

MODULE THREE

INTERPRETATION

All communication involves interpretation. Words have very fluid meaning until they become terms. When a particular word is used in a particular context, it takes on a particular meaning and becomes a term.

The interpreter must discern true meaning across these various distances of culture, language, and time.

KEY THOUGHT

If observation asks, “What do I see?” then interpretation asks, “What does it mean?”

Interpretation is coming to terms with the significance and meaning of the text in our own culture.

THE MIND-SET OF INTERPRETATION

Think like an Archaeologist

When an archaeologist finds a pot or an arrowhead or even a fossil, he or she must think hard about what that artifact *means*. It's one thing to *see* it (observation)—it's another thing to *understand* it (interpretation). We begin to build a bridge of understanding between what was then and what is now.

But people who aren't spiritual can't receive these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can't understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means. Those who are spiritual can evaluate all things, but they themselves cannot be evaluated by others. For,

*"Who can know the LORD's thoughts?
Who knows enough to teach him?"*

*But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.
(1 Corinthians 2:14–16)*

The pursuit of true biblical meaning is a spiritual endeavor; it lies in the domain of true believers.

*God doesn't reveal
His truth to the
hurried soul; you'll
never go deep if
you're in a rush.²*

While the human author might not be around to explain himself to us, the Divine Author is on hand to guide our study and open our understanding.¹ That doesn't mean we can expect perfect divine insight in a single flash of illumination! Even though our pursuit is a spiritual one, understanding usually accompanies a lifetime of diligent, methodical study.

DISCUSSION: Determining Meaning through Archaeology

How might an archaeologist determine a text's meaning?

Understand what you see in its original setting.

- **Allow for language.** Are there any particular words that need definition or explanation? Like hieroglyphics, are these words explained somewhere else in the text?
- **Allow for genre.** An important question to ask when we're interpreting Scripture is "What type of literature am I reading?" Genre refers to the category of style, form, or content of a particular work. Is the category poetry or prose? Is it history-telling or instruction-giving? Does this type of literature have any specific rules we need to allow for? A story that begins with the words, "Once upon a time," is not going to be interpreted by the same rules as a court order that begins, "You are hereby summoned to testify."
- **Allow for culture.** What customs, cultures, or politics need to be considered? Two hundred BC was the middle of the Ptolemaic dynasty, marked by civil war between Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt.

Understand the hidden hazards of interpretation.

- **Avoid "reading-in."** Eisegesis is when we try to justify or prove our own preconceived opinions. Sometimes these ideas might have been held for a long time because they were taught to us by someone we trusted or admired during our formative years, such as parents, friends, teachers, and professors.
- **Avoid "glossing-over."** This is when we ignore parts of the text because we either don't like what they say, or we don't understand what they say. If it's hard to understand, why? If it's awkward to speak about, why? Explain the text as it comes, not as you would like it to come.
- **Avoid "cherry-picking."** This is when we only pay attention to the parts of the text that we find comfortable or agreeable. It's the other side of glossing over.

INTERPRETATION GUIDELINES

Allow:

- Language
- Genre
- Culture

Avoid:

- "Reading-in"
- "Glossing-over"
- "Cherry-picking"

KEY THOUGHT

The big question to answer at this stage involves intended meaning. What did the first audience think the text meant?

LANGUAGE

Access to Meaning Is in the Text Itself

Look for particular words and phrases that need interpretation. Perhaps unfamiliar words are being used, or ordinary words are being used in a surprising or unconventional way. List these words and use a dictionary or encyclopedia to learn their meaning. But first, look to the Bible itself for help in understanding.

The most reliable sense of meaning will be the closest in context. Therefore, “discover the usage of the word:

- By the same writer in the same book
- By the same writer in other Bible books
- By other writers in the Bible
- By other writers outside the Bible”³

Compare **Ephesians 2:20** with **3:5; 4:11**.

Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.
(Ephesians 2:20)

GENRE

Different Writings Call for Different Kinds of Interpretation

Genre determines which rules we instinctively read by. It is the key filter of interpretation. Recognizing genre is a critical step because it conditions what we can expect from the text.

Historiography versus History

Historiography has an agenda; it is a focused history written from the author's point of view for a purpose.⁵

TYPES OF GENRE

- History
- Narrative
- Poetry
- Wisdom
- Prophecy
- Gospels
- Epistles
- Apocalypse⁺

Narrative

Narrative literature tells stories, and much of the Bible uses several classifications of narrative writing.

1. Tragedy

When we read tragedy, we are introduced to a character or characters who have a certain choice to make or a certain path to pursue, and they choose badly.

2. Epic

Epic narratives deal with large numbers, great distances, and monumental tasks.

3. Romance

Romance books include Ruth and Song of Solomon. Here, the small details make up much of the account.

4. Heroic

Heroic narrative can be thought of as the other side of the coin to tragedy. The hero (protagonist) is given a task or a choice to make, and he or she chooses well.

5. Satire

The nature of satire is to draw attention to foolish thinking by ridicule or sarcasm. Although Jonah might be the only complete book to use the form, many passages and interactions have a satirical quality to them (Matthew 19:24; Luke 4:23–27; John 3:9–10).

6. Polemic

Accounts that illustrate polemic genre are Egypt's plagues and Elijah's contest. Polemic narrative is usually set as a show of force against an enemy.

Poetry

When we read poetry, we know it will use figures of speech, symbolism, and exaggerated imagery to convey its meaning. For this reason, it is important to separate what is *literary* from what is *literal*.

1. Fear and Oppression

*O LORD, I have so many enemies;
so many are against me.
So many are saying,
“God will never rescue him!” (Psalm 3:1–2)*

2. Awe and wonder

*When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars you set in place—
what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them? (Psalm 8:3–4)*

3. Thanksgiving

*I sank down to the very roots of the mountains.
I was imprisoned in the earth,
whose gates lock shut forever.
But you, O LORD my God,
snatched me from the jaws of death! (Jonah 2:6)*

Wisdom

Wisdom literature intends to show God's people how to live with skill and integrity.

1. Wisdom for the Naive—Proverbs

When children are young, the wisdom parents teach them is simplistic: "Do this, and things will be good," or "Do that, and things will be bad."

Proverbial wisdom should be carefully handled so as not to force it into a false meaning.

*Fear of the LORD lengthens one's life,
but the years of the wicked are cut short. (Proverbs 10:27)*

2. Wisdom for the Storm—Job and James

Most of us live our lives caught in the tension between how things should be and how things are. The reality is that life on earth is often confusing and sometimes painful.

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. (James 1:2–3)

3. Wisdom in Retrospect—Ecclesiastes

Solomon's reflections toward the end of his life included the reflective question, "Where is satisfaction found?"

So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him?
(Ecclesiastes 2:24–25)

Prophecy

The Hebrew Bible contains an entire section called "The Prophets" (*Nevi'im*). It was the task of the prophet to be a spokesman for God, speaking divine truth into the society and culture of his time. Sometimes that truth came as a warning for the present, sometimes as a message of hope for the future.

1. Telling Forth—"Court Reporting"

One of the questions we need to ask is, "Did the prophets succeed in keeping Israel from sin?" The prophets recorded the interchange between God and His people.

2. Foretelling

Sometimes the prophets were given special insight into future events. These insights were divinely inspired and therefore fully true.

Gospels

The four gospels are accounts by four authors concerning the words that Jesus spoke and the things that Jesus did.

Epistles

The epistles are letters written by Christ's apostles to His church. The epistles build on and explain Christ's ministry.

Apocalypse

Revelation—John's vision of the victorious Christ and his subsequent visions of heavenly scenes—remains one of the most contested and controversial books.

There are no special rules for reading Revelation. As we read the portions of Revelation that seem too dramatic or strange to be real, it may be helpful to remember that people would have said the same thing before the plagues of Egypt, the fall of Jericho, and even the resurrection of Christ!

CULTURE

Different Societies Understand Things Differently

KEY THOUGHT

Before one can determine the meaning of a text for today, one must know what the writer intended to convey to his original hearers and readers.⁶

We can't know every nuance of a culture that existed more than two thousand years ago. We need to resist the temptation to force our twenty-first century sensibilities into a text that was written into a culture quite unlike our own. For the current stage of our study, we need to think in "archaeological" ways.

The Primary Point of Access—The Bible Itself

Compare **Hebrews 2:2** with **Acts 7:35** and **Galatians 3:19**.

Our most reliable guide to biblical culture is the Bible. How did the people in the text react to what was said or done? Did any given event come as a shock, or did it appear as if it was simple and normal?

For the message God delivered through angels has always stood firm, and every violation of the law and every act of disobedience was punished. (Hebrews 2:2)

The Secondary Point of Access—Archaeological History

Archaeology and its discoveries do not claim to be divinely inspired, but an overwhelming array of artifacts do support and inform the biblical account.

DISCUSSION: Archaeological Evidence of Biblical Events

Here is a brief survey of the more significant artifacts that make positive connection to the events recorded in the Bible.

- Tel Dan Stele (“House of David”)
- Mesha Stele (2 Kings 3)
- Taylor’s Prism (Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem)
- Babylonian Chronicles (Nebuchadnezzar’s campaign against Judah)
- Cyrus Cylinder of Emancipation (Ezra 1:1–4)
- Qumran Documents (Isaiah and Micah scrolls)
- City of David Excavations

MODULE THREE REVIEW

Having asked the initial question, “What do I see?” we have now followed up with the next methodical question, “What does it mean?” We narrowed the question to, “What did it mean to the original audience?” To help answer that important question, we considered how to deal with words and phrases that need careful explanation, looked at the profound way genre influences our understanding of meaning, and realized how an appreciation of cultural differences can help us avoid imposing a modern-day view into the author’s message before understanding his original intention.

MODULE FOUR PREVIEW

In the next section, we will recognize the Bible as a cohesive document. Even though it is a collection of books written over fifteen-hundred years, it remains a unified whole. The Divine Author has ensured that the accounts, themes, and lessons contained in the Bible supplement and support each other. The Bible correlates perfectly with itself in this regard, and the discernment of such correlation guards us against error. The Bible will not contradict itself when correlated elements are understood correctly.

The discipline of correlation serves as quality control for the claims we make and the truths we assert. In the pulpit, correlation provides assurance that a point “holds water” when related to other Scriptures.

ASSIGNMENT

For the next session, consider your chosen passage (or switch to another if you prefer), and ask yourself where and how the themes and ideas found there can be supplemented, supported, clarified, or modified in other parts of the Bible. This practice is much like doing a crossword puzzle. Just as the words in the puzzle must interconnect, biblical interpretations must fit with the rest of Scripture. What you need to do now is find some answers that help you solve your puzzle!

MODULE THREE INTERPRETATION

What Did It Mean?

Allowing for Language

Are there words that need explanation?

- The Scriptures were kept at the **synagogue** where they were read and studied. The synagogue was the preferred domain of the Pharisees (rather than the temple). Ten adult men were required before a synagogue could be established, so even quite small communities could build one. The word means “assembly” or “gathering.” Synagogue assemblies were not the same as temple worship. No sacrifices were made there; it was just a place of assembly for study and prayer.

- **Scrolls** were written on parchment (sheep or calfskin) stitched together into long rolls like wallpaper. The complete scroll of Isaiah from Qumran is seventeen sheets of parchment stitched together to make a twenty-four-foot document in fifty-four columns. Isaiah 61 occurs in the forty-ninth column of that scroll, about five feet from the left-hand end. (Hebrew reads right-to-left.) Such a location suggests the choice of text was deliberate, being close to—but not at—the very end of the scroll. Jesus *either* chose the reading or chose the day when that reading was due.

Allowing for Genre

What type of writing is this?

Gospel narrative in Luke's hand. Luke was deliberate and careful, using many sources to craft his "orderly account" (Luke 1:1–4 ESV). Luke could have learned of this episode from James or Mary, who would have been almost certainly present at the time, as this was Jesus' hometown debut.

Allowing for Culture

What customs and politics need to be considered?

- This was a chosen moment, not a random (walking-in-the-fields) event. The audience was specific—they knew Jesus as one of their own.
- This was a Jewish-oriented event. The setting of the synagogue on a Sabbath suggests the entire Jewish community would have been focused on God and His works. Nazareth was a small town, so most of the village would have been in attendance.
- The Jews were under Rome's thumb and longed for God to free them from Rome's oppression and reestablish them as His favored children. They were looking for the long-awaited Messiah. Isaiah chapters 60–62 particularly feature the prophet's anticipation of Israel's glory once her Anointed King comes.

Summary

On that Sabbath day, Christ purposefully orchestrated the announcement of His ministry. He was Israel's promised Messiah-King, come to open their eyes to the truth and restore God's favor to the Jews.