

# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH

*A SURVEY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION BASED ON THE BOOK BY GORDON D. FEE & DOUGLAS STUART<sup>i</sup>*

## CLASS GOALS

- Understand why biblical interpretation is necessary
- Explore different types of Bible translations
- Identify key literary genres of the Bible
- Describe key elements of the historical context of each of the major biblical literary genres
- Learn how to approach the literary context of each of the major biblical literary genres
- Encounter both good and bad examples of biblical interpretation in each major literary genre

## CLASS OUTLINE

June 4 – The Need to Interpret, Bible Translations, Old Testament Narrative  
June 11 – The Law, Psalms, Wisdom, Prophecy  
June 18 – Gospels, Parables, Epistles  
June 25 – Revelation, Evaluation and Use of Commentaries

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“For more than a century, Protestant theology has been in conflict about the Bible. The first storm center was inspiration and its corollary, inerrancy. Eighty years ago, the debate shifted to revelation, the method and content of God’s communication through allegedly fallible Scriptures. Interpretation is now the central interest, and the subjectivism which yesterday concluded that the Bible is neither true nor trustworthy today interprets it on the basis that its message to us is neither consistent nor clear.” – J. I. Packer<sup>ii</sup>

**What are some of the ways in which Packer says people have questioned the Bible?**

**Why might this pattern of questioning the authority of Scripture exist?**

## A. THE NEED TO INTERPRET

### 1. Protests and Inevitability

*Every so often we meet someone who says with great feeling, “You don’t have to interpret the Bible; just read it and do what it says.” Usually, such a remark reflects the layperson’s protest against the “professional” scholar, pastor, teacher, or Sunday school teacher, who, by “interpreting,” seems to be taking the Bible away from the common man or woman. It is their way of saying that the Bible is not an obscure book. “After all,” it is argued, “any person with half a brain can read it and understand it. The problem with too many preachers and teachers is that they dig around so much they tend to muddy the waters. What was clear to us when we read it isn’t so anymore.” There is a lot of truth in that protest...*

*We are also agreed that the preacher or teacher is all too often prone to dig first and look later, and thereby to cover up the plain meaning of the text, which often lies on the surface. Let it be said at the outset—and repeated throughout, that the aim of good interpretation is not in uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has seen before...*

*The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the “plain meaning of the text.” (13-14)*

**Who is qualified to read and interpret the Bible?**

**What are some ways various people who read the Bible are different from each other?**

**What is the goal of good interpretation?**

**Does the plain meaning of the text depend on the reader?**

## 2. The Dual Nature of Scripture

*A more significant reason for the need to interpret lies in the nature of Scripture itself. Historically the church has understood the nature of Scripture much the same as it has understood the person of Christ—the Bible is at the same time both human and divine. As Professor George Ladd once put it: “The Bible is the Word of God given in the words of [people] in history.” It is this dual nature of the Bible that demands of us the task of interpretation... Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the “tension” that exists between its eternal relevance and its historical particularity. (17)*

## 3. Historical Particularity: the Need for Exegesis

*Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. This is basically a historical task. It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was the original intent of the words of the Bible. (19)*

**What is exegesis?**

*The historical context, which will differ from book to book, has to do with several things: the time and culture of the author and his readers, that is, the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author’s setting; and the occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. All such matters are especially important for understanding...*

*The more important question of historical context, however, has to do with the occasion and purpose of each biblical book and/or of its various parts. Here one wants to have an idea of what was going on in Israel or the church that called forth such a document, or what the situation of the author was that caused him to write. (22-23)*

**Can you think of an example from Scripture where the geographical, topographical or political factors that are relevant to the author’s setting provide important information about how to understand the passage? Where do we go to find information like this?**

**If the even more important question has to do with the occasion and purpose of the author’s writing, where can we go to find that information?**

*[The literary context] is what most people mean when they talk about reading something in context. Indeed this is the crucial task in exegesis, and fortunately it is something one can do well without necessarily having to consult the “experts.” Essentially, literary context means that words only have meaning in sentences, and for the most part, biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. (23)*

**Examples of literary context questions: What is the “therefore” there for?**

4. Eternal Relevance: the Need for Hermeneutics

*Although the word “hermeneutics” ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts. In this book, we will use it exclusively in this way, to ask the questions about the Bible’s meaning in the “here and now.” ...*

*The reason one must not begin with the here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text...*

*On this one thing ... there must surely be agreement. A text cannot mean what it never meant. Or, to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken. This is the starting point. How we work it out from that point is what this book is basically all about. (25-26)*

**When the author says, “A text cannot mean what it never meant,” what is an example of this kind of error?**

**What is hermeneutics in the context of this book/class?**

5. Disagreement and the Problem of Metaphor

[Excerpt from Sproul, “Knowing Scripture,” p. 59ff]

## B. BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

1. See Nick’s recent sermon on Bible translations.
2. The authors of this book recommend using several Bible translations with an understanding of where they fall on the spectrum between literal translation, dynamic equivalence translation and free translation.

**Are there any burning questions on Bible translations at this point which I can answer quickly before we move on?**

## C. OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

### 1. The Nature of Narratives

*Narratives are stories...*

*Bible narratives tell us about things that happened—but not just any things. Their purpose is to show God at work in his creation and among his people. The narratives glorify him, and give us a picture of his providence and protection. At the same time, they also provide illustrations of many other lessons important to our lives...*

*It will help you as you read and study the Old Testament narratives to realize that the story is being told, in effect, on three levels. The top level is that of the whole universal plan of God worked out through his creation. Key aspects of the plot at this top level are the initial creation itself; the fall of humanity; the power and ubiquity of sin; the need for redemption; and Christ's incarnation and sacrifice. This top level is often referred to as the "story of redemption" or "redemptive history."*

*Key aspects of the middle level center on Israel: the call of Abraham; the establishment of an Abrahamic lineage through the patriarchs; the enslaving of Israel in Egypt; God's deliverance from bondage and the conquest of the promised land of Canaan; Israel's frequent sins and increasing disloyalty; God's patient protection and pleading with them; the ultimate destruction of northern Israel and then of Judah; and the restoration of the holy people after the Exile.*

*Then there is the bottom level. Here are found all the hundreds of individual narratives that make up the other two levels: the narrative of how Joseph's brothers sell him to Arab caravaneers heading for Egypt; the narrative of Gideon's doubting God and testing him via the fleece; the narrative of David's adultery with Bathsheba; et al. (78-80)*

**What principles of exegesis do we see being used in this teaching on Old Testament narrative?**

### 2. 10 Principles for Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

- i. *An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.*
- ii. *An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.*
- iii. *Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.*
- iv. *What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.*
- v. *Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect and their actions are too.*
- vi. *We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge that on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in the Scripture.*
- vii. *All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given... What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.*

- viii. *Narratives are not written to answer all out theological questions. That have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere, in other ways.*
- ix. *Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without saying it).*
- x. *In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.*

**What unfortunate interpretations of Old Testament narrative have you heard that were based on a misunderstanding of one or more of these principles?**

3. Example of Narrative Interpretation: Joseph

*[Excerpts from pages 84-86]*

**What special insights stood out to you?**

4. Special Case: Genesis One

*[Excerpts from The Lost World of Genesis One, pages 38-46]<sup>iii</sup>*

**Does this interpretation of the Hebrew verb *bārā'* follow good exegetical practice? Give examples.**

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<sup>i</sup> Fee, Gordon D., and Stuart, Douglas. "How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth," 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Zondervan, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> Packer, J. I. "Foreword" from Sproul, R. C. "Knowing Scripture," 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. InterVarsity Press, 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> Walton, John H. "The Lost World of Genesis One." InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009.