) [180 ratings](#) IVP Series

The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters is a one-of-a-kind reference work. Following the format of its highly successful companion volume, the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, this Dictionary is designed to bring students, teachers, ministers and laypeople abreast of the established conclusions and significant recent developments in Pauline scholarship. No other single reference work presents as much information focused exclusively on Pauline theology, literature, background and scholarship. In a field that recently has undergone significant shifts in perspective, the Dictionary of Paul and His Letters offers a summa of Paul and Pauline studies. In-depth articles focus on individual theological themes (such as law, resurrection and Son of God), broad theological topics (such as Christology, eschatology and the death of Christ), methods of interpretation (such as rhetorical criticism and social-scientific approaches), background topics (such as apocalypticism, Hellenism and Qumran) and various other subjects specifically related to the scholarly study of Pauline theology and literature (such as early catholicism, the center of Paul's theology, and Paul and his interpreters since F. C. Baur). Separate articles are also devoted to each of the Pauline letters to hermeneutics and to preaching Paul today.

[Dictionary of the later New Testament & its developments](#) [71 ratings](#) IVP Series

The third of IVP's critically acclaimed series of dictionaries of the New Testament provides focused study on the often-neglected portions of the New Testament: Acts, Hebrews, the General Epistles, and Revelation. Furthermore, its scope goes beyond the life of the New Testament church to include the work of the apostolic fathers and early Christianity up through the middle of the second century.

[Dictionary of New Testament background](#) [79 ratings](#) IVP Series

In a time when our knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean world has grown by leaps and bounds, this volume sets out for readers the wealth of Jewish and Greco-Roman background that should inform our reading and understanding of the New Testament and early Christianity. The Dictionary of New Testament Background takes full advantage of the flourishing study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and offers individual articles focused on the most important scrolls. In addition, the Dictionary encompasses the fullness of second-temple Jewish writings, whether pseudepigraphic, rabbinic, parables, proverbs, histories or inscriptions. Articles abound on aspects of Jewish life and thought, including family, purity, liturgy and messianism. The full scope of Greco-Roman culture is displayed in articles ranging across language and rhetoric, literacy and book culture, religion and cults, honor and shame, patronage and benefactors, travel and trade, intellectual movements and ideas, and ancient geographical perspectives. No other reference work presents so much in one place for students of the New Testament. Here an entire library of scholarship is made available in summary form.

[Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible \(DDD\)](#) - 950 pages (1995) Read some of the [65 ratings](#) (4.8/5 Stars). Very expensive to purchase. If you want to dig deeper into some of the names of the false gods like Baal, etc, then this is the resource to examine.

[The new international dictionary of the Christian church](#) by Douglas, J. D [18 ratings](#) If you want to get some information on an individual in church history, this is a good resource.

[The Zondervan pictorial encyclopedia of the Bible](#) vol 1 - A-C

[The Zondervan pictorial encyclopedia of the Bible](#) vol 2 - D-G

Volume 3 - Not available - May, 2022

[The Zondervan pictorial encyclopedia of the Bible](#) vol 4 - M-P

[The Zondervan pictorial encyclopedia of the Bible](#) vol 5 - Q-Z

WORD STUDY RESOURCES GREEK AND HEBREW

- **NOTE** - All of these resources can be borrowed from archive.org.

CAVEAT (DISCLAIMER) - While the Word Study resources below can be very helpful in your study of the meaning of a Greek or Hebrew word in a given passage, you need to be sure that the definition you read in the lexicon applies to the word in the context of the verse you are studying. In other words, as always, context is king. Many Greek and Hebrew words have more than one meaning, so you have to be very careful to not use a meaning which does not fit the context of the passage you are studying. Does that make sense? With practice as you look up various words, you will begin to see how important this caution is in doing Greek and Hebrew Word Studies. If you select the wrong Greek or Hebrew definition, your interpretation of that text might be [askew!](#)

[The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament](#) by Zodhiates, Spiros - This is my "go to" resource for Greek word studies. One of the best lexicons for laymen. Highly Recommended for Greek Word Studies to aid your interpretation of a passage.

[Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#) by Friberg, Timothy. Shorter definitions than Zodhiates but does an excellent job in summarizing the various nuances of a specific Greek word. One of my favorites.

[The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament](#) by Rogers, Cleon - This book is a gold mine of little gems on individual Greek words in any NT passage you are studying. **If you have time it is always worth checking out!** I use it in my Greek word studies all the time.

[BDAG](#) - Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich Greek Lexicon - A Classic resource.

[Word meanings in the New Testament](#) - Ralph Earle - Has notes on most verses with comments on the meaning of some of the words in that verse.

[New Testament Exegesis By Gordon D Fee](#) - Online copy

[Word meanings in the New Testament](#) - Matthew-Revelation by Ralph Earle. Strictly speaking this is not a lexicon, but it offers insights on selected words in a verse by verse format (but not every verse is included in the analysis). This resource is worth checking if you have time as it can occasionally give some wonderful insights on a specific Greek word.

[Word meanings in the New Testament](#) - Matthew-Revelation by Ralph Earle

[Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#) by Gingrich, F. Wilbur. Similar to Friberg but shorter definitions. Gingrich however gives more Scriptures for each nuance, whereas Friberg generally gives only one representative Scripture.

[New Testament Words](#) - William Barclay - [59 ratings](#) very interesting resource - covers about 70 NT Greek words in Barclay's unique style. On page 289 there is a helpful index of English words with the corresponding Greek word, in turn followed by the places Barclay described them in [New Testament Words](#) and in his Daily Study Bible series ([see list of DSB commentaries here](#)). E.g., take the Greek word for "Covetousness" which is [pleonexia](#) and is found in [New Testament Words](#) on page 61 and pp 233-235 and is also described in the Daily Study Bible entries for : Mark 7:14-23; Ro 1:28-32; Eph. 4:17-24; Col. 3:5. So you can click the [DSB commentary on Mark 7](#) and scroll down to Mark 7:14 to see Barclay's entry for [pleonexia](#) which concludes "Pleonexia (G4124) is that lust for having which is in the heart of the man who sees happiness in things instead of in God." Interesting if you have the time!

[Christian words](#) by Turner, Nigel, (1980) Discussing over 350 Greek words. Good supplement to other classics like Zodhiates and Vines.

[Click for instructions on how to use the following](#) all 3 volumes of which are online and does allow copy and paste

The New international Dictionary of New Testament Theology by Brown, Colin - 3 volumes

[Expository Dictionary of Bible words](#) by Richards, Larry - 744 pages. [34 ratings](#) Hebrew and Greek definitions, which are generally brief but can give some interesting additional insights.

[A Theological Wordbook of the Bible](#) by Richardson, Alan, [2 Reviews](#) - This resource takes a word like "Understand" and briefly discusses the sense of both the OT word and the NT synonyms. In that sense it is not strictly speaking as much a lexicon as some of the other sources in this list. It is probably more akin to a resource like [Expository Dictionary of Bible words](#) (above)

[Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : based on semantic domains](#) - Louw Nida. Brief but nice definitions. Not easy to use - you need to know some Greek. Classifies Greek words into 93 "semantic domains" (see list on page XXV) and if you can categorize the word you are looking for in one of the domains, it can help find the specific word you are interested in.

[Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament : abridged in one volume](#) - Classic ("Little Kittel") work summarizing the 10 volume set by Kittel. For most of us the abridged definition is "more than enough!"

[A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament, and other early Christian literature;](#) by Bauer, Walter, More detailed definitions but need to know Greek. Zodhiates and Friberg much easier to use.

[Liddell and Scott's Greek-English lexicon, abridged : the little Liddell](#) by Liddell, Henry George. The abridged version. You need to know Greek to use.

[Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament](#) (Volume 1 - A thru E); [Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament](#) (Volume 3- P thru ...) Volume 2 not available. I do not find this adds much to the easier to use resources like Zodhiates and Friberg.

[A pocket lexicon to the Greek New Testament](#) by Souter, Alexander. Brief definitions. Need to know some Greek. Not that helpful.

[Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words](#) - pdf. The old standby. You can also borrow [Vine's complete expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words](#)

[Theological wordbook of the Old Testament](#) by Harris, R. Laird - [229 ratings](#) (5/5 Stars) One of the best OT lexicons for laymen.

[Hebrew honey : a simple and deep word study of the Old Testament](#) by Novak, Alfons, (332 pages) Indexed by English words. No Strong's numbers to help you determine if you are researching the correct Hebrew word. Here is a "work around" - go to page 289 and see if there is an annotation of the Scripture you are studying. E.g., say you want to see if there is anything for "heart" in Ezek 11:19. In the Scripture list find an entry for Ezek 11:19 with the English word "Heart." Now go look up "Heart" (on page 123). It does take some effort, but you might glean an insight not described in other Hebrew lexicons.

[Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament](#) by Unger, Merrill. Indexed by English word and then any related Hebrew nouns or verbs. Definitions are solid and geared to the lay person.

[Zondervan NASB exhaustive concordance](#) - 1589 pages

[Pocket dictionary for the study of New Testament Greek](#) by DeMoss, Matthew S. If you want to dig a little deeper into Greek. [66 ratings](#)

[Analytical concordance to the Holy Bible](#) : containing about 311,000 references, subdivided under the Hebrew and Greek original with the literal meaning and pronunciation of each by Young, Robert,

[The Englishman's Greek concordance of the New Testament](#) by Wigram, George

[Synonyms of the New Testament](#) by Trench, Richard Chenevix - or [click here for list of 108 entries](#)

[Girdlestone's Synonyms of the Old Testament](#) - [click](#) for list of 127 entries

LOCKHART'S AXIOMS OF HERMENEUTICS

Rules of interpretations are based upon Corollaries formed from two [axioms](#).

AXIOM 1: THE BIBLE IS A BOOK WRITTEN BY PEOPLE TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY PEOPLE

COROLLARIES

1. Each Biblical writing was written by someone to specific hearers or readers in a specific historical-geographical situation for a specific purpose.
2. Each Biblical writing was couched in the cultural setting of the times in which it was written.
3. Each Biblical writing was recorded in a written language and followed normal grammatical meanings including figurative language.
4. Each Biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context.
5. Each Biblical writing took on the nature of a specific literary form (genre = category of literature characterized by a particular style, form, or content - History, Poetry, Narrative, Wisdom, Gospels, Prophecy, Letters/Epistles).
6. Each Biblical writing was understood in account with the basic principles of logic and communication.

AXIOM 2: THE BIBLE IS A DIVINE BOOK

COROLLARIES

1. The Bible contains **MYSTERY**

Only supernatural can answer: Prophecy, Parables, Miracles, Doctrine

2. The Bible contains **UNITY**

It will not contradict itself (all fits together).

It often interprets itself (study all of it).

Its obscure and secondary passages are to be interpreted in light of clear and primary passages.

3. The Bible contains **PROGRESSION**

Progressive revelation (from partial to complete).

(Source: Clinton Lockhart, Principles of Interpretation, 2nd ed. Fort Worth: S. H. Taylor, 1915)

We all need the reverent attitude of **Charles Colson** who once said

"The longer I'm a Christian, the more I'm in fear of misinterpreting the Bible. It's an awesome responsibility."

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

1. [Pray](#)
2. [Observe](#)
3. [Keep Context King](#)
4. [Read Literally](#)
5. [Compare Scripture with Scripture](#)
6. [Consult Conservative Commentaries](#)
7. [Clarity \(Perspicuity\) of Scripture](#)

(1) PRAY

PRINCIPLE: Read the Scriptures prayerfully, open to communication either direction (to Him or from Him) at any and all times during your inductive study.

"*But we've already prayed.*" That's great, but remain in a prayerful attitude throughout your study, ever alert to your Teacher's voice. Don't fall into the trap of performing inductive Bible study as an intellectual exercise, but be open and alert to the heart transformation that is the ultimate goal of your study.

Be like the psalmist who prayed...

Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law, and keep it with all my heart. [Psalm 119:34 - see Spurgeon's note](#)

The **Westminster Catechism** (prefix) adds that the...

understanding is the pilot and guide of the whole man; that faculty which sits at the stern of the soul: but as the most expert guide may mistake in the dark, so may the understanding, when it wants the light of knowledge.

The prince of preachers, **C H Spurgeon** once said that when he encountered Biblical passages he could not understand, it seemed to him as though God had set a chair there for him to kneel down and worship. He added that...

I have always found that the meaning of a text can be better learned by prayer than in any other way.

(2) OBSERVE WITH A PURPOSE

- Click discussion of Observation

PRINCIPLE: Practice reading the Scriptures actively (not passively), repeatedly, interrogatively, acquisitively and purposefully.

J C Ryle (1816-1900) put it this way...

We must read our Bibles like men digging for hidden treasure.

The value of careful observation cannot be overemphasized. Weak and inaccurate interpretation inevitably results from superficial or careless observation. We must immerse ourselves in the book we are studying by repeated readings of the whole book. If we are reading about the coming of the Holy Spirit in [Acts 2](#) on Pentecost, we need to "put our sandals on", so to speak, and imagine ourselves as bystanders to the incredible scene in Jerusalem. Now you're reading with your mind actively engaged!

Think of the passage you are reading as analogous to one of the center pieces from the jigsaw puzzle depicted above. How do handle one of the odd-shaped puzzle pieces? Don't you usually search carefully for the more obvious pieces... the corner pieces

and straight edges? Well, that's the same approach you are going to take as you begin to observe a book or a chapter. You observe with a **Focus On The Obvious (F.O.T.O.)** If you remember the old television program, [Dragnet](#), Jack Webb's famous line was "*Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts!*" That's the approach we want to take in inductive study as we are seeking to establish the context.

If you have ever consulted one of **Dr. Warren Wiersbe's** commentaries (if you haven't then you need to check them -- but only have your own inductive study! See [his online books](#) or [here](#)), you know that he invariably has incredible insights. How did he arrive at such insightful interpretations? Well, before he writes a commentary on a passage, Dr. Wiersbe carefully reads and re-reads the entire book (up to 50 times) before he feels competent to even begin interpretation of the text! He may not refer to his approach as inductive Bible study, but that is in fact what he is doing as he repetitively and carefully observes the text and begins to understand the overall **context** (the corner and straight pieces of the puzzle). The great Bible expositor G Campbell Morgan was known for his powerful sermons. When asked for the secret of his insightful exposition, he replied that he made it a habit to read the chapter or section of Scripture on which he was preaching some 30-40 times before he preached the sermon.

In a similar way, as you read and **observe** with a **purpose** you are in essence reading and re-reading the passage. For example in an epistle, you might read through the chapter or book, observing and marking the **author**. The next time you might re-read and mark the **recipient(s)**. The third time you might read observing and marking **key words** and/or **key phrases** (including synonyms). Each time you mark the text, you should pause and ask as many as the 5 W's or H questions (see note) as possible. As you practice this style of prayerful, purposeful reading, you are becoming familiar with the content of the text and you are beginning to establish the [context](#) (see next principle).

It takes some practice to make the interrogative mindset a habit, but over time you will become more comfortable with the **5 W's and H questions**. You will be amazed at how competent the Scripture is at answering your questions, especially as you hone your interrogative skills! You will also begin to experience the joy of discovering Truth on your own in a way that you had previously thought possible only for those who had been to seminary. You will also notice that as you **observe** and interrogate the text, the **interpretation** (and application) begins to "flow" naturally from your observations and especially as you ask questions.

Martin Luther alluded to the practice of careful observation noting that...

I study my Bible as I gather apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest may fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb I shake each branch and every twig. Then I look under every leaf... Pause at every verse of Scripture and shake, as it were, every bough of it, that if possible some fruit at least may drop down.

Keep in mind that although careful observation always precedes accurate interpretation, observation does not inevitably lead to correct interpretation as shown in the humorous illustration of The Cow ([Click here](#))

Vance Havner wrote that...

Speed-reading may be a good thing, but it was never meant for the Bible. It takes calm, thoughtful, prayerful meditation on the Word to extract its deepest nourishment.

A T Pierson adds that...

Partial examination will result in partial views of truth, which are necessarily imperfect; only careful comparison will show the complete mind of God... (He once wrote) When I read this passage for the hundredth time, the following idea came to me.

Andrew W Blackwood has recognized the necessity of this absorbing process in Bible study in preparation for the ministry of preaching. He writes:

Before man dares to preach much about the Christ of the Fourth Gospel, he ought to live with this book for a number of months. In case of difficulty he should consult a first-class exegetical commentary... But the main stress ought to fall on reading the Bible book itself, as it was written, and on dealing with each paragraph as a unit' (from Irving Jensen. [Independent Bible study](#) - online)

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE:

Click for an exercise on observing with a purpose

(3) KEEP CONTEXT KING

- [Click for more on context](#)

PRINCIPLE: Context always rules in interpretation, whether you are studying a single word, one verse or a larger section of

Scripture. Always check to see who the "neighbors" are!

Context is the setting in which something "dwells". If you take a fish out of water, it doesn't function well! This principle holds for any passage of Scripture which is taken out of context.

In simple terms, **context** is that which goes with the text, the "neighbors" so to speak -- that which comes before and after.

Webster says that "**context**" is

the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning.

The English word **context** is derived from **com** = with and **texere** = to weave or braid, and thus means woven together! This interesting word picture is depicted below...

What happens when you remove a piece of thread from a garment? It doesn't function well and it does not fulfill the weaver's intended purpose! It was woven together with other threads in order to make a garment, even as a specific Biblical passage is woven together with other verses to make a context. Any time we break into the middle of a book, a chapter or a paragraph, we need to look at the surrounding **context**. When you interpret Scripture, whether it is a single word, a verse or a paragraph, you must **always** consider the Scripture in light of the surrounding verses, chapters and book in which it is found and finally in the context of the entire Bible. Your interpretation should **never** contradict the context of the book, chapter or paragraph you are studying. If you ignore context, the accuracy of your interpretation will suffer and may even be "spiritually dangerous." Remember that a **text** taken out of **context** potentially can become a **pretext** (a fictitious or false reason given in order to conceal the real one or given in order to justify an action - Example = "*He gave plausible reasons for his conduct, but these were only **apretext** to conceal his real motives.*" **You've never done that have you?**). It follows that using Scriptural pretext is a major "tool" of the cults or non-Biblical systems of belief about life, death, eternity, etc (click example). If you fail to read (hear) the verse in context it's like the all too typical experience with cell phones where you may hear every other phrase or word which can lead to a completely inaccurate understanding of what the other person has said which can potentially have dire consequences!

See **Bob DeWaay's** [discussion of Context](#) below.

Louis Cassels wrote that "Any single verse of the Bible, taken in isolation, may actually be dangerous to your spiritual health. Every part of it must be read in relation to the whole message."

One of the early reformed theologians **Ulrich Zwingli** (1484-1531) emphasized the importance of **context**, declaring that pulling a passage from its context "is like breaking off a flower from its roots."

Warren Wiersbe adds that

We must never divorce one part of Scripture from another, but we must always "compare spiritual things with spiritual" (1Cor 2:13). We can prove almost anything by the Bible if we isolate texts from the **contexts** and turn them into **pretexts**...

You can prove anything by the Bible, provided you twist the Scriptures **out of context** and reject the witness of your own conscience. The Bible is a book of literature and it must be interpreted according to the fundamental rules of interpretation. If people treated other books the way they treat the Bible, they would never learn anything...

Most heresies are the perversion of some fundamental doctrine of the Bible. False teachers take verses out of **context**, twist the Scriptures, and manufacture doctrines that are contrary to the Word of God...

Beware of taking promises out of their **context**... Few passages in the Bible are more misunderstood and misapplied than the **Sermon on the Mount** (see notes). Often people will take single verses or phrases from Matthew 5-7 and disregard the context. It's important that we have a total view of this important sermon (**Ed**: cp context) before we attempt to study the various divisions of this passage." ([Bible Exposition Commentary. available to borrow](#))

Kay Arthur emphasizes that when...

you seek to know what something means, ask yourself,

"Is my interpretation of a particular section of Scripture consistent with the theme, purpose, and structure of the book in which it is found?"

"Is my interpretation consistent with other Scriptures about the same subject or is there a glaring difference?"

"Am I considering the historical and cultural context of what is being said?"

(Kay Arthur: [How to Study Your Bible \(available to borrow\)](#): this reference is highly recommended especially if you are new to inductive Bible study)

Hendricks illustrates context this way...

Remember the old spiritual...

The knee bones connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bones connected to the hip bone,
The hip bones connected to the tail bone,
Now hear the word of the Lord!

That's primitive physiology but good methodology. It recognizes the connectedness of the body, that it all hangs together. There's unity. So it is with Scripture. The Bible is a sixty-six-book collection, but it hangs together as one Book. Its a unified whole. And that's the principle on which (context) the second key of biblical interpretation depends. ([Living by the Book.1993](#))

LEVELS OF CONTEXT

Skip Heitzig notes that...

There are **two levels of context** to keep in mind—**immediate** and **remote** (Ed: Some have more than 2 and illustrate using successively enlarging circles). **Immediate context** refers to the sentence in which a word is found or the paragraph in which a sentence is found. **Remote context** refers to the entire progression of thought leading up to the verse. Let's take a look at a familiar passage to get a feel for this

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.. (Hebrews 12:1-note , He 12:2-note)

The immediate context is found here in the first two verses of Hebrews 12, which refer to a race of faith that is to be run with endurance. The author speaks of how to run that race and who to keep our eyes on while we run. The **remote context**, on the other hand, is suggested by the first word of chapter 12, "**therefore**," which draws our attention back to Hebrews 11. There we find several examples of faith as portrayed by various saints down through the ages. The word **therefore** informs us that what is said in Hebrews 12 is "as a result of" what has been revealed in chapter 11. In that context, then, we know that the "**cloud of witnesses**" refers to the list of faithful people in chapter 11. The passage is couched in terms of an athletic event, which was a common point of reference in ancient Greece and Rome. The faithful saints of old are presented as "**witnesses**" to our present "**race**." Warm-up weights are representative of sin, which is to be laid aside in the serious competition of life. In its context, the verse is saying that the **life of faith** is like a **race** in which we are required to "**run with endurance**," just as others have successfully run before us. ([How to Study the Bible and Enjoy It](#)) (Bolding added)

HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

We are prone to interpret everything we read in terms of our modern Western culture, since the "here and now" is where we live. The **Historical and Cultural Context** answers questions like

- What did the specific passage mean to the people to whom it was spoken or written?
- What were the times like?
- What was the attitude toward Christianity?
- When is this taking place?
- What else was taking place in the world at this time?
- What were some of the social and political influences on the writer and on those to whom he was writing?

You have to understand the **historical** setting to best understand the writer's original intent. In other words, try to put yourself into the **historical** and **cultural** context of the author and the audience he was addressing (see offsite article on importance of

[historical/cultural setting](#) in interpretation). The epistles for example were written to a particular group (e.g., churches at Philippi, Colossae, etc) at a particular time in history (first century in case of the churches), both factors which will contribute to the accuracy of one's interpretation. Although you can discern various aspects of the historical and cultural context from careful observation of the book, you will probably have to use secondary resources to discover other aspects of historical or cultural context that might help your interpretation. Although William Barclay's commentaries are not always thoroughly conservative and evangelical, Barclay frequently gives excellent historical/cultural descriptions that are not readily available elsewhere. ([click here](#) or [here](#) for more thoughts on Barclay).

SCRIPTURE NEVER CONTRADICTS SCRIPTURE!

Remember: Never attempt to interpret a verse by itself but at the very minimum take a moment and examine the paragraph in which it is found. Not only is the immediate context (paragraph, chapter and book) surrounding a verse important, but the context of the entire Bible is also crucial in understanding the meaning of a particular passage. **Why?** Because **Scripture never contradicts itself**, so if we arrive at an interpretation in one passage that contradicts truth in another passage, we have an inaccurate interpretation. In short **all** Scripture is the context in which any Scripture is to be considered and applied, for God always agrees with Himself!

A A Hodge helps us understand why **any** Scripture should be interpreted in light of **all** Scripture explaining that...

The doctrines of the Bible are not isolated but interlaced; and the view of one doctrine must necessarily affect the view taken of another.

R B Kuiper adds that...

Scriptural paradoxes are *seeming*, not *actual*, contradictions. Scripture is its own infallible interpreter and every part of it must be interpreted in the light of the whole of it... The Bible is a self-consistent unit. What it teaches in one place it does not contradict elsewhere.

As **J I Packer** put it...

Truly, the inner unity of the Bible is miraculous; a sign and wonder, challenging the unbelief of our skeptical age.

Bob Smith reminds us that...

we must always view a passage or verse (1) in its immediate setting; (2) in the larger context of the chapter or book in which it stands; and (3) in the light of the total context of biblical revelation. Remember that though we see it in its parts and divisions, God wrote ONE Book, not sixty-six. ([Basics of Bible Interpretation](#))

J. I. Packer wrote that...

The Bible appears like a symphony orchestra, with the Holy Ghost as its Toscanini, each instrument has been brought willingly, spontaneously, creatively, to play his notes just as the great conductor desired, though none of them could ever hear the music as a whole... The point of each part only becomes fully clear when seen in relation to all the rest (from God Has Spoken)

C H Spurgeon (in a sermon on Hebrews 11:16) made this comment...

Now let us come back to the Scripture; we cannot do better than keep close to it, for our text is only to be understood by the **context**. Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. The locks of Scripture are only to be opened with the keys of Scripture; and there is no lock in the whole Bible, which God meant us to open, without a key to fit it somewhere in the Bible, and we are to search for it until we find it. ([The Two Pivots](#))

Have you ever been misquoted because your quote was yanked "**but of context**"? Then you understand how significant **context** is to accurate communication. Read the simple illustration below to understand the crucial role context plays in accurate interpretation:

If I said "I saw the trunk" how would you interpret the meaning of the word "trunk"? It could refer to a tree, a car, an elephant, a piece of luggage, athletic wear, etc. How can one determine the correct meaning? Clearly, the context determines how one interprets the meaning of "trunk". So if we were at the zoo, you would most naturally understand that this is a reference to the trunk of an elephant, etc, etc. You get the point - a Scripture taken out of context can easily lose God's (and inspired human author's) intended meaning. Don't misquote God by taking Him out of context!

It is surprising that although we use "**context**" in everyday communication, we often tend to disregard this crucial role of interpreting

in **context** when studying the Scriptures. We need to discipline ourselves and make a habit of always consulting the verses before and after that favorite verse, so that we can be sure we don't take the passage out of context. See an illustration of [context](#) from Our Daily Bread. See also "[Quote Misquote](#)"

We cannot find a safer guide to follow
Than precepts from the pages of God's Word;
But if we twist and misapply the Scripture,
We make its sacred teachings seem absurd. --Hess

Even experienced Bible students are often surprised to see what a familiar Bible quotation means when understood in light of its immediate setting. Difficult problems of understanding often evaporate simply by determining how a text is framed by the main idea running through that section of Scripture. As alluded to earlier, reading one passage in the Bible by itself can be like looking at a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. As you analyze it, you see elements of form and color, but you realize that it is only one essential part of the "big picture". Because the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament are all "chapters" of one Book, those who live by the whole counsel of God will increasingly be enabled by the Holy Spirit to see each individual part in light of the whole.

Nelson's New Illustrated Dictionary emphasizes that...

The primary rule of biblical interpretation is "**context**." This cannot be emphasized too strongly. If the Bible student would merely let a passage speak for itself within the context of the paragraph, chapter, or book, the majority of all errors in interpretation would be avoided. The problem is our bias, or our subjectivity. Many times we approach a passage thinking we already understand it. In the process we read our own meaning into the passage. This is called eisegesis. (Eis is a Greek preposition meaning "into.") But interpreting the Bible correctly demands that we listen to what the text itself is saying, and then draw the meaning out of the passage. This is called exegesis. (Ex is a Greek preposition meaning "out of.") If we let a passage be defined by what it and the surrounding verses say, then we have taken a large step toward interpreting the Bible properly. Only by watching the context carefully and by letting the passage speak for itself do we give Scripture the respect it deserves. Of course, it is impossible to dismiss totally our own bias and subjectivity. Our interpretation will always be colored by our culture and our opinions about the passage, or perhaps by our theological beliefs, which are partially based on the passage. But this should not discourage our attempt to let the passage speak for itself as freely as possible, without being weighed down with our personal opinions and views. ([Available for borrow](#))

TAKEN OUT of CONTEXT

President Lincoln was once misquoted as saying that he would rather live in Russia than in America. What President would make such a remark? It was said by the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. But he's being quoted out of context. He actually said, "I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance." Lincoln wrote these words while expressing regret about a dangerous trend he saw in America. He feared that many wanted to change "all men are created equal" to "all men are created equal, except non-whites." If that were to happen, Lincoln suggested, he would be more comfortable in a land where the government didn't pretend to stand for liberty. The context makes all the difference, for it tells us exactly what Abe meant to say. Similarly, if the immediate and wider contexts are not considered, a person can make the Bible say anything he wants it to say. See Biblical examples in topic [Context of Immediate Settings](#).

ILLUSTRATION OF A PASSAGE TAKEN OUT OF CONTEXT -

but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND which HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." (1 Corinthians 2:9+)

The passage has such wonderful words that I memorized it some 25 years ago with almost no effort. I was so excited about what I thought Paul was teaching! My confession is that I "yanked" it out of context and for 25 years I have been misinterpreting it, sometimes even using it to buttress my presentation of the Gospel which opens the doorway to the glories of Heaven, to which I heretofore erroneously thought Paul was referring! Here are some comments from the imminent expositor [Archibald Brown](#) that give the correct interpretation of this passage in his sermon on [1 Corinthians 2:10 - The Deep Things of God](#) -

"This text (1 Cor 2:10KJV+) is vitally united, you will see, to the verse which precedes it, because this verse begins with '**but**,' (ED: NAS = "FOR") and that rivets it to the prior verse — it is the *outcome* of it — and that

prior verse (1 Cor 2:9) has, **I suppose, suffered more from misquotation and misapplication than any other verse in inspired writ.** (ED: I HAVE TO SAY "AMEN!") You know it well: *'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him.'* That text is always handed over to *Heaven*, and it is read as if it taught that Heaven is such a beautiful, such a glorious place, that really we know nothing whatever about it; that no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard, and no heart can imagine, all the beautiful things that are stored up in an at present unseen Heaven. **I need hardly say that Heaven was not in the apostle's mind when he penned the words.** You will see that so far from teaching that these things are not to be seen or cannot be known, the apostle goes on to say, in the language of our text, which is never quoted (ED: **THUS EMPHASIZING THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT FOR ACCURATE INTERPRETATION**), **'But God has revealed them.'** 1 Cor 2:10KJV) What a pity it is to cry halt and pull up at the end of the ninth verse, and say, 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God has prepared for them that love him,' and not to go on to the next verse, 'But God has *revealed* them.' The simple teaching of the passage is this: that mere worldly wisdom can never understand spiritual teaching; that there must be a revelation made by God, and that the work of the Holy Spirit is to make clear to men what they never could learn, either through the eye, through the ear, or by the imagination. God has revealed these glories to us, because there is no other way in which we could acquire a knowledge of them but by revelation. **Mental perception, however keen, is not enough; you cannot fathom eternal realities. God has to draw the veil over these beauties, and reveal the facts in Scripture — and then the Holy Spirit reveals the Scripture again to us. There is thus a double revelation — God revealing his truth in the Word, and then the Holy Spirit revealing the Word unto us.** Is it not true that the eye does not see these things? Millions of eyes can see God's work — but they never see the Artificer; millions of ears can hear the voice of God — but they never recognize that which is spoken. **God must be revealed to be known.**

ILLUSTRATION - A woman entered the Democratic primary for governor of Texas because she was convinced God had told her in the Bible that she would win. When she saw on the official list of nominees that her name was last, she read Matthew 19:30 **"Many that are first will be last, and the last first"** which convinced her she would win, but she did not win. Scripture interpreted (and applied) out of context can be twisted to mean just about anything we want it to mean. The cults are masters of the deceptive craft of taking passages out of context, which is why believers need to continually be Bereans and remember that "Context is King".

ILLUSTRATION - A man dissatisfied with his life decided to consult the Bible for guidance. Closing his eyes, he flipped the book open and pointed to a spot on the page. Opening his eyes, he read the verse under his finger. It read, "Then Judas went away and hanged himself" (Matthew 27:5b) Closing his eyes again, the man randomly selected another verse. This one read, "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:37b)

Roy Zuck comments:

The lack of proper hermeneutics has also led to the Bible being highly abused and maligned. Even some atheists seek to support their position by referring to Psalm 14:1, "There is no God." Obviously they are overlooking how those words are introduced: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" ([Basic Bible Interpretation](#))

John MacArthur emphasizes that...

In Bible study, get the right message from the right passage. Don't "proof text" your bias or opinions by making the Bible say what you already know you want it to say. ([MacArthur, J., F. How to get the most from God's word. Dallas, TX: Word Pub. 1997](#) - borrow for 1 hour).

Howard Hendricks adds that

"Telescopic reading is based on this principle (of examining the text in the broader context). It never settles for close-ups alone; it always demands the wide-angle lens of perspective. It always asks, What is the big picture?" ([Living by the Book](#) online)

Hendricks goes on to comment that evaluation of

"the passage in light of the book as a whole... is the ultimate extension of checking the context. It's like flying a plane over some land in order to evaluate distances and relationships." ([Living by the Book](#) online)

Remember context is king in interpretation and a text out of context is at best a **pretext**" and even worse may be a **"proof text"** or a text of Scripture quoted to prove, defend or support a specific doctrine or belief. Every major cult is founded on a violation of this principle of failing to handle in context as illustrated in the following exercise.

Milton S. Terry explains the importance of taking into account historical context, including the setting, and circumstances in which the words of Scripture were written noting that...

The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term grammatico-historical interpretation. ([Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics](#). NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976, 231)

IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT WHEN PERFORMING WORD STUDIES

Remember that when you are doing **Greek Word studies** (see synopsis of Greek Verbs) (similar warning applies to Hebrew), many Greek words have more than one meaning as determined by the **context**. A word can only mean one thing at a time so we must make every effort to determine the writer's single intended meaning. The diligent student needs to be cautious when looking up definitions of a specific word in Greek lexicons and using the definition to amplify or interpret the meaning of that word in a specific verse. If the definition you choose makes the verse more difficult to understand, then you have probably chosen a definition that is not "compatible with" the **context** of the verse you are studying. Let me give you an example of how context affects the meaning of the Greek word. In Mark God the Father speaks out of a cloud at the transfiguration of His Son and declares to Peter, James and John

This is My beloved Son. **Listen** (akouo in the present imperative = not a suggestion but a command to make listening one's continual practice) to Him (Mk 9:7, cp Mary Lk 10:39 versus Martha Lk 10:40, 41, 42)

The Greek Verb (akouo) normally means simply "to hear" but in this context conveys the sense of "Hear Him and obey Him" and in fact is so translated by the Amplified Version ("Be constantly listening to and obeying Him!" - Amplified)

DON'T FORGET THE ENGLISH DICTIONARY

As an aside when doing **"Word Studies"** don't forget to occasionally look up words in the English dictionary (and the same caution applies - be certain that it "fits" the context of the verse under study). Let's look at an example in Php 4:6 Paul commands believers to **"Be anxious for nothing..."**. A study of the Greek word for **anxious** (merimnao - see word study) uncovers an interesting origin from the Greek verb **merizo** which means to divide and gives us a vivid word picture of the effect of anxiety on most of us! When we look up the word **anxious** in Webster's dictionary we read *"Anxious: Characterized by extreme uneasiness of mind or brooding fear about some contingency: worried."* Does that help amplify what Paul is saying? And don't forget to note the origin of the English word, in this case **anxious** being derived from Latin *angere* = to strangle, to distress, to torment, to choke! What a picture of the potential effect of anxiety! Some Bible Versions translate Php 4:6 with the verb **"worry"**... take a moment and look up **"worry"** in an English dictionary - you may be surprised what you discover ([note especially Webster's origin and definitions #1-4!](#)) (The earlier versions of Websters frequently use Scripture to illustrate the use of a word - [Webster's Dictionary - 1828 and 1913 Editions](#))

Related Resources:

- Greek Word Studies - this list is added to continually
- Hebrew Word Studies
- How To Do A Greek Word Study on the Internet
- [How To Do Word Studies - Offsite Resource](#)

The growing numbers of sermon-sippers and seminar-sitters who flit from one doctrinal dessert to another like helpless hummingbirds are deceiving themselves unless they are choosing to heed the truths they have heard (cp Jas 1:22, 23, 24-note, Jas 1:25-note).

J. I. Packer adds these comments on the **"Interpretation"** out of **context**:

We cannot arrive at a true understanding of God's Word by detaching texts from their contexts to find personal meaning in them and be feeding them into the world of our private preoccupations and letting that world impose new senses on old phrases. A theological student whom later I knew as a senior friend had committed himself to starting his ministry in the north of England

when he received a very attractive invitation to join a teaching institution in South Wales instead. He did not feel able to withdraw from his commitments, but one day he read in Isa 43:6 (Authorized Version), "I will say to the north, Give up", and concluded that this was God telling him that he would be providentially released from his promise and so set free to accept the second invitation. No such thing happened, however, so he went north after all wondering what had gone wrong. Then he reread Isa 43:6 and noticed that it continued, "...and to the south, Do not withhold." At this point it dawned on him that he had been finding meaning in the text that was never really there. Instead, the concerns which he brought to his reading of the text had governed his interpretation of it. To impose meaning on the text is not the way to learn God's Law. Yet we constantly do this, and it is one chronic obstacle to understanding.

In his classic book **The Invisible War** ([online](#)) **Donald Grey Barnhouse** has a section subtitled "How to Read the Bible" in which he illustrates the importance of reading the Biblical text in context...

Our certainty rests upon the Word of God and upon some of its statements about how we are to read its pages. An **illustration** is, perhaps, the best way to come to the heart of the method. Some years ago I entered the playroom of our home one evening, and found my two boys at work on a large picture puzzle which had been given one of the members of the family at Christmas. It was a finely made puzzle, on three -ply wood, beautifully cut, and among its hundreds of pieces a score or more were designed in the shape of common things. The little sister, three years old, too young to match the intricately cut edges of the pieces, had been allowed to pick out those pieces which resembled articles she knew and arrange them in rows at the edge of the table. She was eager to show me what she had done. Here was a piece in the shape of a clover leaf; here was an apple, a wheelbarrow, the letter S, the figure four, an umbrella, a violin and a bird. To her mind those and the other shaped pieces were the most important things in the puzzle. To see them, and to identify something that was in her world, made it all very interesting. To her older brothers, however, the shape of individual pieces was merely incidental. They knew that the violin would become part of a cloud, that the umbrella would be lost in the pattern of a lady's dress, and that the other figures would melt into flower garden and trees.

Each Verse Has Its Place - This illustration is almost perfect for the student of the Word of God. The unfortunate person who takes some text by itself and attempts to build a doctrine on it will be in utter confusion before he has gone very far. Only with this wrong type of Bible reading can anyone ever come to the absurd conclusion so often expressed, "You can prove anything by the Bible."

When, however, the shape of the individual verse is fitted into the whole divine plan of the revelation of God, the full -rounded, eternal purpose begins to be seen; and the whole of the Word of God becomes something so stupendous, so eternal, so mightily divine, that every rising doubt is checked immediately. There comes, then, a knowledge of the finality of God's revelation which becomes as much a part of the believer as his breathing, or his sense of being alive. Any other possibility cannot be entertained even for a moment. The believer knows that the Bible is the Word of God, even more surely than he knows that he is alive.

If we are going to understand the Word of God, we must have a spiritual attitude toward it. The Lord said that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). God refuses to reveal Himself to just any casual passer-by. The Lord indicated this when He said in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matthew 7:6). This same thought must have been in His mind when He prayed, saying, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, be because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight" (Matthew 11:25, 26). The fact that one must have a spiritual attitude that comes from spiritual life in order to understand the deep things of the Word of God is also the true meaning of the great verse which we quote in paraphrase: "For whosoever hath [new life in Christ], to him shall be given [knowledge of the divine plan and revelation], and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not [the new life in Christ], from him shall be taken away even that [common sense and deep learning that might make him one of the world's leaders of the world's thinking] he hath" (Matthew 13:12).

Putting the Puzzle Together - The proper method of Bible study, then, is analogous to the putting together of the puzzle. For any given doctrinal subject, read the entire volume, selecting every verse that bears on the truth under study. Put all of these passages together, and the synthesis of the result is the true Bible doctrine on the question with which you are concerned. A verse from Moses, and one from Ezekiel, and one from Paul, put side by side, each illuminating the others, fit into the perfect pattern of the whole design and give the whole

light which God has been pleased to reveal on that particular theme. Taken one by one, the verses may be no more than mere shapes, meaningless as far as the over-all purpose of the inspired revelation is concerned. This is why the Lord says that one of the first principles of Bible study is that no Scripture is of "private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20).

The [exegesis](#) of the Greek shows that this verse should not be interpreted to restrict the right of the private individual to read and understand the Bible for himself. The Lord says that the anointing by the Spirit renders us capable of understanding, so that we do not need to have any one teach us (1 John 2:27). The existence of teachers by divine order and arrangement is like the original institution of divorce, not because it was God's first choice, but because of the hardness of the hearts of men (Matthew 19:8). The responsibility for reading and knowing the Word and will of God is upon every individual, who must find out for himself, conclude what he believes and be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within him, knowing that he will be answerable to the Lord for the content of his faith, and that he will not be permitted to present the excuse that he believed what some church or group of clergy interpreted for him. All this to show what the passage does not teach. Positively, what it does teach is that no passage of Scripture is to be taken by itself, but that Scripture must be read in the light of the rest of the Bible.

Many heresies arise from a false interpretation of a single verse of Scripture, and the matter is even sadder when we realize that the interpretation would have been corrected if the heretic had taken time to collate all of the passages covering the subject on which he erred. The one sure method of continuing in the path of truth is to have before you all that the Bible reveals on any possible point of discussion. Obviously, for any one man to know all truth would mean that he had compacted the whole of the Scripture, like a pyramid, and made it stand upon its apex with its full weight upon a single passage. Then the whole process would have to be begun over again and continued through all the thousands of topics which could be discussed from the Bible. Time is too short for any one man to do this. That is why no individual has ever been able to write a satisfactory commentary upon the whole of the Bible. Men who have spent their lives on a single book have produced the great commentaries on those individual books.

Related Resources

- How Do You Approach Interpretation of God's Word? Supernaturalistic, Naturalistic, Existentialistic, Dogmatic?
- [Robert Girdlestone on importance of "Context"](#) (or [download Pdf](#))

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE:

Click for an exercise on the value of context in accurate interpretation.

(4) READ SCRIPTURE — LITERALLY IF POSSIBLE

PRINCIPLE: If the plain sense of the Scripture you are studying makes good sense, then do not seek to make some other sense out of it or the final interpretation could be complete nonsense and totally unrelated to God's intending meaning. Take every word in its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and self-evident and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.

This preceding principle is my paraphrase from **David Cooper's** widely quoted statement that...

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise. (David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated*. Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970)

Notice the important phrase, *studied in the light of related passages*. This is the biblical equivalent of a "safety net." In the same way that trapeze artists performing on the high-wire are protected by a net below which catches them in the event of a fall, comparing Scripture with Scripture (Principle #5) provides a doctrinal "safety net" which serves to prevent the interpreter from "falling" into an inconsistent understanding or interpretation.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

You might be asking yourself "Why is there so much emphasis on **literal** interpretation, for it seems so logical that the safest interpretation is that which remains closest to the original text." To answer this important question would require a review of the church's approach to interpretation over the past 2000 years which would require much more time than can be given in this brief overview. In lieu of a more in depth explanation, the highly respected evangelical author **Dwight Pentecost** offers the following succinct analysis of the history of Biblical interpretation...

It is to be noted that all interpretation began with the literal interpretation of Ezra. This literal method became the basic method of Rabbinism. It was the accepted method used by the New Testament in the interpretation of the Old and was so employed by the Lord and His apostles. This literal method was the method of the ("Early") Church Fathers until the time of Origen (ca. 185-254 AD) when the [allegorical method](#) (**Ed**: Refers to a method in which one looks for hidden or secret meaning, rather than accepting the plain meaning of text), which had been devised to harmonize Platonic philosophy and Scripture, was adopted. Augustine's influence brought this allegorizing method into the established and brought an end to all true exegesis (**Ed**: primary concern in exegesis is an understanding of the text). This system continued until the Reformation. At the Reformation the literal method of interpretation was solidly established and, in spite of the attempts of the church to bring all interpretation into conformity to an adopted creed, literal interpretation continued and became the basis on which all true exegesis rests. It would be concluded, then, from the study of the history of interpretation that the original and accepted method of interpretation was the literal method, which was used by the Lord, the greatest Interpreter, and any other method was introduced to promote heterodoxy (quality of holding to unorthodox doctrines). Therefore the literal method must be accepted as the basic method for right interpretation in any field of doctrine today. ([Pentecost, Dwight: Things to Come, page 32-33](#) borrow for 1 hour) (See also the [Rise of Allegorical Interpretation](#))

Interestingly, Pentecost goes on to add the caveat that just because one holds to a literal approach does not necessarily guarantee that they will arrive at an accurate interpretation. For example, witness the Rabbinical teachings that espoused a literal approach and yet were far removed from accurate interpretation in many Scriptures, not to mention the writings of many of the otherwise "literalist" reformers who often approached apocalyptic (uses symbols that communicate absolute truth) or prophetic literature (the four fully apocalyptic books are Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation) with an [allegorical approach](#), reasoning that the prophetic genre called for a non-literal approach.

[Charles Simeon](#) (circa 1832) in speaking specifically about the Minor Prophets gives us some wise insights the wise reader of Scripture would do well to hear and heed regarding interpretation of Old Testament Scriptures, especially those that are clearly prophetic or eschatological...

It is a matter of general complaint, that the minor prophets are difficult to be understood: and this is true to a considerable extent: but we apprehend that **it arises very much from our not sufficiently bearing in mind the subjects on which they wrote**. We do right in looking for many things applicable to the Messiah, and to his Church and kingdom: but **we err in not having more respect to the Jewish Church** (**Ed**: Used in sense not of the NT church but of believing Jews) **as it existed in the times when the prophets wrote**; and as it shall exist at a period yet future, when that people shall be gathered in from their present dispersion, and be restored to their own land. **We complain that we cannot unlock those Scriptures; but we neglect to take the key that alone will fit the wards. If we kept the Jews more in view, many of the difficulties would vanish; and innumerable beauties would be seen in passages that are now passed over as devoid of interest.** We believe verily that the day is fast approaching, in which "God will shew them marvellous things," not a whit inferior to those which He wrought for them when He brought them out of Egypt: and it is their privilege to be looking forward to that period, with earnest and assured expectation of the blessings prepared for them. ([Micah 7:8-10 Address of the "Jewish Church" to Her Enemies](#) - Bolding added)

Comment: How have so many in Evangelicalism gotten so far afield of something a poor 19th century English preacher who never attended a seminary grasped so clearly? So, so sad, and as Simeon rightly says, so much to their loss for in their spiritualizing and replacing the literal nation of Israel with the Church they fail to grasp some of the most incredible "Hope" diamonds (pun intended as the "Hope" diamond was once the largest ever mined!) of truth sparkling and laying ready to be mined throughout the Old Testament Scriptures.

S Lewis Johnson echoes Simeon's thoughts noting that "Robert Louis Stevenson, whom we know as a man of literature, was nevertheless a believer. And in his latter days, he became firmly convinced that the Scriptures would be fulfilled as God had written them. And when he spent his last days on the island of Samoas, he came into contact with a missionary, who later wrote an article in the Atlantic Monthly. And in this article he went on to say that Robert Louis Stevenson, in his last days, spoke often about the fact that the Christian church had neglected the great promises of the Old Testament. Stevenson went on to say that the **Old Testament and the New Testament contain glorious promises of the FUTURE, which if they are taken in their PLAIN SENSE, afford a**

great means of encouragement and consolation to the people of God. But when they are applied to the CHURCH, they become **farcical**. When they are not taken in their SIMPLE SENSE, but applied to those to whom they do not apply, they are a comedy. And so the Old Testament is a "comedy," and it is farcical, if it is not to be fulfilled as God wrote it This is why the Old Testament is neglected today. But of course, the Old Testament was the Bible of the early church. They did not have a New Testament, they carried the Old Testament around in their pockets and they preached from the Scriptures as they knew them in the Old Testament. And they justified the Christian religion from the standpoint of the teaching of the Old Testament. And they looked forward to the future, in the light of the promises which would be made by the prophets. To which also were added, those of the apostles as our Lord Jesus taught them. (from [The Conversion of Israel](#)) (Bolding added)

[William Tyndale](#) (1494-1536) who was martyred for translating the Bible into English wisely wrote "Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scripture hath but one sense, which is the **literal** sense. And that **literal** sense is the root and ground of all and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave thou canst never err nor go out of the way. And if thou leave the **literal** sense, thou canst not but go out of the way.

J Gresham Machen wrote "I hold that the Bible is essentially a plain book. Common sense is a wonderful help in reading it."

Bernard Ramm says "We use the word '**literal**' in its dictionary sense: '... the natural or usual construction and implication of a writing or expression; following the ordinary and apparent sense of words; not allegorical or metaphorical' (Webster's New International Dictionary) ([Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation](#), page 119 borrow for 1 hour) (Bolding added)

Related Resources:

- George Peters 19th century Lutheran and author of the magnum opus [The Theocratic Kingdom](#) (1884) has an interesting [Proposition 4 on Literal Interpretation](#)
- [The Nature and Result of Literal Interpretation](#) - 13 page paper - Earl Radmacher
- [Defining and Practicing Literal Interpretation and Theological Method](#) - David Mappes
- [Literal Hermeneutics, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism](#) - Mike Stallard
- [The Certainty of Prophetic Language](#) - Mike Stallard
- [The Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic: Its Defense and the Demand for Premillennialism](#) by Abner Chou
- [Literal Interpretation: A Plea for Consensus](#) - Elliot Johnson

Dr Charles Ryrie reasons that "If God be the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to humanity, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell mankind. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense. The Scriptures, then, cannot be regarded as an illustration of some special use of language so that in the interpretation of these Scriptures some deeper meaning of the words must be sought.

We must correctly hear God's Word,
Or we will be misled;
We must give careful thought and prayer
To what the Author said. —Hess

As **Andy Woods** explains that "**literalism** resists going beyond what is written. Because **literalism** resists "going beyond the facts," when interpreting a given text, **literal** interpreters resist the temptation to import foreign ideas from outside the text. A classic example of going beyond what the text says is the ancient interpretation that the four rivers in Genesis 2, the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates (Ge 2:11, 13, 14), represent the body, soul, spirit, and mind (One need only examine the works of Philo to find numerous examples of such a hermeneutical methodology.). Such an idea is not readily apparent from studying the text in Genesis 2. One must go outside the text of Genesis 2 and bring into it foreign concepts in order to arrive at this conclusion. ([Paper by Andy Woods](#)) (Bolding added)

Unless the immediate [context](#) clearly indicates otherwise, one should always seek to interpret the text literally, in its straightforward, natural, ordinary, usual, normal, meaning, just as you would any other writing, accepting the words at face value without the imposition of hidden or symbolic meanings.

For example, it is not intellectually honest or consistent to simply classify the book of Revelation as "prophecy" (which of course it is) and based on that classification to change the rules of interpretation from **literal** to **allegorical/symbolical** as does the following commentator...

A failure to take full account of [the apocalyptic or prophetic] feature has led to some of the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is "literal, unless absurd." Though this is a good

rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule, and literalism the exception. (Gregg, S: Revelation Four Views: A Parallel Commentary. Page 11. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997)

Some attack the principle of **literal interpretation** by stating that this method denies the Bible's use of figurative language (including types, symbols, figures of speech, etc). **Dr Charles Ryrie** counters such fallacious arguments noting specifically that literalism "does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation... (Literal interpretation) might also be called plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech.

E R Craven adds that "The *Literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols* are used in prophecy, nor does he deny the great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded. ([Lange's commentary on Revelation enlarged and edited by E R Craven](#))

Apocalyptic literature does not dictate that one dismiss normative interpretation in favor of "symbolic conjecture".

Why is a literal approach to the Holy Scriptures so critical? Because the symbolic approach always raises the question "*Whose symbolic interpretation is correct?*" The answer of course is that no one knows who is correct because there are so many symbolic interpretations to choose from - a veritable "interpretative quagmire" ("soft miry land that shakes or yields under the foot; a difficult, precarious, or entrapping position" - Webster)!

No two allegorical/symbolic commentators hold the same interpretative position except in a handful of areas, resulting in a frustrated student who walks away discouraged and even more confused than before reading the commentary. This fact alone disqualifies a non-literal approach because it has factually demonstrated its bankruptcy in conveying a reproducible message from God. In effect, the symbolic or allegorical approach *literally* (pun intended) makes the book of Revelation unknowable.

Perhaps you are still asking why should one insist on a **literal or "normal" interpretation** of all of Scripture? **Couch** explains that there are at least three reasons offered by who are committed to a normal reading of Scripture:

First, the obvious purpose of language is to enable effective communication between intelligent beings. Words have meaning and in their normal usage are intended to be understood... God is the originator of language. When He spoke audibly to man, He expected man to understand Him and respond accordingly. Likewise, when God speaks to man through the inspired writings of His apostles and prophets, He expects man to understand and respond accordingly...

A **second** reason for a normal reading of Scripture concerns the historical fulfillment of prophecy. All the prophecies of the Old and New Testament that have been fulfilled to date have been fulfilled literally... Thus, ... all prophecies which are yet to be fulfilled will be fulfilled literally.

A **third** reason concerns logic. If an interpreter does not use the normal, customary, literal method of interpreting Scripture, interpretation is given over to the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter. (Couch, M: Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics. Page 36-37. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications) (Bolding added)

LESS IS BETTER

Another key advantage of **literal interpretation** is that it is **minimal interpretation** and thus superimposes the barest "**interpretive layer**" or "**interpretative bias**" on the inspired communication from God.

As the highly respected literalist commentator **Henry Morris** has well said...

The best interpretation of a historical record is no interpretation but simply letting the divine Author of the record say what He says and assuming He says what He means. (Quoted from one of the few well done, literal, non-confusing commentaries on the Revelation entitled "[The Revelation Record](#)")

The greater an author's interpretative bias, the greater the danger that the commentator will add to or subtract from the meaning originally intended by God, a grave error John warns against writing:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone **adds** to them, God shall add to him the plagues

which are written in this book and if anyone **takes away from** the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. ([See notes Revelation 22:18-19](#), cp Pr 30:5, 6, Dt 4:2, 12:32)

Literal interpretation is occasionally criticized as leading to "ridiculous" conclusions. **Bernard Ramm** addresses this accusation leveled at those who adhere to the literalist approach, writing that...

To interpret Scripture literally is not to be committed to a "wooden literalism," nor to a "letterism," nor to a neglect of the nuances that defy any "mechanical" understanding of language. Rather, it is to commit oneself to a starting point and that starting point is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, tradition range of designation which includes "tacit" understanding. (Ramm, B: Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. Page 11. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970)

In other words **Literal interpretation** does pay attention to variations in the style of the text and thus maintains a consistency of interpretation which is driven by the text itself, not the interpretative bias of the commentator: For example it is often stated that evangelicals who hold to a literal one thousand year reign of Christ based on Revelation 20, also demand that every single passage is to be interpreted literally without exception. This is an unfair and weak attempt to discredit the literal approach, because in fact even strict literalists clearly accept that if the language of a given passage is clearly symbolic, it is to be governed by the laws relating to symbols. If the passage is clearly figurative, it also must be interpreted based on the laws dealing with figures of speech.

It is also interesting to note that even those who espouse a symbolic/allegorical approach to the Revelation clearly rely on a normal literal approach in many if not most passages in John's great apocalyptic work. For example, when John writes that he "was on the island that is called Patmos" (Revelation 1:9) virtually all commentators, symbolic and literal, agree that John was literally on an island named Patmos! When the symbolic/allegorical authors encounter other passages that are not so easily interpreted, they jettison the literal approach in favor of speculation.

As **Tony Garland** quips...

This "dual hermeneutic" is employed much like the gearshift in an automobile. On the major "freeway" of the gospel text, they generally stay in **literal gear**. But when a prophetic "off-ramp" or doctrinal "mountain" looms ahead, they shift into a non-literal gear. This inconsistency leads to all manner of confusion and allows for the most amazing conclusions which are often in complete contradiction to the plain meaning of the text! ([A Testimony of Jesus Christ - Interpreting Symbols](#))

Smith adds that

Much Bible study is done to verify men's preconceptions, since all of us bring our personal opinions and biases with us...

If God has really spoken through the pen of the human author, let's not try to rewrite the script. **Proof-texting**, i.e., quoting only those biblical texts which are useful to prove our own preconceived opinions and theological biases, is a favorite trick of the cultists and only succeeds in confusing the issue...

We should view the Scripture just as we would any other writing, accepting the words at face value without the imposition of hidden meanings. This is the general rule, to which there are notable and recognizable exceptions, such as **allegory** (see [Rise of Allegorical Interpretation](#)) and **typology** (See discussion of Typology). **Figures of speech are to be interpreted in the literal significance that the figure conveys.** (Ed note: Read that sentence again)...

When the Scripture says, "**Rejoice** always, **pray** constantly, **give thanks** in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (**Red** = present imperative = command to do this continually; 1Th 5:16, 17-note; 1Th 5:18-note), we don't have a problem of interpreting the language, but rather one of how to apply the truth. We accept the literal meaning of the words. How we can do what it commands we must discover in the [context](#) :

"Do not quench the Spirit," [for he is our strengthener to enable] "do not despise prophesying," [for preaching and teaching are the vehicle he uses to encourage us] "but test everything," [for our thinking is askew and we are being fooled by an enemy if we are defeated on these issues] "**hold fast** (**Red** = present imperative = command to do this continually) what is good," [for that is what will save the day] "**abstain** from every form of evil" (1Th 5:19, 20-note, 1Th 5:21, 22-note). **Abstain**, because indulging in evil gets us into trouble.

The punch line is 1Th 5:24, "He Who calls you is faithful, and He will do it." (note) This assures us that the Lord is active in our behalf to enable us to do all He commands. So we take language in its literal sense when it is used like this. But when we read, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5), we recognize figurative language and seek the literal meaning of the figure. As we observe the [context](#) we read also, "Abide in me, and I in you" (Jn 15:5) and easily recognize that our Lord is talking about a shared life, since a branch is a living part of the vine, receiving the flow of life from it. ([Basics of Bible Interpretation](#))

Horatio Bonar echoed the plea for adherence to literal interpretation writing...

I feel a greater certainty as to the literal interpretation of the whole Word of God-historical, doctrinal, prophetic. "Literal, if possible," is, I believe, the only maxim that will carry you right through the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation.

John Peter Lange has an interesting explanation of a **literalist** (normal, plain language) versus a **spiritualist** (mystical) writing that...

The **Literalist** is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted-that which is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, and that which is manifestly figuratively being so regarded. The position of the **Spiritualist** is not that which is properly indicated by the term. He is one who holds that certain portions are to be normally interpreted, other portions are to be regarded as having a **mystical** sense. The terms properly expressive of the schools are **normal** and **mystical**." (Lange, John Peter: A Commentary on the Holy Scripture: Revelation, p. 98) (Bolding added)

In short, the wise reader is advised to look for the **clear teaching**, not some mystical or "hidden" meaning or special "code" which needs to be deciphered! It is truly remarkable what we can discover when we let God say what He has already said and He gives us eyes and ears to see and hear spiritual truth.

Unless the Scripture calls for you to do so (e.g., in Ga 4:24 Paul says "*this is allegorically speaking*" clearly allowing for an allegorical interpretation), strongly resist any attempt to **allegorize** (symbolic and non-literal representation of truth) or **spiritualize** the meaning of the passage. ([Click interesting discussion on literal interpretation](#))

Webster has some interesting thoughts on the meaning of "**literal**" especially as it relates to accurate interpretation, noting that the meaning is "not figurative or metaphorical", "free from exaggeration or embellishment (the "literal" truth)", "characterized by a concern mainly with facts" and "reproduced word for word, exact, verbatim".

The **Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms** writes that...

"Regarding interpretation, literalism generally attempts to understand the author's intent by pursuing the most plain, obvious meaning of the text as judged by the interpreter. In translation, the attempt is made to convey with utmost accuracy through the words of another language the actual meaning of the biblical text." (Grenz, S., Guretzki, D., & Nordling, C. F. Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press)"

Learn to recognize figures of speech (especially common in poetic and prophetic passages) and to interpret them in the same way they are used in normal speech. In other words, interpret figures of speech in the literal significance that the figure conveys. If Jesus calls Himself a "Vine", interpret the meaning of the passage in light of the specific meaning of the figure of a "vine".

Listen to the great reformer ("Sola Scriptura") **Martin Luther** who insisted that the **literal** sense...

alone holds the ground in trouble and trial, conquers the gates of hell [Mt 16:18] along with sin and death, and triumphs for the praise and glory of God. **Allegory**, however, is too often uncertain, unreliable, and by no means safe for supporting faith. Too frequently it depends upon human guesswork and opinion; and if one leans on it, one will lean on a staff made of Egyptian reed (Ezek 29:6]. (Luther wrote) When I was a monk, I was an expert in allegories. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans I came to have knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory and I learned to know what Christ is."

(Luther wrote that) Allegories are empty speculations and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture... Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt... To allegorize is to juggle with Scripture... Allegorizing may degenerate into a mere monkey game... Allegories are awkward, absurd, invented, obsolete, loose rags." (Needless to say this great reformer did not like allegorical interpretation after experiencing his new birth!)

John Calvin (1509-1564) known as "one of the greatest interpreters of the Bible" like Martin Luther also rejected allegorical interpretation describing these works as "frivolous games" and declaring that the early church father, Origen (and many others) were guilty of "torturing the Scripture, in every possible sense, from the true sense". Calvin stressed the Christological nature of Scripture, the grammatical-historical method, exegesis rather than eisegesis, the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, and a balanced approach to typology (See discussion of Typology and Illumination of the Bible)

John MacArthur adds that "**Allegory** ([Wikipedia](#)) is a [Pandora's box](#) that ignores the literal, historical meaning of Scripture and opens biblical interpretation to every extreme. Because of man's finiteness and fallenness, it inevitably leads to arbitrariness, absurdity, and futility." (Comments on Galatians 4)

Bob DeWaay writes that "**allegorizing Scripture has a long and destructive history**. Though it was practiced by some early church fathers, it existed elsewhere in the ancient world. Some Jewish writers, such as Philo, practiced allegorizing Scriptures. It was found that the teachings of Moses and the Greek philosophers could be integrated by using this method.³ The Greeks too had used allegorization of their own ancient texts.⁴ The main "benefit" of allegorizing is the ability to remove real or apparent contradictions between Scriptures and current beliefs. The reason many have been sold on the allegorical method is the false assumption that since the Bible is a spiritual book, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that it therefore contains hidden or secret meanings. The idea is that the truly spiritual person can discern meanings to passages of the Bible that are hidden from the unenlightened. There are even passages of the Bible that can be cited to seemingly justify this idea, such as 1 Cor 2:14. However, it should be noted that the "things of the Spirit of God" that the natural man "cannot understand" are clearly revealed in the context of this passage. They concern the fact that central to God's plan of salvation was a crucified Messiah, foolishness to Gentiles and an offense to the Jews (1Cor 1:18-29). The problem was not that a person couldn't grasp the words that Paul preached - that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and rose from the dead. The claims of the gospel were clear enough. The problem was that the natural man refused to accept God's wisdom. So this passage does not teach a secret meaning to Scriptures that can be extracted by a clever allegorist. If so, then why not say Jesus didn't really die and rise again, its just an allegory? Paul taught a literal cross with literal words. ([Common Errors in Biblical Interpretation](#)) - also discusses Hyper-literalism)

Craig Keener - Avoid Allegory- Some principles help us draw lessons from stories accurately. The first principle is a warning, especially for historical narratives in the Bible: Do not allegorize the story. That is, do not turn it into a series of symbols as if it did not happen. If we turn a narrative into symbols, anyone can interpret the narrative to say whatever they want; people can read the same narrative and come up with opposite religions! When we read into a text in this way, we read into it what we already think-- which means that we act like we do not need the text to teach us anything new!...Many people practice allegory because they want to discover some hidden meaning in every word or phrase of Scripture, The problem with this approach is that it defies the way Scripture was actually given to us, hence disrespects rather than respects Scripture. (The Bible in Context)

George Sweeting - The very same Holy Spirit who led these men to write, longs to lead us today so we can understand. Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible is like an ocean which cannot be sounded, heavens which cannot be surveyed, mines which cannot be explored, and mysteries beyond unraveling. We must—we must—yield to the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

John MacArthur gives the following example of **non-literal interpretation** from a conference he was attending...

where one of the speakers talked about [John 11](#), the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. This was his interpretation: "Lazarus is a symbol of the church, and what we have here is a vivid picture of the rapture of the believers. The resurrection of Lazarus is the church going through the rapture." Afterward, this speaker came up and said, "John, did you ever see that in the text before?" I tried to be honest but diplomatic: "You know, I doubt that anyone has ever seen that in the text before. You are the first." There are passages in Scripture that are symbolic. There are passages that give us types and pictures. But beware of interpretations that read symbols and pictures into the text that simply are not there. ([MacArthur, J. F. How to get the most from God's word. Dallas, TX: Word Pub. 1997](#) - borrow for 1 hour).

John Calvin exhorts us to know...

that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning; and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely. Let us not only neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions those pretended expositions which lead us away from the natural meaning.

M R. DeHaan of Our Daily Bread fame admonishes saints to "Be on guard against any tampering with the Word, whether disguised as a search for truth, or a scholarly attempt at apparently hidden meanings."

The principle of reading the Bible literally is brought out by the following interchange between Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox.

The Queen asked Knox "Ye interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they in another; whom shall I believe, and who shall judge?"

To which **Knox** replied "Believe God, that plainly speaketh in His word: and further than the word teacheth you, ye shall neither believe the one nor the other. The word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrarious to Himself, explains the same more clearly in other places."

Martin Luther (1483-1546) arrived at an interesting conclusion declaring...

I have observed that all the heresies and errors have arisen not from Scripture's own plain statements, but when that plainness of statement is ignored, and men follow the Scholastic arguments of their own brains.

William Tyndale (1492-1536) who was best known for his translation of the New Testament into English (for which he was murdered!), stressed **literal** interpretation writing that...

Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense.

John Wesley adds that...

The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts. But in that case, the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly... Try all things by the written word, and let all bow down before it. You are in danger of fanaticism every hour, if you depart ever so little from Scripture; yea, or from the plain, literal meaning of an text, taken in connection with the context.

As a general rule if you or someone arrives at an interpretation on a text that no one has ever described, you need to consider that interpretation suspect.

DOCTRINE OF THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

Following overview is from [Ligonier Ministry devotional](#)...

Commentators on Scripture during the medieval era developed a complex means of interpreting the Bible known as the quadriga. According to the medieval [quadriga](#), every biblical passage had a fourfold meaning—a literal sense, a moral sense, an allegorical sense, and an anagogical sense. To know the literal or most obvious meaning of a passage was a good thing, but to know the higher moral, allegorical, and anagogical meanings was even better. Precious few, however, could attain to these other, more hidden meanings of Scripture. This tended to obscure the meaning and significance of the Bible for the uneducated, and it led to all sorts of fanciful interpretations among those who had more learning. Only the most “advanced” thinkers, for example, could see that the census recorded in Numbers was not really about the number of Israelite soldiers but rather the several steps it takes for the soul to ascend to God.

Of course, there is nothing in Scripture itself that justifies such a view of biblical interpretation. In fact, if the Bible teaches anything about itself, it is that its basic message is clear enough for anyone—even a child—to understand. This idea is known as the clarity of Scripture, which is also called the **perspicuity of Scripture**. It was a doctrine that the Protestant Reformers embraced, and they endeavored to return the church to the clearest, literal meaning of the Bible.

EDITORIAL NOTE: [perspicuity](#) = clarity as a consequence of being [perspicuous](#) (transparently clear; easily understandable)

That the Bible is clear enough for even a child to understand is assumed in passages such as Deuteronomy 6:6–9. Moses instructs the people of Israel to teach the divinely revealed commandments of God to their children. This implies that the children are capable of understanding and applying the Word of God as their parents teach it to them. But note that it also implies that ordinary mothers and fathers are able to have a grasp of Scripture sufficient enough to teach it to their children. This is particularly notable, given that most of the people to whom Moses originally spoke these words would not have had much in the way of education, and many of them would have been unable to read at all. Neither of these factors, however, was a barrier to understanding enough about the Scriptures to be able to understand them and teach them to others.

The clarity of Scripture does not deny that some passages of Scripture are difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:15–16). It does mean that anyone who studies the Word of God can discern the basic message of salvation and what it means to please the Lord.

Many people treat the Bible like a puzzle or a secret code that is full of hidden meanings accessible only to a select few. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Scripture can be understood by anyone who puts in the basic effort to read it in its context. We can read and hear the Scripture with profit, knowing that God’s message to us is clear.

Related Resources:

- [What Is the Clarity of Scripture? \(Perspicuity\)](#) - Don Stewart

- [The Perspicuity of Scripture](#) - Themelios - Very in depth article
- [The perspicuity of Scripture](#) - The Master's Seminary
- [What is the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture?](#) - Gotquestions

Here is an excellent summary of literalism from the recommended website **Gotquestions.org**:

"What is biblical literalism?" Answer: Biblical literalism is the method of interpreting Scripture that holds that, except in places where the text is obviously allegorical, poetic, or figurative, it should be taken literally. Biblical literalism is the position of most evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists. It is the position of Got Questions Ministries as well. (See "[Can/Should we interpret the Bible as literal?](#)") Biblical literalism goes hand-in-hand with regarding the Word of God as inerrant and inspired. If we believe in the doctrine of biblical inspiration—that the books of the Bible were written by men under the influence of the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21) to the extent that everything they wrote was exactly what God wanted to say—then a belief in biblical literalism is simply an acknowledgement that God wants to communicate to us via human language. The rules of human language then become the rules of interpreting Scripture. Words have [objective](#) meaning (**Ed**: Meaning which is undistorted by emotion or personal bias; based on observable phenomena), and God has spoken through words. Biblical literalism is an extension of the literalism that we all use in everyday communication. If someone enters a room and says, "The building is on fire," we don't start searching for figurative meanings; we start evacuating. No one stops to ponder whether the reference to "fire" is metaphorical or if the "building" is an [oblique](#) reference to 21st-century socio-economic theories. Similarly, when we open the Bible and read, "The Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left" (Exodus 14:22), we shouldn't look for figurative meanings for sea, dry ground, or wall of water; **we should believe the miracle**. If we deny biblical literalism and try to interpret Scripture figuratively, how are the figures to be interpreted? And who decides what is and is not a figure? Were Adam and Eve real people? What about Cain and Abel? If they are figurative, where in Genesis can we start saying the people are literal individuals? Any dividing line between figurative and literal in the genealogies is arbitrary. Or take a New Testament example: did Jesus really say to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44)? Did He say it on a mountain? Was Jesus even real? **Without a commitment to biblical literalism, we might as well throw out the whole Bible**. If biblical literalism is discarded, language becomes meaningless. If "five smooth stones" in 1 Samuel 17:40 doesn't refer to five aerodynamic rocks, then what in the world did David pick out of the stream? More importantly, if words can mean anything we assign to them, there are no genuine promises in the Bible. The "**place**" that Jesus said He is preparing for us (John 14:3) needs to be literal, or else He is speaking nonsense. The "**cross**" that Jesus died on needs to be a literal cross, and His death needs to be a literal death in order for us to have salvation. **Hell** needs to be a literal place—as does **heaven**—if we are to have anything to be saved from. Jesus' literal **resurrection** from a literal tomb is as equally important (1 Corinthians 15:17). To be clear, biblical literalism does not ignore the dispensations. Commands given to Israel in the theocracy do not necessarily apply to the New Testament church. Also, biblical literalism does not require that every passage be concrete and not figurative. Idioms, metaphors, and illustrations are all a natural part of language and should be recognized as such. So, when Jesus speaks of His flesh being "**food**" in John 6:55, we know He is speaking figuratively—"food" is an obvious [metaphor](#). We follow the rules of language. We are alert to metaphors and the signals of [similes](#), **like** and **as**. But unless a text is clearly intended to be figurative, we take it literally. God's Word was designed to communicate, and communication requires a literal understanding of the words used.

Related Resource: [What is wrong with the allegorical interpretation method?](#)

Devotional from Paul Enns' book **Approaching God: Reflections for Growing Christians** - INTERPRETING THE BIBLE LITERALLY (Mt 1:23)

while attending a Monday night Bible class, a major league baseball player became a Christian. Reading in the King James Version that a believer should go into his closet to pray (Matthew 6:6), every morning he took his flashlight and his Bible into his closet, shut the door, and read his Bible. He explained that he was very uncomfortable, but he learned a lot about the Bible! He was right in interpreting the Bible literally, but he needed a new translation of Matthew 6:6. **Why is literal interpretation important?** It is necessary to understand the plain or normal meaning of the Bible. We should not look for allegorical or "hidden" meanings or attempt to give unnatural meanings to ordinary words. We can readily understand the Bible when we interpret it literally. The account of creation, the Exodus from Egypt, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—all are understood in their literal or normal meaning. Reading the Bible literally also guards us from the imaginative ruminations of the cults. For example, the Christian Science cult sees the Bible as one vast allegory; hence, the devil is not a person, only "a lie, error." Heaven becomes "harmony," hell

becomes "lust, remorse, hatred," and Jesus becomes "the highest human corporeal concept of the divine idea." When literal interpretation is abandoned, all objectivity-all normal understanding is lost. Imagination takes over. Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled literally, giving us a precedence for literal interpretation. It was literally prophesied and literally fulfilled that Jesus would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22), that He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Mt 2:6), that soldiers would gamble for His garments (Ps 22:18; Jn 19:24). We need not look for mystical, hidden meanings behind the plain words of Scripture. Though we recognize figures of speech, we interpret the Bible in its ordinary meaning. That is a comfort. God did not intend that only seminary trained people could grasp the Scriptures. He wants all of us, from all walks of life, to read, understand, believe, and enjoy His Word. LESSON: The Bible is to be interpreted literally, understanding the words in their normal meaning.

INTERPRETATION OF PROPHETIC PASSAGES

A few more thoughts on the literal approach in prophetic passages

In interpretation of prophecy, the safest, simplest and most sane approach is take the text as saying what it means and meaning what it says. In a sense the literal approach assumes that the best interpretation is no interpretation. For example, in the prophesy of the Revelation, one assumes that John desired to communicate to his reader and therefore wrote plainly, saying exactly what he wanted to say (under the inspiration of the Spirit of course) and what he believed to be the most effective manner of communicating that truth to all generations. As alluded to above, the **literal plain sense** approach does not ignore the fact that prophecy often uses **symbols** and **figures of speech**. The point to emphasize is that the interpretation of such figures and symbols is not to be left up to the reader's imagination or ingenuity. (Click for an example of a somewhat imaginative, non-literal interpretation of [Revelation 20](#)) Figures of speech must be defined and explained unambiguously, either aided by the immediate [context](#), the broader context or comparison with other similar passages. If one determines to approach a prophetic book such as the Revelation with a literal mindset, they will find that much of the difficulty in understanding is effectively eliminated. As someone has well said

"The book of Revelation isn't hard to understand--it's hard to believe!"

One of the main reasons why so many commentaries resort to an allegorical interpretation of prophecies like the Revelation and Daniel is that they find the literal meaning of the prophecies difficult to accept and attempt to explain them in some less offensive manner!

When **R C Sproul** was asked "'R. C., you don't interpret the Bible literally, do you?" The way this question is phrased assumes that surely I, as an educated Bible scholar, could not possibly be so ignorant as to take the Bible literally. Now, I'm just mischievous enough to answer, "Of course I do." I say it as if obviously anybody who knows anything will interpret the Bible literally....Literal interpretation means interpreting according to the "letter." What does the text actually say? We should be seeking the plain sense of the meaning of the text when we come to the Bible. (Before the Face of God: Book 2) What is interesting is that Sproul (an amillennialist) goes on to add that "literal interpretation means we have to be able to recognize the literary form in which parts of the Bible come to us. Some of these forms are poetry, symbolic prophecy." Notice the phrase "symbolic prophecy" which opens up an entirely "new can of worms" because then it is anyone's guess as to which Scripture is literal prophecy and which is "symbolic" prophecy. The hermeneutical danger inherent in this genre of logic is that it opens one up to the non-literal interpretation of a prophetic passage, especially if a literal interpretation would be counter to one's overall approach to systematic theology. In other words, the person puts on their "systematic theology" set of "sun glasses" (so to speak of course) and then sees that shade or tint (from the "glasses") in every prophetic passage they seek to interpret. They become much like the fellow in the cartoon below...

Tony Garland in his excellent, highly recommended commentary on the Revelation (free online at: [A Testimony of Jesus Christ](#)) writes that there are two main approaches to interpretation as they relate to prophecy, (Quoting Ramm)

Among evangelicals there are generally two major camps regarding how prophetic passages should be read. **Amillennialists** will generally **allegorize** large portions of the prophetic Word, especially passages that speak of the Second Advent of Christ and the establishment of the one thousand year literal Davidic kingdom. In contrast, **premillennialists**, following the teaching of the early church, treat the Second Coming with the same literal hermeneutic as they would the First Coming of Jesus. They hold that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, should be understood **literally** from a normal reading unless **typology** (See discussion of Typology) or poetry is used. And even then, premillennialists believe that "literalness" is implied behind the figure of speech or illustration used. (Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970, page 119) (Bolding added)

The most serious charge that can be leveled against **non-literal interpretation** is that of perverting the promises of God. God's promises, both in the OT and NT, were given to specific recipients using words which they understood in the context in which they lived and in which the promises were given. When a nonliteral view of these passages is adopted, this robs the original recipients of the promises as God gave them:

Adopting a nonliteral view of the Old Testament kingdom prophecies raises some disturbing questions:

What did those prophecies mean to those to whom they were addressed?

If prophecies seemingly addressed to Israel really apply to the church (which did not exist at that time), did God give revelation that failed to reveal?

And if those prophecies were meant to apply symbolically to the church, why were they addressed to Israel?

What meaning could such prophecies have in their historical settings?

Ironically, many who spiritualize Old Testament prophecies reject the futurist interpretation of Revelation because it allegedly robs the book of its meaning for those to whom it was written. Yet they do the very same thing with the Old Testament kingdom prophecies. (MacArthur, John: Revelation 12-22: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2000)

God's promises involve both ends of the communication channel: the things God said and what those who received His promises understood them to mean in the original context. It is not permissible, after the fact, to make what God said mean something different which would have been entirely foreign to those who originally received His word. Allegorization and spiritualization do just that. (Garland, Anthony: [A Testimony of Jesus Christ](#) free online)

Mal Couch - A normal reading of Scripture is synonymous with a consistent literal, grammatico-historical hermeneutic. When a literal hermeneutic is applied to the interpretation of Scripture, every word written in Scripture is given the normal meaning it would have in its normal usage. Proponents of a consistent, literal reading of Scripture prefer the phrase a normal reading of Scripture to establish the difference between literalism and letterism. (Mal Couch, General Editor, An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002)

Many depart from the simplicity of the "plain sense" rule of literal interpretation reasoning something like...

If the plain sense does not fit my theological system, then I will seek some other sense, lest I should end up agreeing with the literalists!

And thus one reads an avowed amillennialist (interprets 1000 in Revelation 20 figuratively/allegorically not literally) named Hamilton who states...

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures (Charles Ryrie, The Basis of the Premillennial Faith, Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1981)

Or it's like the husband busily perusing his Bible and obviously annoyed with his wife's attempts to converse, to which he finally exclaims in frustration...

Don't bother me. I'm looking for a verse of Scripture to back up one of my preconceived notions!

Are you a "literalist"? See the Recommended Article which gives you a "test" to see if you interpret Scripture literally (From Middletown Bible Church):

- [Do You Interpret the Bible Literally? Seven Tests to See if You Do](#) ()

"About the time of the end, a body of men will be raised up who will turn their attention to the prophecies, and insist upon their literal interpretation, in the midst of much clamor and opposition" --
Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727)

BRIEF EXCURSUS ON ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

In light of the fact that the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4+ (to select one of many examples we could use) is frequently interpreted allegorically, symbolically or figuratively, it would be useful to see how this mode of Bible interpretation (or better "misinterpretation") had its "[pathogenesis](#)." As a pathologist I think [pathogenesis](#) is appropriate in view of the fact that **allegorical interpretation** leads to such speculative and, in my opinion, "spiritually unhealthy" comments. That said, below are notes from **Dr Anthony Garland** who has written the best literal commentary on the Revelation that has ever been written. **Garland** writes...

The Rise of Allegorical Interpretation (from [the Testimony of Jesus Christ](#))

Because the book of Revelation is categorized as *apocalyptic* literature and contains numerous symbols, it undergoes a great deal of abuse due to allegorical interpretation. But what exactly is allegorical (also known as *mystical*²²) interpretation and where did it come from?

Zuck offers the following description of *allegorization*:

Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words the literal reading is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach the literal is superficial, the allegorical is the true meaning.²³

Completely in line with Zuck's description is the following statement by Trench regarding his understanding of the New Jerusalem (Rev. [21:2](#)):

The dream of an actual material city to be let down bodily from heaven to earth, . . . has been cherished in almost all ages of the Church by some, who have been unable to translate the figurative language of Scripture into those **far more glorious realities** of the heavenly [πολιτεία](#) [politeia], whereof those figures were the vesture and the outward array. [emphasis added]²⁴

Notice how the language of Trench confirms the statement of Zuck: the allegorical meaning represents *far more glorious realities*. The literal text represents figures which are the *vesture* and *outward array*. According to Trench, the true (allegorical) meaning is "clothed" by the representation of the literal text. Presumably, the interpreter must remove this outergarment of literal text to see the deeper and *more glorious* reality beyond.²⁵ Trench doesn't inform us that each interpreter that does so finds a *different* glorious reality!²⁶

Using allegorical interpretation, it is possible to "find" all manner of meanings beyond the plain sense of the text:

To cite a few examples [of allegorical hermeneutics]: The journey of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran is interpreted as the imaginary trip of a Stoic philosopher who leaves sensual understanding and arrives at the senses. The two pence given by the Good Samaritan to the innkeeper has the hidden meanings of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The river Euphrates means the outflow of manners and is not an actual literal river in Mesopotamia. Pope Gregory the Great's interpretation of the Book of Job is equally disheartening: "The patriarch's three friends denote the heretics; his seven sons are the twelve apostles; his seven thousand sheep are God's faithful people; and his three thousand hump-backed camels are the depraved Gentiles!"²⁷

While it is tempting to chuckle at these examples from early Christianity, what is alarming is how often equally obscure results attend modern interpreters of the book of Revelation.

So where did this tendency begin? Evidence is lacking within Scripture that Jesus or the Apostles understood the Old Testament in this way.

The allegorical interpretation of Sacred Scriptures cannot be historically proved to have prevailed among the Jews from the time of exile, or to have been common with the Jews of Palestine at the time of Christ and His apostles. Although the Sanhedrim and the hearers of Jesus often appealed to the Old Testament according to the testimony of the New Testament writers, they give no indication of the allegorical interpretation. Even Josephus has nothing of it.²⁸

The flowering of allegorical interpretation as applied to Scripture can be traced to Jews in Alexandria Egypt who were interested in accommodating the [OT](#) Scriptures to Greek philosophy as a tool for removing or reinterpreting what were considered embarrassing anthropomorphisms and immoralities in the OT.

Two names stand out in Alexandrian Jewish allegorization: Aristobulus and Philo. Aristobulus, who lived around 160 B.C., believed that Greek philosophy borrowed from the Old Testament, and that those teachings

could be uncovered only by allegorizing. . . . Philo (ca. 20 B.C. - ca. A.D. 54) . . . sought to defend the Old Testament to the Greeks and, even more so, to fellow Jews. He was led to allegorize the Old Testament, . . . because of his desire to avoid [seeming] contradictions and blasphemies.²⁹

Observe how often Christian aberrations have arisen from a faulty attempt to defend the Scriptures before skeptics.[Preterism](#), and its belief that non-believers reject Scripture because Jesus' prediction to come "soon" was misunderstood, is a recent example.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-216) was influenced by Philo and proposed a system of interpretation where any passage of the Bible might have up to five meanings.³⁰ Thereafter, Origen, who studied Platonic philosophy and is thought to have been a pupil of Clement, went so far as to say that Scripture itself demands that the interpreter employ the allegorical method.

Amillennialist Schaff is fair when he describes the great hermeneutical failings of Origen: "His great defect is the neglect of the grammatical and historical sense and his constant desire to find a hidden mystic meaning. He even goes further in this direction than the Gnostics, who everywhere saw transcendental, unfathomable mysteries."³¹

[Origen] lays down the principle that the true meaning of prophecy is to be found only by going beyond the literal and historical sense to the spiritual; and he says specifically of the Apocalypse that the mysteries **hidden in it** can be understood only in this way. His whole interpretation of the book is therefore spiritual rather than literal. [emphasis added]³²

[Origen's](#) interpretive approach had great influence on those who would follow in the Middle Ages, as did Augustine (354-430) who, like Philo, saw allegorization as a solution to Old Testament problems.³³ The allegorical system of interpretation prevailed throughout most of the Middle Ages:

During the Middle Ages, the fourfold sense of Scripture was taught. Medieval scholars took Origen's threefold sense—the literal, the moral, and the spiritual—and subdivided the spiritual into the allegorical and the anagogical. As schoolman Thomas Aquinas affirmed, 'The literal sense is that which the author intends, but God being the Author, we may expect to find in Scripture a wealth of meaning.' An example of how the fourfold sense was worked out during the Middle Ages is Gen. [1:3](#), 'Let there be light.' Medieval churchmen interpreted that sentence to mean (1) Historically and literally—An act of creation; (2) Morally—May we be mentally illumined by Christ; (3) Allegorically—Let Christ be love; and (4) Anagogically—May we be led by Christ to glory.³⁴

Although Aquinas endorsed looking beyond the primary meaning of the author, he did recognize some of the dangers of allegorization. "Aquinas put forward a threefold argument against allegory: (1) it is susceptible to deception; (2) without a clear method it leads to confusion; and (3) it lacks a sense of the proper integration of Scripture."³⁵ All three of these significant drawbacks are evident in much interpretation of the book of Revelation today.

Augustine's allegorical interpretation of Bible prophecy dominated the understanding of eschatology during the medieval period. It found acceptance also with the Roman church and among the leaders of the Reformation. Even today, Augustinian eschatology is held by large segments of the Christian church.³⁶

Even the Reformers, who cast off the darkness of Medieval allegorization in so many areas, failed to escape the influence of those who went before them in their understanding of the book of Revelation.³⁷

As we've observed in the origination of this method of interpretation, there was a *motive* for its use. This remains the case today. At times it has simply been unbelief:

As someone has said, "The Book of Revelation isn't hard to understand—it's hard to *believe!*" The main reason why so many have resorted to allegorical interpretations is that they have found the literal meaning of its prophecies difficult to accept, scientifically, and aesthetically, and have tried to "explain" them on some less offensive basis.³⁸

At other times, the motive has been to teach unorthodox doctrines twisted from the proper understanding of the text, something which has been with us all along:

Metaphysical cults, theosophical cults, divine science cults, pantheistic cults all base their interpretation of Holy Scripture on the theory that the meaning of Scripture is plural. The first meaning is the ordinary historical or grammatical one; and the second meaning is the one the cultist brings to Scripture from the particular metaphysical system or religious system he is pushing.³⁹

Even as far back as [Tertullian](#), the dangerous freedom offered by figurative interpretation for manipulating the meaning of the text was recognized. "On the proper method of interpreting prophecy Tertullian stated: 'Now to upset all conceits of this sort, let me dispel at once the preliminary idea on which they [heretics] rest their assertion that the prophets make all their announcements in figures of speech. Now if this were the case, the figures themselves could not possibly have been distinguished, inasmuch as the verities would not have been declared, out of which the figurative language is stretched. And, indeed, if all are figures, where will be that of which they are the figures? How can you hold up a mirror for your face, if the face nowhere exists? But, in truth, all are not figures, but there are also literal statements.' "[40](#)

As we will see as we progress, allegorical interpretation is frequently used by Christians who hope to avoid the plain implication of the teaching of Scripture. Christian Reconstructionists utilize forms of allegorical interpretation in order to work around passages in the book of Revelation which do not conveniently fit into the newspaper events surrounding the times prior to 70 A.D. Since John's writings clearly indicate a coming time of wrath and judgment upon the earth, their motive is to attempt to remove this reality in favor of a more optimistic future for Christianity:

Reconstructionism's interest in this subject stems from its optimistic outlook regarding Christianity's ability to gain control of secular society. Because Revelation is admittedly pessimistic in this regard, the system's scheme for disposing of this unfavorable evidence is to relegate its fulfillment almost entirely to the past, to a time prior to A.D. 70.[41](#)

Those who stand opposed to God's promises made to the Jewish nation find the plain sense of Revelation [20:4](#) much to their disliking as it suggests the fulfillment of the Messianic Kingdom prophecies scattered throughout the OT. Again, allegorical interpretation provides the "solution" in that the thousand years (Rev. [20:4](#)) becomes an indefinite period and the physical rule and reign with Christ represents the current spiritual standing of the believer. Never mind that interpreting the first resurrection (Rev. [20:4-5](#)) as being *spiritual* and the second (Rev. [20:12](#)) as *literal* runs rough-shod over the rules of sound [hermeneutics](#).

The net result of allegorical interpretation is to place a veil of darkness over God's divine Word. It takes that which God has graciously revealed to the saints and subjects it to the dark vagaries of human imagination and speculation. The result is predictable. Those who major in it remain as much in the dark regarding the Second Coming of Jesus as many Jews were in relation to His predicted suffering at the First Coming.[42](#)

Concerning the inconsistency of the allegorical method and the damage which results, Seiss notes:

Good and able men have satisfied themselves with it; but, on the same principles of interpretation, there is not a chapter in the Bible, nor a doctrine of our holy religion, which could not be totally explained away. By a happy inconsistency do they not so treat other portions of Scripture, or they would transmute the whole Revelation of God into uncertainty and emptiness.[43](#)

Having examined a long list of these symbolic and allegorical interpretations, and followed the processes by which their authors have tried to apply them, I have not found one which does not completely break down under the weight of its own cumbrous unfitness. They each and all fail to explain the facts and relations of the record, and treat John as a half-demented sentimental old man, trying to make a grand poem out of a few dim anticipations touching the earthly fortunes of the Church, which could have been better told in one well-written chapter. They are, at best, the wild guesses of men who have never got hold of the real thread of the matter, whilst under the necessity of saying something.[44](#)

Devotional from Paul Enns' book **Approaching God: Reflections for Growing Christians** - MUST WE INTERPRET PROPHECY LITERALLY? As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,... from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. (Micah 5:2)

When my wife says, "Honey, would you please take out the garbage?" what does she mean? I could stop and reflect, Hmm, maybe I've been acting like a bear lately. Maybe she wants me to clean up my act. If she asks me, "Would you please bring home a loaf of bread today?" what is my response? Do I say to myself, Things have been tough financially. She probably wants me to ask the boss for a raise? Of course not. I take the sack of garbage and deposit it in the garbage can; I go to the store and buy a loaf of bread. Why? Because normal use of language is to communicate literally. Why should our study of prophecy be any different? **The Bible is understood very well when we interpret it literally, but what is literal interpretation?** It is understanding words in their normal meaning. Reading about Adam and Eve and understanding words in their normal meaning, we realize they were historical people who sinned against God and plunged the human race into sin. Paul compares and contrasts Christ and Adam in Romans 5, understanding both to be literal, historical men. If Adam was not a literal, historical person, then we have no basis for saying Christ was either-a serious point indeed. In Exodus we read how Jacob's family grew into a nation of two million, was brought out of Egypt,

and given the law. It makes good sense to understand that literally. Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled literally: the prophecy of Christ's birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), His virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14), His suffering on the cross (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53), and His resurrection (Psalm 16:10). Even figures of speech must be understood in their literal meaning first (e.g., mustard seed, tree, bird, and branches in Matthew 13:31-32). Doesn't it make good sense to interpret prophecy literally if that is how the Bible as a whole is understood and if that is how other prophecies have been fulfilled? This is a crucial matter since it determines whether we will interpret the Bible consistently or not. LESSON: The literal method of interpreting the Bible is the way the Bible is normally understood and the way we should also interpret prophecy.

Resources On Interpretation

Not listed in order of importance and as always be a Berean even on articles on "Interpretation!" (Acts 17:11 note)

1) [Hermeneutics - Study of Interpretation of Scriptures](#) by Stephen R Lewis -

Excellent Material - Highly Recommended. Download the Pdf to your desktop so you can refer to it easily in the future, as the 150+ pages are filled with solid material that relates to accurate interpretation of the Bible.

Includes an interesting synopsis of the history of how Scripture has been interpreted since the first century AD, I would recommend the synopsis by Dr Stephen R Lewis ([see page 22](#)). You may be surprised at what you discover about the so called Early Church Fathers and their slide into allegorical interpretation which even such highly regarded men as Augustine (354-430 AD) et al championed and which sadly led to the allegorical method becoming the favored method of Scripture interpretation for almost 1000 years (the "dark ages" - perhaps herein lies a clue as to why they were so "dark"!) As one writer has said "the Middle Ages was a vast desert so far as biblical interpretation is concerned" (Mickelsen).

2) [Literal Interpretation: A Plea for Consensus](#) by Elliot Johnson

3) From Tony Garland at Spiritandtruth.org...

- [Art and Science of Interpretation](#)
- [The Rise of Allegorical Interpretation](#)
- [Understanding Symbols and Figures](#)
- [Understanding Numbers](#)

4) [Issues in Hermeneutics](#) from Andy Woods at Spiritandtruth.org...

a). [Grammatico Historical Method](#)

b). [Matter Of Genre](#)

5) [Basics of Bible Interpretation](#) by Bob Smith

- Words of Life
- Is Anybody Listening?
- The Goal of Bible Study
- Interpretive Principles
- The Interpretive Process
- Bible Study Approaches
- Figures of Speech
- The Language of Analogy (especially Parables)
- Allegories and Types
- The Greeks Had a Word for It
- Helps on Hebrew
- Getting It All Together

6) [History of Interpretation by Michael Patton - Audio and Video only](#)

- 7) [The Bible: Understanding Its Message J. Hampton Keathley, III](#)
- 8) [Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics](#)
- 9) [Contemporary Problems in Biblical Interpretation by John Walvoord](#)
- 10) [Interpreting Prophecy Today by John Walvoord](#)

- [Part 1: Basic Considerations in Interpreting Prophecy](#)
- [Part 2: The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament](#)
- [Part 3: The New Testament Doctrine of the Kingdom](#)
- [Part 4: The Kingdom of God in the New Testament \(continued\)](#)

(11) [David Hocking's Article on Interpretation](#) - "When we come to the interpretation of the Bible, we are talking about one of the most serious subjects as it relates to our Bibles. The authenticity of the Bible-I've often said-is revealed in or manifested in the field of hermeneutics, which means interpretation." This article is one of three parts on interpretation. Here are links to all three:

- [Interpretation of the Bible — Part One](#)
- [Interpretation of the Bible — Part Two](#)
- [Interpretation of the Bible — Part Three](#)
- These are part of a multi-part course on "History and Authenticity of the Bible"
 - [Introduction — Part One](#)
 - [Introduction — Part Two](#)
 - [Miracles](#)
 - [Scripture Cannot Be Broken](#)
 - [Dead Sea Scrolls & Aramaic Targums](#)
 - [Greek Translations](#)
 - [N.T. Manuscripts](#)
 - [New Testament Languages and the Apocrypha](#)
 - [The Apocrypha and the Catholic Church](#)
 - [The Apocrypha and the Bible](#)
 - [Inspiration — Part One](#)
 - [Inspiration — Part Two](#)
 - [Difficulties of Inspiration — Part One](#)
 - [Difficulties of Inspiration — Part Two](#)
 - [Review and Issues of Canonicity](#)
 - [The Inerrancy of the Bible](#)
 - [Manuscript Evidence](#)
 - [Greek Translations](#)
 - [English Versions](#)
 - [Interpretation of the Bible — Part One](#)
 - [Interpretation of the Bible — Part Two](#)
 - [Interpretation of the Bible — Part Three](#)
 - [Culture](#)
 - [Symbolic Language](#)
 - [Course Review](#)

(12) [Exegetical Fallacies Common Mistakes Every Student of the Bible Must Avoid](#) - William D. Barrick - Topics covered include

- **The Evidential Fallacy**
- **The Superior Knowledge Fallacy**
- **The Word Study Fallacy**

Word studies are popular, easily obtained from available resources, and an easy way to procure sermon content. However, word studies are also subject to radical extrapolations and erroneous applications.¹² It is not always possible to strike exegetical gold by extracting a word from the text for close examination. Word studies alone will not suffice. Indeed, over-occupation with word studies is a sign of laziness and ignorance involved in much of what passes for biblical exposition in our times. Nigel Turner, an eminent

New Testament Greek scholar, correctly summarized the issue as follows: *"Just as a sentence is more revealing than a single word, so the examination of a writer's syntax and style is that much more important to a biblical commentator. It is not surprising that fewer books have been written on this subject than on vocabulary, because whereas students of vocabulary can quickly look up lists of words in concordances and indices, in the field of syntax the study is more circuitous. There is no help except in a few selective grammars and monographs, so that the worker really must work his way through all the texts in Greek."* While we might decry over-emphasis on philology or etymology, we must recognize that the choice of individual words was significant to the writers of Scripture. It is legitimate for the exegete to ask, "Why did the writer choose this term as opposed to one of its synonyms?" Robert Renihan offers the following explanation: *"Whether Euripides wrote dei ["ought"] or chre ["must"] in a given passage is hardly of metaphysical import. But we must assume that he made a choice between them. This is sufficient justification for concerning ourselves with the problem. It made a difference to the poet; it should make a difference to us. This planet, I do not doubt, shall never want for people to despise such problems and those who try to resolve them. Such contempt is founded upon the remarkable premise that one who manifests a concern for minutiae must of necessity be both indifferent to and unequal to profound problems. The Greeks, on the contrary, in their simplicity had contrived a word to express this reverence before even the smallest truth; and that word is filalh,qeia ["love of truth"]. Study of the words alone will not present us with a consistent interpretation or theology. This is one of the misleading aspects of theological dictionaries/wordbooks. We learn far more about obedience/disobedience or sacrifice and sin from the full statement of a passage like 1 Samuel 15:22-23 than we will from word studies of key terms like "sacrifice," "obey," or "sin" in the text. As a matter of fact, as Moisés Silva reminds us, "We learn much more about the doctrine of sin by John's statement, 'Sin is the transgression of the law,' than by a word-study of hamartia; similarly, tracing the history of the word hagos is relatively unimportant for the doctrine of sanctification once we have examined Romans 6–8 and related passages."*

- **The Fallacy of Reading Between the Lines**
- **The Hebrew Verb Fallacy**
- **The Fallacy of Ignoring Particles**
- **The Fallacy of Reduction**
- **New Testament Exclusion Fallacy**

The final fallacy I wish to mention in this session is the Bible student's failure to allow the New Testament to have a say in how an Old Testament passage is interpreted. Too often we are being excessively exclusionary in dealing with Old Testament texts only within their immediate contexts—sometimes even to the extreme of disallowing later intertextual evidence within the Old Testament itself.... ([keep reading](#))

(13) [The new linguistic and exegetical key to the Greek New Testament](#) by Rogers, Cleon - This little book is a gold mine of little gems on individual Greek words one any NT passage you are studying. If you have time it is always worth checking out! I use it in my **Greek word studies** all the time.

(14) [The complete word study dictionary : New Testament](#) by Zodhiates, Spiros - One on the best lexicons for laymen. Highly Recommended for Greek Word Studies to aid your interpretation of a passage.

(15) [Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible \(DDD\)](#) - 950 pages (1995) Read some of the [65 ratings](#) (4.8/5 Stars). Very expensive to purchase

5) COMPARE — SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE

PRINCIPLE: Interpret Scripture with Scripture and don't base your convictions on an obscure passage which cannot be supported by other more easily interpreted texts. Clear up problem areas with the clear teaching of other passages relating to the same subject.

This guideline is based on the hermeneutical principle known as ***analogia Scriptura***. According to this principle, Scripture never contradicts Scripture. In other words God never teaches something in one passage that violates what He teaches in another passage. "Apparent" contradictions are just that -- *apparent*, not *actual* for God is not the Author of confusion and never contradicts Himself!

As the Puritan **Thomas Watson** once stated...

"The Scripture is to be its own interpreter or rather the Spirit speaking in it; nothing can cut the diamond but the diamond; nothing can interpret Scripture but Scripture."

In his work "Analogia Scripturae" **Martin Luther** said that obscure passages are to be understood in light of the clear passages emphasizing that

Scripture is its own interpreter

Clement of Alexandria encouraged his readers to...

Explain the Scriptures by the Scriptures.

The Puritan writer **William Gurnall** exhorted believers to...

Compare Scripture with Scripture. False doctrines, like false witnesses, agree not among themselves.

The Westminster Confession states that...

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture... it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

Develop the practice of **comparing Scripture with Scripture** because Scripture is always the best commentary on itself. The beauty of using Scripture to interpret Scripture is that when the Bible answers its own questions, then we know the answer is correct. Why? Because the Bible is a unified whole, and God never contradicts Himself. In other words, the great interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. The Bible is unified in its message. Although it sometimes presents us with paradox, it never confounds us with contradiction.

Tony Garland in his excellent treatise on the [Revelation](#) commenting on the importance of studying Scripture "*in the light of related passages*" writes that...

This is the biblical equivalent of a "safety net." In the same way that trapeze artists performing on the high-wire are protected by a net below which catches them in the event of a fall, comparing Scripture with Scripture provides a doctrinal "safety net" to keep the interpreter from "falling" into an inconsistent understanding or interpretation. This principle is also known as the Analogy of Scripture... the systematic study of the Scriptures across all the books of the Bible to arrive at a self-consistent understanding of any particular topic. This principle is founded upon the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture. That the inspired books, being ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (2Pe 2:19, 20, 21 - note), are without error and consistent in their teaching from Genesis 1:1 through Rev 22:21. When we encounter what seems to be an inconsistency (commonly referred to as a "Bible Difficulty"), we must assume that the problem is one of our own understanding and not God's Word. The experienced student of the Word will recognize how frequently what appeared to be contradictory turned out, upon further insight, study, and illumination, to be by design. (Garland, Anthony: [A Testimony of Jesus Christ](#) an excellent online commentary on Revelation - also has an excellent 8+ hour introductory discussion [Mp3's] on proper interpretation of the Scriptures, especially as it relates to prophecy).

Where do you find the Scriptures to compare to the passage you are studying?

Practically speaking there are two common sources

- (1) The cross-references in the margin of your Bible.
- (2) The [Treasury of Scripture Knowledge \(TSK\)](#)

The [TSK](#) is a conservative resource originally compiled by Dr. R. A. Torrey around the turn of the 20th century and to this day remains the most comprehensive collection of Scriptural cross references available, with over 500,000 entries. Formerly, the only source of the TSK was a large hardbound volume. With the advent of the computer era, the **TSK** is now readily available in a variety of computer formats:

- (a) [TSK](#) is a component on virtually all modern Bible software programs
- (b) [TSK](#) is available on [E-sword](#) and [TheWord](#) are the best free Bible software programs available ([click](#) for details).
- (c) [TSK](#) is widely available on the Internet - one of the best sites available is [StudyLight](#) ([click](#) for an example of the TSK cross-references on 2 Timothy).

There are at least 3 advantages of the TSK over your Bible's "built in" marginal references

- (i.) [TSK](#) has far more cross-references per verse than any other resource currently available in any format.

(ii.) [TSK](#) references are more "relevant" to the verse in question than most marginal references.

(iii.) [TSK](#) has more Old Testament cross references on New Testament verses which greatly facilitates integrating the New Testament with the Old Testament. This is which is important because

"the Old is the New concealed"
and
"the New is the Old revealed."

Since Scripture is always the best commentary on Scripture, consider making it a practice as you perform inductive study to check the **Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge** often, especially when seeking to know the meaning of a given text.

Respected Bible expositor **John MacArthur** speaks very highly of the **TSK** noting that it is...

The one book, aside from the Bible itself, that I value most in my studies.

The great preacher **Donald Grey Barnhouse** testified to the value of using Scripture as a commentary on itself, remarking that...

You very rarely have to go outside the Bible to explain anything in the Bible.

William Gurnall exhorted believers to...

Compare Scripture with Scripture. False doctrines, like false witnesses, agree not among themselves.

The well-known evangelist **D. L. Moody** offered a similar encouragement reminding us that...

There is no better book with which to defend the Bible than the Bible itself.

Spurgeon comments...

The only way to cut a diamond is by a diamond: diamond dust must be used if the gem is to be cut. In like manner, the best way to understand Scripture is by Scripture itself. One of the best commentaries; in the world is that which is "**wholly** biblical." Students of the Word, I pray you, study the Bible by the Bible; cut the diamond with the diamond; use the light of God in God's light: "In Thy light shall we see light."

Let's illustrate this principle with 1 Corinthians 15:29 where Paul speaks of those who are '**baptized for the dead**.' Based on this verse Mormon teaching encourages their adherents to be baptized for the dead. There are at least three major problems with this interpretation:

(1) 1Cor 15:29 is an **obscure passage** (as stated earlier, the cults frequently will "*major on the minors*")

(2) The [context](#) of the entire Word of God never mentions baptism "by proxy"

(3) **Other Scriptures** clearly refute and nullify the possibility that Paul's teaching validated the Mormon practice. For example, the writer of Hebrews clearly teaches that it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment (Heb 9:27-notes).

Shakespeare's Translation? -Some have speculated that William Shakespeare helped translate the King James Bible. They say that he inserted a cryptogram (a message written in code) while he translated Psalm 46. In this psalm, the 46th word from the beginning is shake and the 46th word from the end is spear. Furthermore, in 1610, while the King James Bible was being translated, Shakespeare would have been 46 years old. Despite these coincidences, no serious evidence supports this theory. Some people also claim to have found hidden meanings when interpreting the Bible. Certain cults will cite a verse out of context, only to lead someone into heretical doctrine. Some quote John 14:16, for example, and say that the "Helper" refers to their "new revelation." When compared with other Scripture, however, the Helper whom Jesus sent to us is obviously the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-14; Acts 2:1-4). The apostle Peter wrote, "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). To interpret a biblical passage accurately, we must always consider the context and compare it with other Scripture. This respects the clear meaning of the Bible without trying to find hidden meaning in it. - Our Daily Bread - Dennis Fisher

God's Word does not have secret codes
That need a special key;
It's understandable and clear,
With truth for all to see.
—Sper

Related Resources:

- [The Use of Cross-References](#)
- [Robert Girdlestone on comparing Scripture with Scripture](#)

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE:

Click a simple exercise on the importance of comparing Scripture with Scripture in order to derive the most accurate interpretation

(6) CONSULT CONSERVATIVE COMMENTARIES

PRINCIPLE: After you have performed your own inductive Bible study, consult conservative resources to check your interpretative conclusions.

The order is important -- **first the Scriptures** then secondary sources for the Word of God illuminated by the Holy Spirit of God is important than any commentary . Without the Word there is no life, no growth, no holiness, and no acceptable service. We should read it, study it, memorize it, meditate on it, and above all obey it (cf application). As someone has said, "Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge."

McQuilkin rightly advises that...

Even for the experienced Bible student it is best to consult the commentary **after** one has made his own independent study. There are several reasons for that. First, no commentator is infallible, nor is any commentator an expert on every passage of Scripture. Often a commentator will rely on the work of earlier commentators. Therefore, to preserve one's independent judgment and the integrity of one's own work, it is best to do personal study first by exegeting or drawing out the meaning of the passage with the basic tools. On the other hand, it is never wise to conclude one's study without referring to several of the best commentators on a given passage. In that final stage of study, the commentator provides a check for one's own conclusions and also provides additional insight before one's work is complete. Furthermore, the commentator provides appropriate background sources that can be checked. (Borrow this excellent resource - [Understanding and applying the Bible](#)) (Bolding added)

Consultation serves as a good check on the accuracy of your interpretation, but use secondary sources with caution because no single individual has a corner on all the truth.

As **George Sweeting** past pastor of Moody Bible Church once said "Commentaries are splendid; however, beware of being chained to them. Someone has humorously said, "**The Bible throws a lot of light on the commentaries.**" Any book that takes priority over the Bible becomes a crutch which leads to weakness. To read the words of men and neglect the Word of God is to say the books of men are of greater worth."

Be wary if you come to a conclusion that no one else has ever "discovered" and you cannot find support in any other conservative commentary.

REFRAIN FROM STUDYING THE STUDY NOTES!

When you are in the process of performing an Inductive Study, it is always tempting to see how your **Study Bible notes** or favorite commentary interpret the section of Scripture you are studying. Please refrain from consulting secondary sources until you have given the Scriptures time to speak for themselves!

Skip Heitzig has some interesting thoughts on commentaries and other ancillary resources...

I have traveled in many parts of the world where even the best-equipped pastors have only a study Bible, a concordance, and perhaps a Bible dictionary. Three or four books at most—and no computer resources at all! These pastors have learned how to study the Scriptures inductively on their own, without relying on commentaries or other tools. It is interesting to note that most of the church growth worldwide is currently occurring in these third-world countries. Clearly, having a huge library of books is not the most important factor. You can buy the best Bible study tools available and still not be a good Bible student. ([How to Study the Bible and Enjoy It](#))

A E Knock gives us some similar wisdom regarding the judicious use of commentaries (in the preface of the commentary he wrote on the New Testament)...

"The writer of these notes cannot help uttering a heartfelt prayer that they will never be taken for more than what they are intended to be—suggestive thoughts which lead to and not from the Sacred Text. (**ED: AND THE WRITER OF THE NOTES ON PRECEPTAUSTIN.ORG ECHOES HIS PRAYER!**) He would rather they would vanish than that they should stand between anyone and the living oracles. May we never be tainted with the spirit of the ancient Rabbis who did not scruple to place their words above the Sacred Scrolls. In the Talmud we read: 'The words of the scribes are more noble than the words of the law; for the words of the law are both hard and easy [to understand], but the words of the scribes are all easy.' Another traditional saying was, 'He who deals with Scripture does a thing indifferent; he who reads the Mishna has a reward; but he who devotes himself to the Gemara is most meritorious of all.'

"In the same way the commentaries and confessions and creeds of Christendom have a stronger hold on the hearts of many of His saints than the inspired Scriptures. May He grant that many will return to the fountain undefiled!" ([Concordant Commentary on the New Testament - Preface](#)).

UTILIZE OTHER BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Although you may never have thought of other Bible Versions as commentaries, you will be surprised at the insights you can glean from reading a passage, paragraph or chapter in a different version. However, I would offer two caveats: First, always do your inductive study with a more literal translation before comparing other translations. Second, be very cautious when reading translations that are predominantly paraphrases. Paraphrased Bible versions represent a restatement of the passage with the goal being to give the meaning in another form.

Examples of paraphrased versions include: New Living Translation (NLT - in my opinion one of the most trustworthy of the paraphrased versions), The Living Bible (TLB), the Message, and J B Phillip's NT Paraphrase (often very "picturesque" rendering). **Click chart** comparing various popular translations for degree of literalness (the more literal the closer the translation is to the original Greek or Hebrew manuscripts) Remember that paraphrased versions are **highly interpretative** and you should **never** base your final interpretation on a paraphrased version. A special note of caution (cp He 5:14-note, 1Th 5:21, 22-note) is called for when reading "The Message", which is a very loose and free paraphrase. On the other hand, the **Amplified Version** is an excellent, recommended resource which can even function much like a "mini-commentary".

COMPARE MULTIPLE TRANSLATIONS

If you have internet access, there is a resource that allows easy comparison of multiple passages including the Amplified Version which functions much like a "mini-commentary" on a given passage...

(1) Click [Biblegateway.com](#)

(2) In the box labeled "Enter Passage(s)" enter "2Ti 1:1" or if you want to look at an entire chapter enter "2 Tim 1".

(3) Drop down to the next section labeled "Select version(s)"

Click "Lookup passage(s) in multiple versions"

Select these versions (up to five are allowed)

(a) NASB - main version in inductive study,

(b) Amplified Version - relatively literal, often expands the meaning of the verse

(c) NLT - one of the more accurate paraphrases.

(d) NIV - remember this is not as literal as the NASB

(4) Click boxes for **'Hide footnotes'** and **'Hide cross-references'** to minimize "clutter".

(5) Click **"Lookup Passage"** to display the parallel versions

To see the verses in parallel columns click **'Layout: Columns'**

Note: As an alternative to Biblegateway.com, consider downloading [E-sword](#) or [TheWord](#) the best free Bible software programs available. Then you can easily and quickly compare multiple versions simultaneously without having to be connected to the internet.

COMMENTARIES ON BIBLE PROPHECY

Special discernment is in order when referring to commentaries on prophetic books like Revelation (click for a brief discussion of the common methods of interpreting Revelation [preterist, historicist, idealist, futurist or literalist] and a list of recommended futuristic commentaries and sermons) and Daniel (click for a list of futuristic commentaries and sermons on Daniel). Please note that commentaries on prophetic books vary widely in their **interpretative** approach, and you may not always be able to easily discern their bias (Click for a list of published Revelation commentaries categorized by the predominant interpreter view)

If an interpreter does not use the normal, customary, literal method of interpreting Scripture, interpretation is given over to the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter thus accounting for the widely-varying imaginative interpretations of the non-literal interpreters.

Remember that all the prophecies of the Old and New Testament that have been fulfilled to date have been fulfilled literally, thus there is no precedent for anything but a literal approach to the prophetic books containing prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

Another key advantage of literal interpretation is that this approach results in minimal interpretive overlay of the inspired text. Clearly the best interpretation of a historical record is no "interpretation". One should seek to allow God to say what He says and assume that He says what He means. The more interpretation that is necessary to "make sense" of the text, the greater the danger one will add to or subtract from the meaning intended by God (Rev 22:18,19-[note](#)).

Garland who advocates a literal approach to interpretation of prophecy has an instructive note writing that

the Golden Rule (of interpretation) holds that we adhere to the plain sense of Scripture and not seek any other sense unless there are good reasons for doing otherwise. These reasons must be found in the immediate [context](#) of the passage under study or related passages. It is not sufficient to simply classify the book of Revelation as an apocalypse and therefore turn the rules of interpretation upside-down as does this commentator:

"A failure to take full account of [the apocalyptic] feature has led to some of the most outlandish teachings on this book by some whose rule of interpretation is "literal, unless absurd." Though this is a good rule when dealing with literature written in a literal genre, it is the exact opposite in the case of apocalyptic literature, where symbolism is the rule, and literalism the exception."

(Garland continues) Notice how this commentator appeals to the apocalyptic genre in order to dismiss (literal) normative interpretation and to assert that we should avoid normative interpretation in favor of pure symbolic conjecture! The easy answer to this proposal is to simply ask, "Whose symbolic interpretation?" No real answer can be given. This is because there is an infinite variety of interpretations possible when using symbolic conjecture. The result is that no two interpreters hold to the same meaning except in a handful of areas. This fact alone disqualifies a non-literal framework because it has factually demonstrated its bankruptcy at conveying a reliable message from God. In effect, it makes the book of Revelation unknowable by man (**Ed note:** Which is exactly the opposite of what the title word Revelation or apokalupsis means! Click definition)." (Garland, Anthony: [A Testimony of Jesus Christ](#) an excellent online commentary on Revelation).

If you are studying the Revelation, one "test" is to note how the author interprets the "1000 years" in [Revelation 20](#). Is the approach **literal** or **allegorical** (spiritualized or symbolic)? **Allegorize** (allegory) in simple terms means to say something different from what the words themselves mean literally.

Roy Zuck, a respected conservative author explains that...

Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words the **literal reading** is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach the **literal** is superficial, the **allegorical** is the true meaning." (Zuck, Roy: [Basic Bible Interpretation](#). Page 29. Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications. 1991)

If the commentary you are consulting takes an interpretative approach that is anything other than **literal**, you need to be very careful regarding their comments on **prophecy** or you may likely end up more than a little confused! Once any interpreter departs from the **literal** (where the literal makes perfectly good sense), they enter into an arena where the passage could mean almost anything and where their fanciful, false interpretations are limited only by their imagination! (Click here for an example of a non-literal interpretation of Revelation 20 by an otherwise respected theologian, B. B. Warfield).

For more discussion on the origin and spiritual danger of the [allegorical method of interpretation](#) especially as applied to prophetic books like Revelation and Daniel [click here](#) for Anthony Garland's analysis. He also has an interesting discussion on [Understanding Symbols and Figures](#), [Abuse of Numbers in Biblical Interpretation](#) and [Literal Interpretation of Numbers](#).

If you are interested in prophecy, I would strongly encourage you to take the excellent four part Precept Ministries International inductive study on the Revelation. (click the following links to download lesson 1 in Pdf format [Adobe Acrobat Reader needed] from each of the four parts: [Revelation - Pt1](#) - Chap 1-3, 10 lessons, [Revelation - Pt2](#) - Chap 4-22, 12 lessons, [Revelation - Pt3](#) - Chap 4-22, 11 lessons, [Revelation - Pt4](#) - Chap 4-22, 14 lessons. Click here for the transcribed lectures by Kay Arthur on Revelation Parts 2-4, but not until you've done your own inductive study! [Click here](#) for Anthony Garland's excellent literal, conservative commentary on [the Revelation](#) or see Dr John Walvoord's [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#)).

The four part **Precept course on Revelation** takes 47 weeks to complete but when you have finished, you will be in awe and blessed by the illumination God's Spirit gives you into His Revelation and to prophecy in general. You will also be saddened by the great confusion in the commentaries and the unfounded fear many believers express toward this wonderful book written for overcomers.

- [See list of resources on Biblical Interpretation including Prophecy](#)

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE:

Click for a list of generally conservative commentaries

but use with discretion and only after you've studied the passage inductively.

What Does It Really Mean? - Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. —Psalm 119:105

A father was telling his son the Bible story about Lot. He said, "God was going to destroy the city of Sodom, so He warned Lot to take his wife and flee. But when Lot's wife looked back, she turned into a pillar of salt." Puzzled, the boy asked, "What happened to the flea?" This humorous misunderstanding points out a deeper problem some of us have with the words of the Bible. Although we believe that every word of Scripture is inspired, this doesn't mean we should take every word literally regardless of its context. Some people seem to do this and thereby miss the true meaning of many Bible passages. The Bible is filled with images—word pictures we call similes and metaphors. The book of James gives us a classic example, calling the tongue "a fire" (James 3:6). We know it doesn't mean that we have a literal flame in our mouth. Jesus used figurative language too. He said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out" (Mt. 5:29-note). What He meant, of course, is that we should take strong measures to keep ourselves from sin.

We need to listen carefully to what God is saying in His Word so we can put it into practice. His Word is a "lamp" for our feet and a "light" for our path (Ps. 119:105). —D J De Haan ([Our Daily Bread](#))

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Observation: What does the context say?

Interpretation: What does the text mean?

Application: What does it mean to your life?

A text taken out of context becomes a pretext.

Perhaps you are thinking "There is no way I can read and understand the Bible like the folks who have formal seminary training." Wrong!

James W. Sire counters this line of reasoning...

The illumination comes to the minds of God's people—not just to the spiritual elite There is no guru class in biblical Christianity, no illuminati, no people through whom all proper interpretation must come. And so, while the Holy Spirit gives special gifts of wisdom, knowledge and spiritual discernment, He does not assign these gifted Christians to be the only authoritative interpreters of His Word. It is up to each of His people to learn, to judge and to discern by reference to the Bible which stands as the authority even to those to whom God has given special abilities. To summarize, the assumption I am making throughout the entire book is that the Bible is God's true revelation to all humanity, that it is our ultimate authority on all matters about which it speaks, that it is not a total mystery but **can be adequately understood by ordinary people in every culture** (Scripture Twisting, pp. 17-18)

Kierkegaard adds that...

To read the Bible as God's word one must read it with his heart in his mouth, on tip-toe, with eager expectancy, in conversation with God. To read the Bible thoughtlessly or carelessly or academically or professionally is not to read the Bible as God's Word.

As one reads it as a love letter is read, then one reads it as the Word of God. (Quoted in Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 75)

H. H. Rowley...

No merely intellectual understanding of the Bible, however complete, can possess all its treasures. It does not despise such understanding, for it is essential to a complete understanding. But it must lead to a spiritual understanding of the spiritual treasures of this book if it is to be complete. And for that spiritual understanding something more than intellectual alertness is necessary. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (cp 1Cor 2:13, 14, 15, 16), and the Bible student needs an attitude of spiritual receptivity, an eagerness to find God that he may yield himself to Him, if he is to pass beyond his scientific study unto the richer inheritance of this greatest of all books. (The Relevance of the Bible, p. 19)

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Dr John MacArthur

Excerpt from [MacArthur Study Bible](#)

Here are tips on how to get the most out of the study of this “divine handbook.” These pointers will help answer the most crucial question of all, “How can a young man keep his way pure?” The psalmist responds, “By keeping it according to Your word” (Ps 119:9).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO STUDY THE BIBLE?

Why is God’s Word so important? Because it contains God’s mind and will for your life (2Ti 3:16, 17). It is the only source of absolute divine authority for you as a servant of Jesus Christ.

It is infallible in its totality: “The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7).

It is inerrant in its parts: “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar” (Pr 30:5, 6).

It is complete: “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.” (Rev 22:18, 19).

It is authoritative and final: “Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven” (Ps 119:89).

It is totally sufficient for your needs: “... so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2Ti 3:16, 17).

It will accomplish what it promises: “So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Is 55:11).

It provides the assurance of your salvation: “He who is of God hears the words of God...” (Jn 8:47; cf. 20:31).

HOW WILL I BENEFIT FROM STUDYING THE BIBLE?

Millions of pages of material are printed every week. Thousands of new books are published each month. This would not be surprising to Solomon who said, “... be warned: the writing of many books is endless” (Ecc 12:12).

Even with today’s wealth of books and computer helps, the Bible remains the only source of divine revelation and power that can sustain Christians in their “daily walk with God.” Note these significant promises in the Scripture.

- The Bible is the source of truth: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17).
- The Bible is the source of God’s blessing when obeyed: “But He said, ‘On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it’ ” (Lk 11:28).
- The Bible is the source of victory: “... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17).
- The Bible is the source of growth: “... like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you grow” (1Pe 2:2).
- The Bible is the source of power: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Ro 1:16).
- The Bible is the source of guidance: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105).

WHAT SHOULD BE MY RESPONSE TO THE BIBLE?

Because the Bible is so important and because it provides unparalleled eternal benefits, then these should be your responses:

- Believe it (Jn 6:68, 69)
- Obey it (1Jn 2:5)
- Preach it (2Ti 4:2)
- Honor it (Job 23:12)
- Guard it (1Ti 6:20)
- Study it (Ezr 7:10)
- Love it (Ps 119:97)
- Fight for it (Jude 3)

WHO CAN STUDY THE BIBLE?

Not everyone can be a Bible student. Check yourself on these necessary qualifications for studying the Word with blessing:

1. Are you saved by faith in Jesus Christ (1Co 2:14–16)?
2. Are you hungering for God's Word (1Pe 2:2)?
3. Are you searching God's Word with diligence (Ac 17:11)?
4. Are you seeking holiness (1Pe 1:14–16)?
5. Are you Spirit-filled (Eph 5:18)?

The most important question is the first. If you have never invited Jesus Christ to be your personal Savior and the Lord of your life, then your mind is blinded by Satan to God's truth (2Co 4:4).

If Christ is your need, stop reading right now and, in your own words with prayer, turn away from sin and turn toward God: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8, 9).

WHAT ARE THE BASICS OF BIBLE STUDY?

Personal Bible study, in precept, is simple. I want to share with you 5 steps to Bible study which will give you a pattern to follow.

STEP 1—Reading.

Read a passage of Scripture repeatedly until you understand its theme, meaning the main truth of the passage. Isaiah said, "To whom would He teach knowledge, and to whom would He interpret the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just taken from the breast? For He says, 'Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there' " (Is 28:9, 10).

Develop a plan on how you will approach reading through the Bible. Unlike most books, you will probably not read it straight through from cover to cover. There are many good Bible reading plans available, but here is one that I have found helpful.

Read through the Old Testament at least once a year. As you read, note in the margins any truths you particularly want to remember, and write down separately anything you do not immediately understand. Often as you read you will find that many questions are answered by the text itself. The questions to which you cannot find answers become the starting points for more in-depth study using commentaries or other reference tools.

Follow a different plan for reading the New Testament. Read one book at a time repetitiously for a month or more. This will help you to retain what is in the New Testament and not always have to depend on a concordance to find things.

If you want to try this, begin with a short book, such as 1 John, and read it through in one sitting every day for 30 days. At the end of that time, you will know what is in the book. Write on index cards the major theme of each chapter. By referring to the cards as you do your daily reading, you will begin to remember the content of each chapter. In fact, you will develop a visual perception of the book in your mind.

Divide longer books into short sections and read each section daily for 30 days. For example, the gospel of John contains 21 chapters. Divide it into 3 sections of 7 chapters. At the end of 90 days, you will finish John. For variety, alternate short and long books, and in less than 3 years you will have finished the entire New Testament—and you will really know it!

STEP 2—Interpreting.

In Acts 8:30, Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Or put another way, “What does the Bible mean by what it says?” It is not enough to read the text and jump directly to the application; we must first determine what it means, otherwise the application may be incorrect.

As you read Scripture, always keep in mind one simple question: “What does this mean?” To answer that question requires the use of the most basic principle of interpretation, called the analogy of faith, which tells the reader to “interpret the Bible with the Bible.” Letting the Holy Spirit be your teacher (1Jn 2:27), search the Scripture He has authored, using cross references, comparative passages, concordances, indexes, and other helps. For those passages that yet remain unclear, consult your pastor or godly men who have written in that particular area.

ERRORS TO AVOID

As you interpret Scripture, several common errors should be avoided.

1. Do not draw any conclusions at the price of proper interpretation. That is, do not make the Bible say what you want it to say, but rather let it say what God intended when He wrote it.
2. Avoid superficial interpretation. You have heard people say, “To me, this passage means,” or “I feel it is saying... .” The first step in interpreting the Bible is to recognize the four gaps we have to bridge: language, culture, geography, and history (see below).
3. Do not spiritualize the passage. Interpret and understand the passage in its normal, literal, historical, grammatical sense, just like you would understand any other piece of literature you were reading today.

GAPS TO BRIDGE

The books of the Bible were written many centuries ago. For us to understand today what God was communicating then, there are several gaps that need to be bridged: the language gap, the cultural gap, the geographical gap, and the historical gap. Proper interpretation, therefore, takes time and disciplined effort.

- 1. Language.** The Bible was originally written in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Often, understanding the meaning of a word or phrase in the original language can be the key to correctly interpreting a passage of Scripture.
- 2. Culture.** The culture gap can be tricky. Some people try to use cultural differences to explain away the more difficult biblical commands. Realize that Scripture must first be viewed in the context of the culture in which it was written. Without an understanding of first-century Jewish culture, it is difficult to understand the gospels. Acts and the epistles must be read in light of the Greek and Roman cultures.
- 3. Geography.** A third gap that needs to be closed is the geography gap. Biblical geography makes the Bible come alive. A good Bible atlas is an invaluable reference tool that can help you comprehend the geography of the Holy Land.
- 4. History.** We must also bridge the history gap. Unlike the scriptures of most other world religions, the Bible contains the records of actual historical persons and events. An understanding of Bible history will help us place the people and events in it in their proper historical perspective. A good Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia is useful here, as are basic historical studies.

PRINCIPLES TO UNDERSTAND

Four principles should guide us as we interpret the Bible: literal, historical, grammatical, and synthesis.

- 1. The Literal Principle.** Scripture should be understood in its literal, normal, and natural sense. While the Bible does contain figures of speech and symbols, they were intended to convey literal truth. In general, however, the Bible speaks in literal terms, and we must allow it to speak for itself.
- 2. The Historical Principle.** This means that we interpret a passage in its historical context. We must ask what the text meant to the people to whom it was first written. In this way we can develop a proper contextual understanding of the original intent of Scripture.
- 3. The Grammatical Principle.** This requires that we understand the basic grammatical structure of each sentence in the original language. To whom do the pronouns refer? What is the tense of the main verb? You will find that when you ask some simple questions like those, the meaning of the text immediately becomes clearer.
- 4. The Synthesis Principle.** This is what the Reformers called the *analogia scriptura*. It means that the Bible does not contradict itself. If we arrive at an interpretation of a passage that contradicts a truth taught elsewhere in the Scriptures, our interpretation

cannot be correct. Scripture must be compared with Scripture to discover its full meaning.

STEP 3—Evaluating.

You have been reading and asking the question, “What does the Bible say?” Then you have interpreted, asking the question, “What does the Bible mean?” Now it is time to consult others to insure that you have the proper interpretation. Remember, the Bible will never contradict itself.

Read Bible introductions, commentaries, and background books which will enrich your thinking through that illumination which God has given to other men and to you through their books. In your evaluation, be a true seeker. Be one who accepts the truth of God’s Word even though it may cause you to change what you always have believed, or cause you to alter your life pattern.

STEP 4—Applying.

The next question is: “How does God’s truth penetrate and change my own life?” Studying Scripture without allowing it to penetrate to the depths of your soul would be like preparing a banquet without eating it. The bottom-line question to ask is, “How do the divine truths and principles contained in any passage apply to me in terms of my attitude and actions?”

Jesus made this promise to those who would carry their personal Bible study through to this point: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (Jn 13:17).

Having read and interpreted the Bible, you should have a basic understanding of what the Bible says, and what it means by what it says. But studying the Bible does not stop there. The ultimate goal should be to let it speak to you and enable you to grow spiritually. That requires personal application.

Bible study is not complete until we ask ourselves, “What does this mean for my life and how can I practically apply it?” We must take the knowledge we have gained from our reading and interpretation and draw out the practical principles that apply to our personal lives. If there is a command to be obeyed, we obey it. If there is a promise to be embraced, we claim it. If there is a warning to be followed, we heed it. This is the ultimate step: we submit to Scripture and let it transform our lives. If you skip this step, you will never enjoy your Bible study and the Bible will never change your life.

STEP 5—Correlating.

This last stage connects the doctrine you have learned in a particular passage or book with divine truths and principles taught elsewhere in the Bible to form the big picture. Always keep in mind that the Bible is one book in 66 parts, and it contains a number of truths and principles, taught over and over again in a variety of ways and circumstances. By correlating and cross-referencing, you will begin to build a sound doctrinal foundation by which to live.

WHAT NOW?

The psalmist said, “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1, 2).

It is not enough just to study the Bible. We must meditate upon it. In a very real sense we are giving our brain a bath; we are washing it in the purifying solution of God’s Word.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. JOSHUA 1:8

RICK WARREN'S POST - Biblical Interpretation: God Doesn't Leave You in the Dark - *No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*” (1 Corinthians 2:11b NIV)

Have you ever heard someone say, “Well, that’s just your interpretation of the Bible”? It’s as if that little phrase disproves everything that’s been said. But it really doesn’t disprove anything.

There are right ways and wrong ways to interpret Scripture. Here are six principles of interpretation that are accepted just about everywhere.

1. **You need faith and the Holy Spirit to interpret Scripture.** The Bible doesn’t make sense to non-believers. It is God’s love letter to believers. When an unbeliever reads the Word, he is reading someone else’s mail. The Bible is a spiritual book that must be understood by spiritual people. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 2:11, “*No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God*” (NIV).
2. **The Bible is its own best commentary.** Scripture interprets Scripture. Practice this principle by getting a Bible with cross-

references in the margin. By looking up cross references, you'll get a much bigger and clearer picture of what God has said in all of his Word, not just that one context.

3. **Read the Old Testament with the New Testament in mind, and read the New Testament with the Old Testament in mind.** The New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament.
4. **Always interpret unclear passages in the light of clear passages.** Look at the full counsel of God in Scripture to get a clear understanding when you find a passage that seems contradictory or confusing. For example, 1 Corinthians 15:29 has a very obscure reference to baptism for the dead. It's the only time the idea is mentioned in Scripture. Paul isn't condoning this. Nothing in Scripture condones it. Let clear passages about salvation and baptism interpret this unclear one, not vice versa.
5. **Don't form a doctrine based solely on an historical event.** Take historical passages of the Bible for what they're meant to be: good lessons. Don't build your doctrine upon them. For example, in Mark 1:35, the Bible says Jesus got up very early, went to a place of solitude, and prayed. Does that mean you must get up every morning at 4 a.m., leave your house, and go somewhere and pray? Of course not! God may convince you that's a good idea, but it's not a command. Use doctrinal passages to base doctrine on. Use narratives to teach lessons.
6. **Never interpret Scripture based on your own experiences.** The point of Bible study is not to shape Scripture to agree with your subjective opinions or your experiences. Feelings lie. Emotions lie. Instead, discover God's timeless truth, and let it shape your life. Study the Bible with an open heart, and invite God to conform you to his will.

God doesn't want to leave you in the dark when you study Scripture. Following these basic rules of Bible study can help to ensure you read the Word from God's perspective.

Talk It Over

- With these points in mind, re-read a passage from one of your quiet times this past week. What new insight does God reveal to you?
- Are you open to letting the Holy Spirit work in your life? How do you keep an open mind and heart when interpreting Scripture so that the Holy Spirit can direct your thoughts?
- How does your perspective change when you understand that the Bible does not make sense to non-believers? (from Rick Warren's Daily Devotionals)

Quote Misquote

You have heard that it was said, "*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" --Mt 5:38-note

In the opening chapter of Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain presents an interesting conversation that reflects human nature. Tom tries to persuade his friend Huck to join him in his plans to form a band of robbers and to take captives much like pirates used to do. Huck asks Tom what pirates do with the captives they take, and Tom answers, "Ransom them." "Ransom? What's that?" asks Huck. "I don't know. But that's what they do. I seen it in books; and so of course that's what we got to do," explains Tom. "Do you want to go doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?"

This dialog represents a way of thinking that's not much different from what Jesus encountered. The people were also quoting and repeating things they had found in a book--the Old Testament. But they were merely mouthing words. The ideas had been separated from the spirit of the original revelation. By misapplying Mosaic principles of conduct, the people were justifying their sinful attitudes and actions (Mt. 5:27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42-see notes).

This should be a reminder to us. When we quote the Bible, let's be sure we understand its meaning and context. Then we won't get things "all muddled up." --M R De Haan II ([Ibid](#))

When reading God's Word, take special care
To find the rich treasures hidden there;
Give thought to each line, each precept hear,
Then practice it well with godly fear. --Anon.

A text taken out of context can be a dangerous pretext.

Bob DeWaay - Failure to Consider the Context - Imagine that someone read you one sentence out of the middle of a large book

you had never read before. How likely would it be that you could properly understand the author's meaning? If it were a novel you would not know who any of the characters were, what had happened to them previously, or what the plot was about. It would be an impossible task, one that we normally would never do. Yet often this is how the Bible is read. Since it is laid out with verse numbers (which have been added by editors, they were not in the original), we often falsely assume each verse is a little literary work of its own, disconnected from anything else. However, with no other information, it would be just as unlikely we would understand a single verse pulled out of the Bible as we would understand a sentence taken out of the middle of a novel. If we have a shared body of information, study the whole of Scripture, understand the Jewish background of the Bible, and understand the setting of each book of the Bible, then a verse quoted from a given book will make sense to us. Yet many never gain this information.

The context of a verse exists at various levels - textual, literary and historical. The first is its immediate textual context. A word is found in a sentence, a sentence in a paragraph and a paragraph in a chapter, etc. Remembering that the chapter and verse designations were not in the original, one must read the entire section, preferably the whole book, before considering the meaning of a verse. This is merely treating the Bible as one would any other piece of literature.

It does not follow from the fact that the Bible is God's inspired Word that it has some mystical, non-standard way of communicating. For example, "You shall not steal," carries the same meaning if God says it as it does if said by a proprietor of a store. The fact that God's inspired Word says it lends the phrase more authority and assures its validity, but it doesn't change the meaning of the phrase. People err in assuming that because the Holy Spirit inspired the words of Scripture those words have some hidden, secret, mystical meaning. This is not the case. The Bible follows the same grammatical and literary conventions as other Jewish literature of its time. Its uniqueness is in its inerrancy and divine inspiration, not in how it is to be read and interpreted. So we must always consider a passage in its immediate grammatical context and not isolate it, looking for some obscure, cryptic meaning.

Another factor is a passage's literary context. What I mean by this is that a verse from the Book of Proverbs should be treated as the type of literature it is, wisdom literature. Whereas a passage from Kings should be treated as historical narrative. The Bible is a collection of different books, written over many centuries. It contains various types of literature. Just as we would distinguish a written history of the United States from a technical journal on auto mechanics, we must treat a gospel as a different type of literature than an epistle. Common errors in interpretation result from a failure to do this. For example, when reading history, if the Bible says that so and so did this, it does not necessarily follow that it was good or bad. If the inspired account says that David arranged for Uriah to be killed, it follows that this surely happened. That the Bible tells about this action is not an endorsement of it. In this case the Bible makes it clear it was wrong. In many instances the historical narrative does not comment on the moral quality of someone's act, but merely tells us about it. We may have to look elsewhere in the Bible, for example in didactic (teaching) sections, to find out whether such an act is good or evil.

For example Saul consulted the witch of Endor and Samuel was summoned (1Samuel 28:7-16). It does not follow that the Bible endorses necromancy or that those who practice such things normally do contact the dead. On the contrary, the Bible forbids this practice (Deuteronomy 18:10). The passage in 1Samuel gives us the historical record of Saul's sin. The teaching section of the Bible tells us that it is a sin. Often the historical sections do comment on the moral qualities of actions, but not always. The important issue is that we recognize the different types of literature (genre) and give this due consideration when interpreting a passage.

Another level of context is the historical context. A common error is to read contemporary ideas and issues into a situation in which they did not exist. I recently read an article about music for a Christian worship service. The article was based on this passage: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16). The writer of this article took the passage to mean we should sing songs that are the Psalms put to music, hymns such as found in hymnals, and contemporary songs and choruses. The problem is, the only one of those categories that existed when Paul wrote to the Colossians were Psalms put to music. They didn't have "How Great Thou Art" in the first century! Paul could hardly have been suggesting that the Colossians sing some of their music from 19th and 20th century hymnals.

The most blatant and common example of failing to consider the historical context is the failure to acknowledge that the Bible, Old and New Testaments, is a Jewish book. It contains many Jewish idioms whose meaning was clear to the early Jewish readers but often misunderstood by contemporary readers. We need to educate ourselves about the Hebrew background to Scriptures. For example, a common Jewish idiom used throughout the Bible is the phrase "son(s) of . . ." Rather than use an adjective, as we would, the Jews would say, for example, "sons of light" (1Thessalonians 5:5). This means characterized by."

An example of a heresy that arose from mis-understanding this usage is the "serpent's seed" teaching of the Latter Rain movement of the late 1940's. The teaching was that Satan had sexual intercourse with Eve and produced the human race, as taught by a man named William Brahmam. Where do you get something like that? From passages such as this: "*You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44). This is an

example of the Hebrew way of speaking of being the son of what one is characterized by. It was never meant to be taken that either the Jews or people in general are literal descendants of Satan. It would be to say that when we lie we are being "devilish." False teachers prey on ignorance and mislead the uninformed.

There are other historical matters that help us understand Scripture. These include geography, political structures of the time, customs of other peoples with whom the Jews interacted, etc. For an example of how this type of information helps us understand particular passages, see Ryan Habben's article in this issue of CIC.

A final word needs to be said about context. The Bible is a unity, though written by dozens of authors over many centuries, the Holy Spirit inspired it all. The Bible has an amazingly clear and consistent message. This serves as part of the evidence for its inspiration. Therefore, when interpreting a passage, we must consider how our proposed interpretation fits with the whole counsel of God as revealed throughout the Bible. For example, there are many passages that make it clear that Jesus was human, and descended from the lineage of David. Yet it does not follow from passages that teach this that Jesus was **only** human. Many other passages teach that He is God. The whole counsel of God on the matter is that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. This truth must inform our interpretation of any particular verse that speaks to us about Christ. ([Common Errors in Biblical Interpretation Exposed](#))

ARCHIVE.ORG BOOKS AVAILABLE TO BORROW OR READ

Explanation - Most of the resources below are newer commentaries (written after 1970) and other Bible resources which previously were available only for purchase in book form or in a Bible computer program. The resources are made freely available by archive.org but have several caveats - (1) they do not allow copy and paste, (2) they can only be checked out for one hour (but can be checked out immediately when your hour expires giving you time to read or take notes on a lengthy section) and (3) they require creating an account which allows you to check out the books free of charge. To set up an account click [archive.org](#) and then click the picture of the person in right upper corner and enter email and a password. That's all you have to do. Then you can read these more modern resources free of charge! I have read or used many of these resources but not all of them so ultimately you will need to be a Berean (Acts 17:11+) as you use them. I have also selected works that are conservative and Biblically sound. If you find one that you think does not meet those criteria please send an email at <https://www.preceptaustin.org/contact>. The resources are listed in alphabetical order by the author's last name and some include reviews of the particular resource.

[The new linguistic and exegetical key to the Greek New Testament](#) by Rogers, Cleon - This little book is a gold mine of little gems on individual Greek words on any NT passage you are studying. If you have time it is always worth checking out! I use it in my **Greek word studies** all the time.

[The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament](#) by Zodhiates, Spiros - One of the best lexicons for laymen. Highly Recommended for Greek Word Studies to aid your interpretation of a passage.

See also the [list of Word Study Resources](#)

[The Holman guide to interpreting the Bible](#) by Dockery, David S

[Foundations for biblical interpretation : a complete library of tools and resources](#)

[Expository Dictionary of Bible Words](#) by Richards, Larry, [33 ratings](#) It does not go into great depth on the Greek or Hebrew words but does have some excellent insights.

[Vine's Expository Dictionary - OT and NT Words](#) - complete book - available in Pdf

[Theological wordbook of the Old Testament](#) by Harris, R. Laird - One of the best Hebrew lexicons for the layman.

[Basic Bible Interpretation : a Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth](#) by Roy Zuck. Recommended.

[How to Study Your Bible](#) by Arthur, Kay ([CLICK HERE](#) for many other resources from Kay Arthur). The basics of inductive Bible study succinctly described. Recommended. This is the original edition not the new edition.

[Living by the Book](#) by Howard G. Hendricks - A classic. An entertaining and informative read that is guaranteed to invigorate your Bible study. Recommended.

Living by the Book by Dr Howard Hendricks - [click here for all 19 sessions](#) of about 20-25 minute each - this was a powerful tool God's Spirit used in my life about 30 years ago but it was not free at that time. There is also another set of videos in which [Dr Hendricks gives shorter sessions](#) - 15 sessions, each about 6 minutes. Could you invest an hour and a half in something that might change the way you read the Bible for the rest of your life? That question is of course rhetorical. And don't say you're too old to learn now! Many Christians read the Bible, but they have never been taught **HOW** to read the Bible. Dr Hendricks will give you some basic pointers in the overview sessions and this may motivate you to view his 19 full sessions (and even better to use them to teach your Bible Study group or Sunday School class **HOW TO READ THE BOOK**, because most of them have never been taught!) Either way, your investment in time will yield precious fruit for eternity! Here is the same material in book form - borrow [Living by the Book](#) or pdf of revised edition [Living by the Book](#).

[Teaching to Change Lives](#) by Howard Hendricks, Howard [561 ratings](#)

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[The Christian Educator's Handbook on Teaching](#) by Kenneth Gangel and Howard Hendricks [21 ratings](#)

[How can I understand the Bible?](#) by DeHaan, Mart (52 page booklet)

[The New How to Study Your Bible Workbook](#) (2010) by Arthur, Kay, - Note that this workbook is the companion to the [New How to Study Your Bible](#) book (not the same as the one linked above).

[Jensen's Survey of Bible \(online\)](#) by Jensen, Irving [140 ratings](#) (NT) [133 ratings](#) (OT) This is a classic and in conjunction with the following three resources should give you an excellent background to the Bible book you are studying. Jensen has some of the best Book charts available and includes "key words." He also gives you some guidelines as to how to begin your inductive study of each book.

[Discover the Bible for Yourself](#) by Arthur, Kay [93 ratings](#) - Proven methods to read, mark, and study God's Word. Introductions to set the stage for each book of the Bible. Maps and charts to add historic and geographic dimension. Word studies for NASB and NIV translations. Definitions and explanations to simplify interpretation. "Things to Think About" for personal application. This resource will inspire and guide anyone interested in creating a personal study of God's Word.

[What the Bible is all about](#) by Mears, Henrietta. This is a classic and is filled with "pearls" from this godly teacher of God's Word.

[Talk thru the bible](#) by Wilkinson, Bruce [The Wilkinson & Boa Bible handbook : the ultimate guide to help you get more out of the Bible](#)

[How to profit from Bible reading](#) by Jensen, Irving [2 ratings](#)

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[MacArthur Study Bible - Topic "How to Study the Bible"](#) - John MacArthur

[MacArthur's Introductions to all 66 Books](#) - includes a helpful discussion of "Interpretative Challenges"

[Swindoll's introductions to all 66 Books](#) - Answers the following questions - Who wrote the book? Where are we? Why is this book so important? What's the big idea? How do I apply this? He also includes a helpful Book Overview chart (right upper corner of page).

[How to Get the Most from God's Word](#) by John MacArthur [16 ratings](#)

[Journey of the Bible : the remarkable story of how the Bible came from God to you](#) by Jensen, Irving

-
- [Inductive Bible Study - Observation](#)
 - Inductive Bible Study - Interpretation
 - [Inductive Bible Study - Application](#)
 - Simple Study on the Power of God's Word

- Authority of God's Word - study on 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- Ezra 7:10 - Exposition of the "Ezra 7:10 Principle"
- Job's "Secret" of perseverance?
- A Primer on the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation
- Memorizing God's Word - Why? How? Resource links...
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- [How to Perform A Greek Word Study on the Web](#)
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- [Bible Interpretation](#) - [Figures of speech](#)
- Multiple resources on Biblical Interpretation (Hermeneutics)
- Is Your Interpretation Supernaturalistic, Naturalistic, Existentialistic, Dogmatic?
- Typology - Study of Biblical types
- Click for Introduction to Inductive Bible Study using PowerPoint (2002)- Hint: View in "Slide Show" mode [see icons at bottom of the Power Point frame - click the one that says "Slide Show" - you can hit your "Escape" key at any time to revert back to the normal screen] - each mouse click will progressively give more information on each slide and make your viewing more "interactive".
- Jensen's Survey of the New Testament and Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament (over 2500 pages total) [available in one Pdf download](#). If you are studying a particular book, check out this resource to help guide your inductive study of that book. It is a treasure chest of material!

Related Resources on God's Word

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- Here is a video I have made and hope (Lord willing) to follow up with more related videos -[How to Study Your Bible - "Hinge Words" Part 1](#)
- Living by the Book by Dr Howard Hendricks - [click here for all 19 sessions](#) of about 20-25 minute each - this was a powerful tool God's Spirit used in my life about 30 years ago but it was not free at that time. There is also another set of videos in which [Dr Hendricks gives shorter sessions](#) - 15 sessions, each about 6 minutes. Could you invest an hour and a half in something that might change the way you read the Bible for the rest of your life? That question is of course rhetorical. And don't say you're too old to learn now! Many Christians read the Bible, but they have never been taught **HOW** to read the Bible. Dr Hendricks will give you some basic pointers in the overview sessions and this may motivate you to view his 19 full sessions

(and even better to use them to teach your Bible Study group or Sunday School class HOW TO READ THE BOOK, because most of them have never been taught!) Either way, your investment in time will yield precious fruit for eternity! Here is the same material in book form - borrow [Living by the Book](#) or pdf of revised edition [Living by the Book](#).

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- [Watch the incredible youtube video The Indestructible Book - How We Got our English Bible - 3 hours, 37 minutes - It will make you weep!](#)
- BIBLE VERSIONS How Literal is your translation?
- [Inductive Bible Study: Application](#)
- [Meditation - An Application of Inductive Bible Study](#)
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- [1 Peter 2:1-3 Longing for the Word - John MacArthur](#)
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- [Rationality, Meaningfulness & Precision of Scripture - Robert L. Thomas](#)
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- [The Word-Filled Life - Developing the Mind of Christ by Hampton Keathley III](#)
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- [Psalm 1:2 - Notes on this Passage - C H Spurgeon](#)
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- [The Authority & Power of the Word upon the Heart - J C Philpot](#)
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- [Benefits Arising From the Word of God - Charles Simeon's Sermon on Micah 2:7](#)