

Special Section: Understanding Scripture

Seven Keys To Understanding Scripture

Following these simple guidelines can help you better grasp what God's Word is saying.

By Tremper Longman III

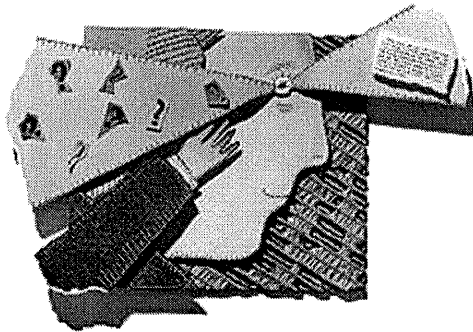


Illustration by Franklin Hammond

Everyone who reads the Bible interprets the text. Unfortunately, however, the Bible is not always easy to understand. Even when the text seems straightforward, we may feel uncertain that our interpretation is right. All of us want to treat the Word of God with the respect it deserves, and we certainly don't want to read into it things that are not there. For these reasons, we need to apply the basic principles of hermeneutics—the science of interpretation—as we read the text.

Many believers already apply these principles just by using common sense. Indeed, they are simply principles of good reading. Though the Bible is a unique book in many ways, many of the rules for interpreting the Bible are rules for interpreting any book.

The goal of our Bible reading and study is to find out what it means. These seven principles can help us understand what God is saying to us through Scripture.

Principle 1

Look for the author's intended meaning.

Notice that this principle acknowledges that there is a meaning to the text! In an age of relativism, this point is important. Many nonChristian interpreters of the Bible suggest that the Bible has no set meaning, and we may read into it whatever we want. On the contrary, we must realize that when we interpret the Bible we are looking for the author's original meaning, not imposing our own meaning on a text. When the reader's interpretation conflicts with the author's, then the reader is wrong.

Each biblical passage has a set meaning intended by its author. The interpreter's task is to discover that meaning. This principle seems clear enough, but we must come to grips with a couple of issues.

First, who is the author and how do we uncover his intention? This question is more complex than it might first appear. Even when we know the name of the human author (Moses, Paul, etc.), we have no independent access to him. We can't ask Paul whether he was describing Christians or nonChristians in Romans 7:21–25. We can only answer such questions by placing ourselves in the time period when the authors first wrote and asking what they meant to tell us (see Principle 4).

A second issue has to do with the unique character of the Bible as the Word of God. As 2 Peter 1:21 states, "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." God is the ultimate Author of the Bible, and this important truth has implications for how we understand it.

Let's look at an example, Hosea 11:1:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

Who is the author of this passage? According to the first verse of Hosea it is the prophet by that name. But how can we know what his intention is in the passage? First, we know approximately when he lived. We also have the broader context of the whole book (see Principle 2), which gives us a fuller idea of what Hosea intended to say in this one verse. When we study his text in the context of his entire book, we find that Hosea is referring to the Exodus described in the book of Exodus.

But later we may be reading Matthew 2 and come across Matthew 2:15. Here the writer applies Hosea 11:1 to Jesus as a youth returning to Judea from Egypt. This reference does not seem in keeping with the intention of Hosea. It is here we must remember where the meaning of a text ultimately resides—in the intention of its Author, God Himself. And as we read the Scripture in the context of the Bible as a whole, we see that He has made an analogy between Israel, God's son, being freed from Egypt, and Jesus, God's Son, coming up from Egypt, a pattern that runs throughout Matthew's gospel.

Principle 2

Read a passage in context.

With the Bible, as with all good literature, we must get a grasp of the whole in order to appreciate and understand the parts. This principle doesn't stop us from turning to the middle of the book of Romans to read a section on sin, but we should only do so with an understanding of where Paul's teaching on sin fits in with the message of the whole book.

When we do read little bits and pieces of Scripture, we must exercise great caution. Imagine reading Paul's words in 1 Cor. 7:27: "Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife." Without taking into account the context, especially Paul's advice in 1 Cor. 7:9, we might conclude that the Bible commands celibacy.

Context is an ever-expanding concept when applied to a passage of Scripture. For example, take Genesis 50:20, where Joseph says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." If we look at the immediate context, we will see that he is speaking to his brothers right after his father died. To understand what he is referring to we need to read the entire Joseph story (Genesis 37:1–50:26). Here we see that his brothers tried to get rid of him by selling him to Midianite traders, who took him to Egypt. We also observe how God used their evil actions to place him in a position of power from which he could save his family.

But even further, we have to read Genesis 50:20 in the light of the whole book of Genesis. Genesis describes the promise that God gave Abraham about numerous descendants and land. Joseph's statement at the end of the book shows his awareness that God is overruling the evil of his brother's intentions in order to preserve the family line and fulfill His promise to Abraham.

And we are still not done. The ultimate context of any Bible passage is the whole Bible. As we read the Bible we see many parallels to Joseph's statement, but none so vivid as the words of Peter as he describes Jesus' death. In Acts 2:22–24 Peter says that Jesus was killed by men who only intended to kill him, but God used those very actions to save many from their sins.

How do we learn to read in context? Avoid only reading little snippets of Scripture. Read whole books. If you can sit down for two or three hours to read a novel, try the same with Isaiah or Acts. Whenever you do read a short passage, do it with an outline of the whole book in your mind or with the help of a good commentary.

Of course, the exact nature of the context may differ from biblical book to biblical book. The context of the historical books is provided by the flow of events of the story; in the letters, one idea comes from another. Proverbs 10–31 has a looser context as one pithy proverb—on laziness, for example—is followed by two on the tongue and then another on laziness. Still, in all books we should have a sense of the whole book as we study any part of it. Ask yourself, how does this passage fit into the message of the whole book, even the whole Bible?

Your ability to read the Scriptures in their ever-expanding context will increase the more you spend time reading God's Word.

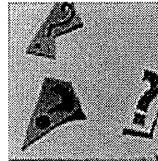


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Principle 3

Identify the genre of the passage you are reading.

One evening I opened a new book and was jarred by this opening sentence: “As Gregor Samsa awoke from an uneasy sleep, he found himself transformed into a gigantic insect.” It was a striking sentence, but it didn't shake me. The book was *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, a fictional story in which human beings can turn into bugs without raising the reader's disbelief.

The Bible is a literal cornucopia of literary types. As we read from Genesis to Revelation we encounter history, poetry, prophecy, proverb, gospel, parable, epistles, and apocalypse. Knowing the type, or genre, of literature you are reading is essential to understanding it. Different genres evoke different expectations and interpretive strategies.

Let's take as a classic example a book of the Bible that has been misinterpreted because its genre was misidentified. For a long time, the Song of Songs was interpreted as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church. When early interpreter Cyril of Alexandria read Song 1:13, “My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts,” he thought the two breasts represented the Old and New Testaments. The sachet was Christ, who spanned both!

Most people today recognize that the Song is a love poem. Its primary message concerns the intimacy of human love. Of course, since human love reflects Christ's love for the Church (Ephes. 5:22–32), the older interpreters were not entirely wrong. But they did miss the most

obvious meaning of the text.

A very helpful handbook for recognizing the different genres is *The Bible Study Tool Kit (IVP)*. On a more advanced level, try *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible (Zondervan)*. *Old Testament Introduction (Zondervan)* by T. Longman III and R. B. Dillard discusses the genre and style of each book in the Old Testament.

Principle 4

Consider the historical and cultural background of the Bible.

The Bible was written in a time far distant from ours, and in cultures quite strange to us. So as we try to discover the author's meaning, we must learn to read his writing as one of his contemporaries would. We must transport ourselves by means of our informed imagination back to the time of Moses, David, Solomon, or Paul.

But how do we do this? For most Bible readers, it means turning to commentaries and other helps. These books can give us insight into the cultural and historical backgrounds to the biblical books.

For instance, the Bible often depicts the Lord as riding a cloud (Psalm 18:7–15; Psalm 68:4; Psalm 104:3; Nahum 1:3). We might learn from a commentary that Israel's neighbors frequently pictured the god Baal riding a cloud chariot into battle. As we place the biblical image in the light of the ancient Near East, we realize that God's cloud is a chariot that He rides into war. When we turn to the New Testament and see that Jesus also is a cloud rider (Matthew 24:30; Rev. 1:7), we understand that this is not a white, fluffy cloud but a storm cloud that He rides into judgment. Furthermore, we now sense that the use of the image was an appeal to those Israelites who worshipped the wrong god, Baal, to come back and worship the true cloud rider, the Lord.

But what about a passage like Psalm 23? Can't we understand the imagery of a shepherd without recourse to the ancient world? We know what a shepherd does. He protects, guides, and takes care of his sheep.

The answer is yes, and no. Shepherds in biblical times acted like shepherds in modern times in all these ways. However, unless we are aware of the use of the shepherd image in the ancient Near East we will miss an important aspect of the psalm. The great kings of the Near East often referred to themselves as the "shepherds" of their people. Thus, as we read Psalm 23 in the light of its ancient background, we recover an important teaching of Psalm 23: the Lord is a royal shepherd.

Principle 5

Consider the grammar and structure within the passage.

In a word, we must read our passage closely in all its detail.

Look for things like connectors, verb tenses, and modifiers to nouns. Connectors (words like *but*, *and*, *therefore*), for instance, help give the reader the logical connection between words. Remember, though, that the meaning of the Bible is not in the isolated words but in the context, namely, in sentences.

Let's look at the conjunctions, tense, adjectives, and other indications of the relationship between words and clauses in Psalm 131.

Our example comes from a poem that has a special kind of structural feature, parallelism, in which the clauses echo each other. The first clause makes a statement, which is then expanded upon in the following related clauses. When reading a poem, reflect on how the parallelism contributes to the meaning of the psalm.

The parallel structure (both in the meaning of the words and the grammar) links the first three clauses of verse one together:

My heart is not proud, O LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.

Careful attention to the structural relationship between the three clauses shows that David distances himself from pride in three distinct areas: his core personality (heart), his external demeanor (eyes), and his actions.

The “but” that begins the second verse draws a strong contrast between the pride described in the first verse and the attitude expressed in the second.

But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

The English translation of the Hebrew verbs (“have stilled” and “have quieted”) indicate that his confidence is rooted in the past and continues in the present.

He then illustrates his present disposition by using the word *like*. Note that David does not use a generic term for *child*, but the word for a weaned child. When we reflect on the word choice, we may realize that a weaned child, one that does not need its mother’s milk, is especially calm in its mother’s lap. It is not grasping for the source of its sustenance, but resting quietly in its mother’s arms.

The final verse of the psalm uses imperatives in order to drive home the application of the truths presented in the first two verses:

O Israel, put your hope in the LORD
both now and forevermore.

Most Bible readers do not have access to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament or the Greek of the New Testament. Serious grammatical and syntactical study must be based on the original languages. For that reason, it is helpful to have a copy of a very literal translation like the NASB around for serious study. Indeed, the best way to get a feel for the original text is to compare a number of different translations. A good commentary based on the Hebrew or Greek text is invaluable for insight into the grammatical and structural relationships.

Principle 6

Interpret experience in the light of Scripture, not Scripture in the light of experience.

All too often, we distort Scripture by allowing our experience to shape our understanding of Scripture rather than the other way around.

One way we let experience dictate our interpretation is by imposing our desires upon it. Many believers find a passage out of context to support their desire, ignore the rest of the Bible’s teaching (thus violating Principle 7), and argue that their desire is the same as biblical truth.

For instance, if sharing my faith made me uncomfortable, I might build an excuse for not doing evangelism around scriptures about God’s love. I could quote 1 Cor. 13 and a host of other passages to show that God and love are nearly synonymous. Then I might reason: “If God is love, how could He condemn anybody?” In this way, I would be “off the hook” for telling

people about Jesus despite all the clear teaching about sin, judgment, and hell.

Another way that experience can warp our interpretation of Scripture is through our cultural makeup. We can unconsciously make the Bible a Western, even American, text as we read into it the values that come naturally to us due to our upbringing. Capitalism is nowhere taught as such in Scripture; socialism isn't either. But American right-wing Christians and Latin American proponents of liberation theology both will use the Bible to promote their agendas. The antidote to such lopsided readings is to point to biblical passages that undermine both capitalism and socialism in the Bible. Our experience of capitalism as good and socialism as bad should not compute into considering the former biblical and the latter unbiblical.

Perhaps one of the most hotly debated issues in evangelical circles today is whether the gifts of the Spirit such as prophecy and tongues continue today. Arguments on both sides of this debate often appeal to experience over biblical teaching. If someone speaks in tongues, then he will be predisposed to believe the Bible justifies the experience. On the other hand, if someone else observes that these gifts add chaos to worship, then he might be more likely to find evidence to refute their practice.

Principle 7

Always seek the full counsel of Scripture.

We should never read Scripture in isolation from the whole Bible. While many human authors contributed to the Bible, God is the Ultimate Author of the whole. While the Bible is an anthology of many books, it is also One Book. While it has many stories to tell, they all contribute to a Single Story.

This principle has many important implications. First, we should never base doctrine or moral teaching of Scripture on an obscure passage. The most important ideas in the Bible are stated more than once. When a text teaches something obscure or difficult and we can find no other passage to support it, we must not attach too much significance to it.

Second, if one passage *seems* to teach something, but another passage clearly teaches something else, we must understand the former in terms of the latter. That is, we must determine the meaning of the unclear verse by examining the clear teaching of Scripture.

Last year I was asked to debate a popular radio teacher on the subject of Christ's return. The teacher had just published a lengthy book arguing that Jesus was going to come again in 1994.

The debate never would have happened if he and his supporters had simply applied this principle. You see, they had all kinds of convoluted mathematical arguments based on obscure interpretations of Scripture that led them to believe that Christ would return in 1994. But the clear teaching of Scripture refutes the teacher's arguments. Take a look at Mark 13:32: "No one knows about that day or hour." Just reading that clear verse should have stopped all the stretching and manipulating of passages to reach a conclusion.

In order to grasp the full counsel of Scripture, we need to study the themes and analogies that stretch from Genesis to Revelation. Then, when we read any one passage, we will be able to understand its place in the unfolding history of salvation.

This principle is particularly important as we read the Old Testament. After all, Jesus Himself told us that the whole Old Testament, not just a handful of messianic prophecies, looks forward to His coming (Luke 24:25–27; Luke 24:44).

Take as an example Matthew 4:1–11, which describes Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. If we keep the whole of Scripture in mind as we read, we may pick up signals when we read that Jesus, the Son of God, spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. This reference may remind us of the Israelites' 40-year trek in the wilderness. But the comparison goes beyond the number

40. The Israelites also were tempted in the wilderness in the same three areas in which Jesus was tempted: (1) hunger and thirst, (2) testing God, and (3) worshiping false gods. Jesus, however, shows Himself to be the obedient Son of God where the Israelites were disobedient. Indeed, Jesus responded to the temptations by quoting Deuteronomy, the sermon that Moses gave the Israelites at the end of their 40-year sojourn.

Reading Scripture in the light of the whole message, the whole counsel of God not only prevents erroneous interpretations, it gives us deeper insight into the Word of God.

Conclusion

It is impossible to approach the Bible in a completely objective way. We all come to the Bible with questions, issues, troubles, and joys. Each of us also approaches the Bible from different cultural and social experiences. This truth contains great benefit and danger.

The benefit is that the Bible is relevant for every life. The danger, of course, is that we will warp God's Word in a way that it was never intended to be read.

There are three ways to avoid the danger while maximizing the benefits. The first is to follow the seven principles for understanding Scripture. These can keep you from reading your own thoughts into the Bible and help you discover the intention of the Author himself.

The second is to read the Bible in community. That is, don't be a lone ranger in your Bible interpretation. Talk to others about what the Bible means to them and be open to their reading of the text. Read books by Christians from other walks of life and different cultural backgrounds.

Finally, bathe your Scripture reading in prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the truth found in the Word. Without the Spirit we cannot understand God's Word (2 Cor. 2:6–16).

Understanding Scripture does not have to be a daunting task. After all, the God who gave us His Word longs for us to understand it even more than we do.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: What's Wrong With This Interpretation?*



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TREMPER LONGMAN III is a professor and chair of the Old Testament department at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He has written *God Is a Warrior* (Zondervan) with Dan Reid, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Zondervan) with Raymond Dillard, and *Cry of the Soul* (NavPress) with Dan Allender. He attends New Life Presbyterian Church.

Tremper wrote this article because he believes, “It is vitally important that Christians renew their interest in the Bible and biblical interpretation. God speaks to us through His Word, and we must cultivate correct principles of interpretation that let us read what is written for us, not what we want to hear.”