Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1: Introducing the Bible

1. The Aim of this Series

- To help us understand the Bible better…
- …so that we enjoy reading the Bible more…
- …and reading more of the Bible.

2. The Literature of the Bible

The Bible is a collection of 66 books (39 OT and 27 NT). These were written by at least 36 human authors over a period of about 1500 years (1400 BC to AD 100). The OT was written almost entirely in Hebrew (there are a few short passages in Aramaic), and the NT was written in Greek. The 66 books of the Bible are written in different styles:

- *Historical narrative* These tell the story about creation, the history of Israel, the life of Jesus and the some of the events in the spread of the Gospel.
- *Legal codes* Much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are legal codes that governed the religious and social life of Israel.
- *Prophecy* The prophets spoke to Israel about present circumstances and behaviour and what God would do in the future. Prophecy is often poetic.
- *Parable* Jesus used parables, but parables are also found in Wisdom literature and the Prophets. Parables may be entertaining stories but are often understood only by those who want to understand them.
- *Psalms* The psalms are songs and are written in a special poetical style.
- *Wisdom literature* Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are wisdom literature. They are often written in short (aphoristic) sentences which are designed to make us think carefully about what God requires of us.
- *Letters* There are 21 letters in the NT. They are real letters, from real people to real people, addressing real issues in the lives of individuals and churches.

Each type of literature needs to be understood in its own terms. We don't read a poem the same way that we read a newspaper sports report; nor should we read Parables as Historical narrative, or Wisdom literature as Letters.

3. The Bible is Like and Unlike Other Books

The Bible is like other books in that:

- it was written by men; it is human literature. So it takes the colour of its authors, i.e. it reflects their temperaments, interests, abilities, education, etc.
- it should be read for what it clearly means. We don't usually look for "hidden" or allegorical meanings in the Bible. There are no hidden codes in the Bible.

But the Bible is unlike other books, because:

- it has a divine author: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16);
- we take a special and personal interest in it: "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97). "…the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

4. Three Perspectives on the Bible

The writing of the biblical texts is far removed from us by time and culture. We ought to be sensitive to this whenever we read the Bible. It will help us to be aware of three perspectives and the Bible.

The world behind the text

This is the world of the author of the text: his culture and customs; the issues he faced and his reasons for writing. History, geography, sociology and theology all throw light on the text. Even a basic knowledge of the rise and fall of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon in the 8th to the 6th centuries BC helps us understand the writings of the Minor Prophets.

The world within the text

This is what the text actually says. What is the literary form of the text? (E.g. is *Jonah* an historical narrative or a parable? Is *Hebrews* a letter or a written sermon?) What vocabulary is used? How is the text arranged into phrases, sentences and paragraphs? (E.g. sometimes the arrangement of a Psalm is part of its meaning.) We need to understand the text in its own right.

The world before the text

How was the text understood by those who first read it? How has it been understood throughout the centuries? How am I to understand it today? In other words, what is the application of the text?

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1, The World Behind the Text

The Shepherd and his Sheep

Over the next several studies we are going to use Psalm 23 as the vehicle for addressing some aspects of the "world behind the text".

1. Watch out for your own baggage

Psalm 23 is not difficult to understand. As soon as we read the first line ("The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.") we know that the main thought of the psalm is the care of the shepherd for his sheep.

But we need to be aware that our picture of the shepherd and his sheep is not exactly the same as the psalmist's:

- David's sheep were exposed to much more danger than sheep on our hillsides, e.g. wolves, lions, bears, thieves and raiding bands.
- The shepherd was constantly out on the hillside with the sheep, exposed to heat, cold and danger.
- The shepherd led his sheep rather than driving them.

This is all well-known. But the point is that we must not jump to conclusions about what the Bible is saying, based on our own experience.

Commentaries and Bible dictionaries can provide useful background information.

Other examples:

- Kingship in the Old Testament is not to be equated with the British constitutional monarchy.
- Women in the first century Greek and Jewish worlds did not occupy the same space in society as they do in 21st century UK.
- Slavery in the Old Testament and New Testament cannot be equated with the slavery of Africans in the 18-19th centuries.

2. Watch out for selectivity

When we read Psalm 23 we automatically reduce the role of the shepherd to the care of his sheep. But what about the utility of the sheep – their wool, milk and meat? A shepherd cares for his sheep not out of the goodness of his heart, but because they will feed and clothe his family. Should this fact play a role in the interpretation of Psalm 23?

Cleary not! In interpreting Psalm 23 we are right to select the picture of the care of the shepherd for his sheep AND to de-select the picture of the utility of the sheep

to the shepherd. The latter was not David's point, and so plays no role in understanding the psalm.

Other examples:

- The parable of the steward (Luke 16:1-13) highlights his shrewdness in preparing for his future, not his abuse of his master's property.
- Paul uses the word "dogs" in Phil. 3:2 because Jews regarded dogs as ritually unclean; no other characteristics of dogs are significant.

3. Watch out for contrast as well as comparison

When David says, "The LORD is my shepherd," he is making a comparison ("the LORD is *like* a shepherd in the way that he cares for me") but he is also implying a contrast ("the LORD is not like the other so-called 'shepherds' in Israel").

The leading men in Israel were regarded as the shepherds of the people. But men are fallible and sinful, full of mixed motives and selfish ambition. The prophets often chastised the princes for their cruel treatment of the people (Jer. 23:1-4). Even David was reprimanded for this sin (2 Samuel 12).

So when David says, "The LORD is my shepherd," there is contrast as well as comparison in his words.

Other examples:

- Paul compares his behaviour towards the new believers in Thessalonica to that of a mother and a father (1 Thessalonians 2:7-12). But sadly some human parents are abusive. It is helpful to be aware of this contrast as well as the comparison.
- The meaning of Jesus' words "I will make you fishers of men" is seen to be richer when we allow for contrast as well as comparison.

4. Watch out for idealization

Idealization takes a fallible object and strips it of its failings so that it is presented in its perfect, ideal form. For example, a shepherd is fallible (e.g. liable to lose his sheep, fail to find them pasture and water, etc.). But what would a shepherd be like who never failed? That's the question Psalm 23 answers – the infallible shepherd always provides rest, refreshment, safety and comfort; and the LORD is just such a shepherd. He is the ideal.

Other examples:

- The OT regularly represents the Davidic king as the ideal king. But all the Davidic kings were human and therefore failed. The ideal points to Jesus.
- The OT presents Jerusalem as the ideal city. But Jerusalem was filled with violence and pagan worship. The ideal points to God's redeemed community.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1, The World Behind the Text

Pastures, Streams and Valleys – Geography and Climate

1. Geography

Psalm 23 makes mention of some of the geographical features of Israel:

- "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."
- "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

There are green pastures, quiet waters and deep valleys. In a dry land, the good shepherd was familiar with where he could find the "ever flowing streams".

Other geographical feature of Israel include:

- the Jordan river valley which is a broad plain at its southern end full of thickets in which Asiatic lions once roamed. The southern region of the plain is called the Arabah and is a hot, desolate place. Some important events took place at the fords of the Jordan;
- the mountain ridge that runs North-South through the land. Rain fall on the mountains fed rivers that flowed through valleys running east to west; these made east-west travel easier than north-south;
- the fertile plains to the west of the mountains, which are fed by rivers that flow east to west; the plains were places of major conflict (e.g. Meggido);
- the coastal plain (occupied by the Philistines and the peoples of Tyre and Sidon – the Israelites were not a seafaring people);
- the southern desert, called the Negev. Wadis (deep gorges which are dry throughout most of the year, but which become raging torrents when it rains) are found in the Negev;

The Old Testament makes mention of all of these.

In addition, Israel was in the middle of the "Fertile Crescent" which ran from Babylonia, through Mesopotamia and down to Egypt. This region was fed by the rivers Euphrates (called the Great River in the Bible) and Tigris, and the Nile. Asia and North Africa are hot regions, but the rivers made civilization possible. With Israel in the middle, she was subject to empires in the north (Assyria and Babylonia) and the south (Egypt).

When we look at a map, Babylon is east of Israel. But invasion across the eastern desert was impossible; the Babylonians followed the Fertile Crescent and invaded from the north.

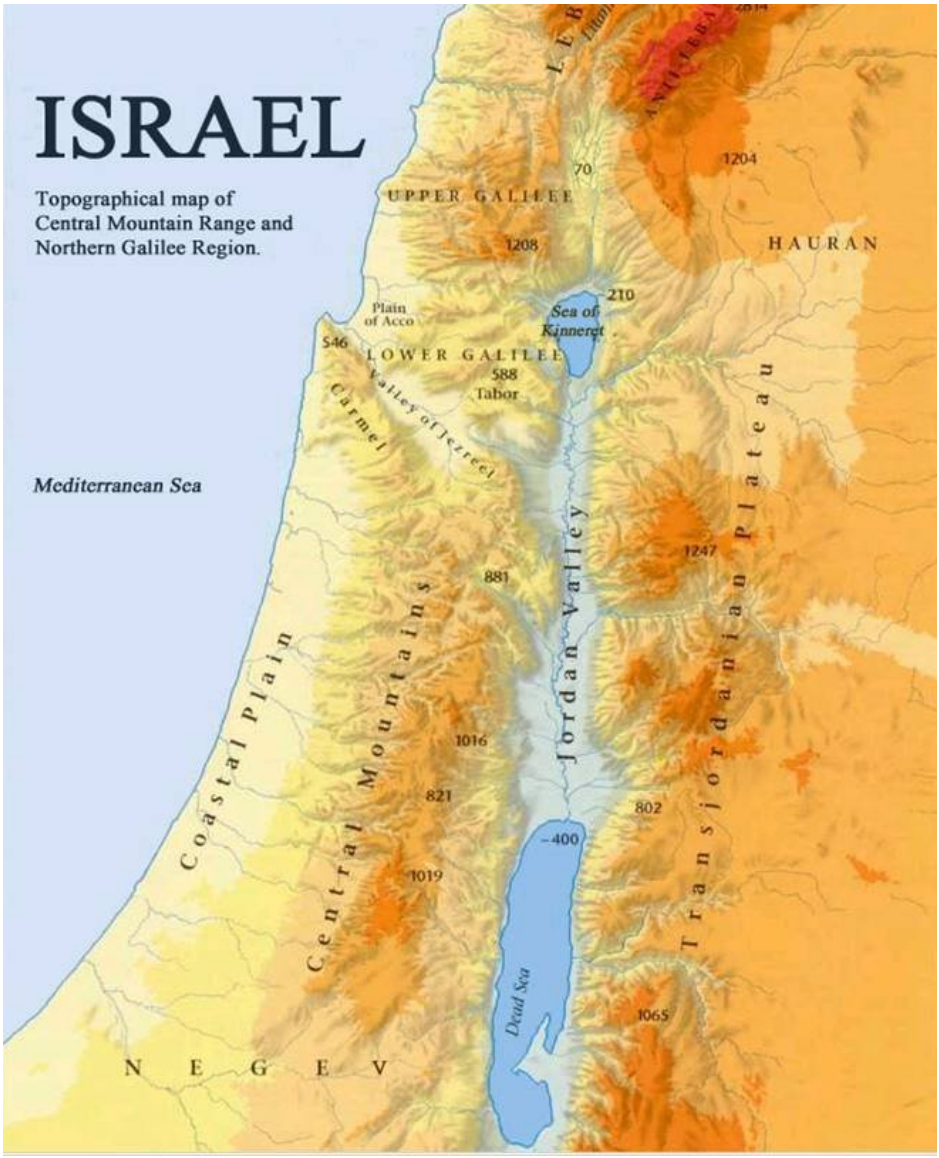
2. Climate

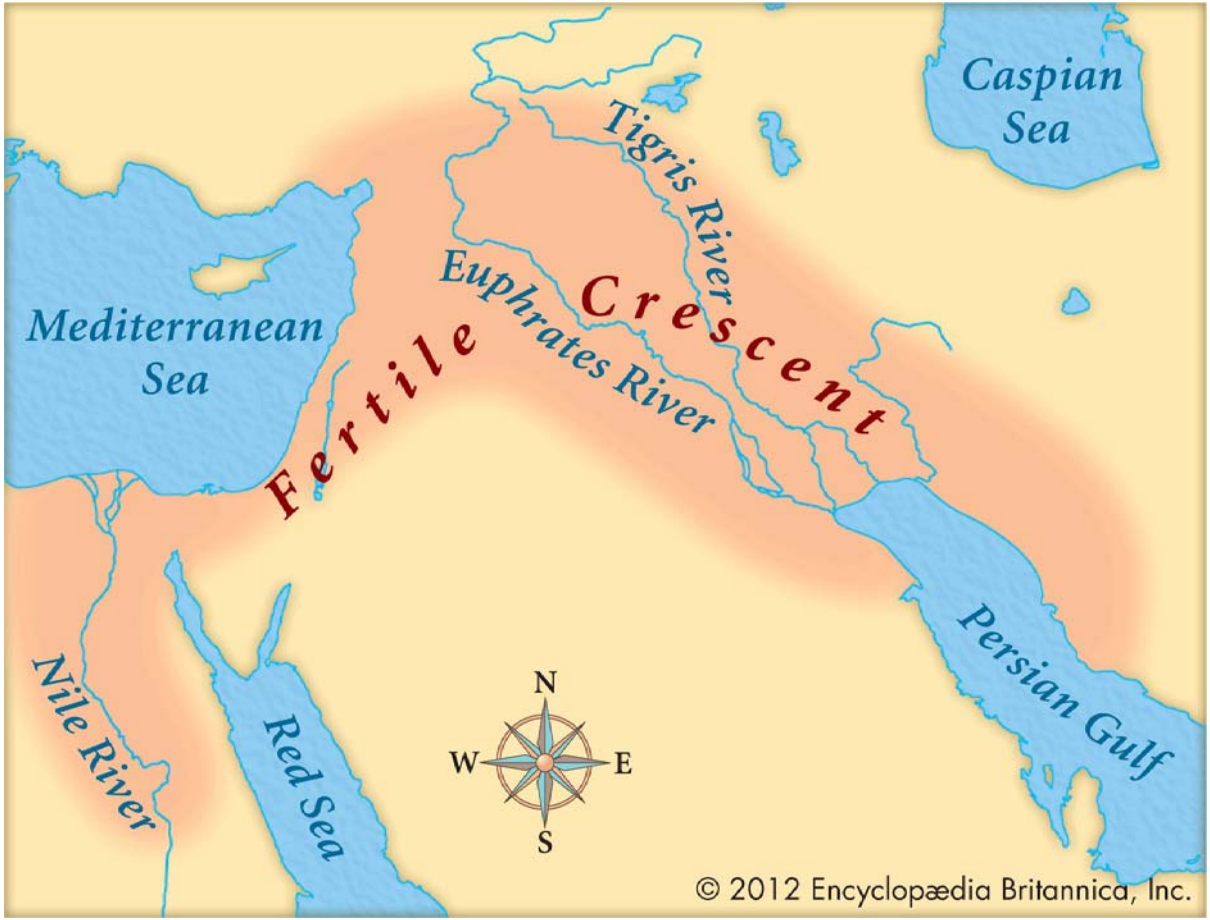
The climate of Palestine was (and is) hot: 45-48 Celsius in the Jordan Valley in the Summer, and 35-38 Celsius on the coast.

Annual rainfall is less than 8 inches. However, there are great variations. Rainfall decreases north to south and west to east. Mount Hermon in the north-west gets 50-70 inches per annum; the Negev in the south-east only 2-4 inches. Rain comes mostly as torrential downpours during the Winter. These generally run off the dry, hardened land; water conservation is difficult. Most rivers run only 30 days per year; the Jordan is an exception. But there are many springs.

Dew was crucial for agriculture, especially in Spring and Summer (latter rains); it is heaviest in August/September (early rains). Remember Elijah's prophecy about withholding dew as well as rain!

Judaea was richly cultivated, fertile and forested. The Jews boasted of the richness of their crops. Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient world. Rome could not have survived without the Egyptian grain ships that supplied her population.


ISRAEL
Topographical map of
Central Mountain Range and
Northern Galilee Region.
Mediterranean Sea
UPPER GALILEE
LOWER GALILEE
HAURAN
Plain
of Acco
Sea of
Kinneret
Tabor
Carmel
Valley of Jezreel
Coastal Plain
Central Mountains
Jordan Valley
Transjordanian Plateau
Dead Sea
N E G E V
70
1204
1208
210
546
588
1247
881
1016
821
802
-400
1019
1065


Caspian Sea
Tigris River
Euphrates River
Fertile Crescent
Mediterranean Sea
Persian Gulf
Nile River
Red Sea
N
W
E
S
© 2012 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1, The World Behind the Text

Belief Systems – The LORD is my shepherd

1. Three Different expressions of belief

Background

"The *LORD* is my shepherd." The name of God was first fleshed out in the Exodus event. By his name God says to the Hebrew people, "I have been with you all along. Even when you thought I was not here, when life hurt and you doubted my presence, I was still with you. How could I not be with you? I myself came down to Egypt with your fathers. And I promised them that I would bring you up again into your own land." That's what I AM meant to the children of Israel – I AM present with you to keep my promise, to liberate and to bless. Everything God did for his people was bound up in his name. "The LORD" is used more than 6,000 times in the OT. In a sense, the OT is an exposition of what "the LORD" means.

Emphasis

What does the passage emphasise? In this case it is the presence of God with his people – a shepherd was with his sheep 24/7.

Amplification

Truth may be expressed in a new way that amplifies what is stated. For example, the full doctrine of the resurrection and eternal life is not revealed until the NT. But in Psalm 23 David's expressions of confidence in God shed some new light on what happens to God's people after physical death:

- "I will dwell in *the house of the LORD* for ever." David could not actually dwell in the Tabernacle; no one could.
- "I will dwell in the house of the LORD *for ever*." David could not live for ever.

So there appears to be a development here: something that points forward to live beyond the grave.

2. Tracing out beliefs

Sometimes it is difficult to the system of belief that lies behind or is expressed in a particular passage of Scripture. For example:

- In Ecclesiastes what do the expressions “meaningless, meaningless” and “vanity of vanities” mean? There is a tension in Ecclesiastes between life lived in terms of the transitory gains of this world, and life lived in the light of heaven.
- The book of Esther does not mention God at all. Should it be in the Bible? Yet throughout the events recorded in the book the hand of God is at work. The author must have a reason for not pointing this out explicitly.
- The Song of Song makes only one allusion to the name of God. What is this book about? Is it about human love? Is it about the love of God for the Church?

“Be alert to the underlying theology of particular books, and remember that this is not simply expressed in sentences about God, but by image and illustration and in poetic form. A warm heart, prayerfully depending on the Holy Spirit’s guidance, a thoughtful mind, and careful reading will yield rich rewards.”

3. Progressive revelation

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1-2).

In other words, when reading the Old Testament remember that revelation came in a piecemeal fashion.

Everything that was revealed is truth. But not all truth was revealed at once.

E.g. consider the way that the suffering of the Lord Jesus was revealed. It is there is Genesis 3:15. It is there in the sacrifices commanded in Leviticus. It is there in Psalm 22. It is there in Isaiah 53. But it was only when Jesus died and rose again and sent the Holy Spirit that the full revelation was given.

Remember also that the men who wrote Scripture did not necessarily understand everything that they wrote. “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Pet. 1:10-11).

E.g. Psalm 22 is an expression of David’s own anguish when hounded by his enemies. It is impossible for us to know whether he understood that the Psalm also pointed forward to the sufferings of the Christ.

The nature of progressive revelation is an encouragement to us to read the Old Testament. This gives a richer understanding of the New Testament.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1, The World Behind the Text

The Author – The LORD is MY shepherd

Knowledge of an author and his life will usually enhance understanding of what he has written. E.g. Psalm 23 is a song not only about a shepherd but also by a shepherd.

1. The author's experience

The psalm clearly reflects David's own experience of shepherding.

- David was familiar with the nature of sheep: their need for pasture and still waters; the terror of valley; the of comfort the shepherd's presence.
- David was also familiar with what was involved in shepherding people. God "chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skilful hand" (Ps. 78:70-72).
- David was familiar with the dangers inherent in the shepherd's calling. He was in danger from the lion and the bear (1 Sam. 17:34-36); and later he was in danger from Saul: "there is but a step between me and death" (1 Sam. 20:3).

Psalm 23 is not an idyllic song about shepherding – behind it lies years of experience of the hard reality of a shepherd's life.

2. Other examples

Sometimes we know nothing about an author, e.g. we do not know who wrote 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. But when we do know about an author this knowledge becomes part of the process of understanding their writings. Four examples:

- *Moses* "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). It is no wonder then that Moses wrote the law codes of Israel – God provided him with the necessary education in literature, writing, law and international diplomacy. This helps us to understand the form of the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20-24).
- *Ezekiel* Ezekiel was among the first wave of exiles to Babylon. He was a priest; so it's no surprise that he shows great interest in the Temple. Like a priest, he began his prophetic ministry at the age of 30. His calling was exceptionally difficult, e.g. it involved being widowed at 40.
- *Luke* Luke was a Greek convert to Christianity. He was a physician, i.e. a highly educated and cultured man. He took pains to ascertain the truth of anything he wrote (Luke 1:1-4) and was himself an eye-witness of some of

Paul's missionary work. Again and again Luke demonstrates accuracy in names and titles of officials of the Roman empire.

- *James the Just* This James was the brother of Jesus and the author of the letter of James. He is known from extra-Biblical literature to have been a man of upright life. His letter demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the book of Leviticus, a keen eye for life in first century Palestine, and sympathy for Jewish believers who were being marginalised by the wealthy landowners.

3. The author's purpose

Look for pointers in the text that indicate the purpose of the author.

(a) *The author may tell us the purpose of his book*, for example:

Luke 1:1-4 "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us…it seemed good to me also…to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."

Jude 3 "Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

(b) *The author's exhortations will give a clue as to his purpose*, for example:

Heb. 4:1, 11 "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it…Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."

Heb. 10:35-36 "Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."

Heb. 12:1 "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

(c) *The author may answer questions posed by others*, for example:

1 Cor. 7:25 "Now concerning the betrothed…"

1 Cor. 8:1 "Now concerning food offered to idols…"

1 Cor. 12:1 "Now concerning spiritual gifts…"

Be careful not to press the Bible to say what you want it to say – the author is not answering *our* questions.

Be careful not to speculate about what state affairs might have provoked the author to write. E.g. the "Colossian question" is notoriously difficult to determine.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1, The World Behind the Text

Customs – You anoint my head with oil

It helps our interpretation of the Bible if we know something about customs in Bible times and lands.

1. "You anoint my head with oil" (Ps. 23:5)

In verse 5 David says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

Is David still pursuing the picture of the sheep? It seems not. Table, oil and cup suggest that David is now thinking about the realm of hospitality: a table of food and an abundant, generous cup of wine.

But why the oil?

Oil was commonly used much as we use body lotions. E.g. Naomi's advice to Ruth: "Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor…" (Ruth 3:3).

Perfumed oils were an element of beauty treatments, e.g. Esther's preparation for her introduction to Ahasuerus: "Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women…" (Est. 2:12).

Of direct relevance to Psalm 23, oil was used to anoint the heads of guests. (C.f. Jesus' rebuke to Simon the Pharisee: "You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment…" Luke 7:46.) In a hot, dry climate the oil soothed the head and face. Anointing was a act of kindness and respect.

2. Other customs of Bible times

Bible times cover 1,500 years, and Bible lands from Rome to Babylon and from Asia Minor to Egypt. We may expect to encounter many foreign customs. For example:

- Levirate marriage in the story of Ruth.
- The scandal of a woman unbinding her hair in public (Luke 7:36-50).
- The issue of head covering for women (1 Cor. 11).
- The matter of eating meat obtained from idol sacrifices (1 Cor. 8-10).
- Greeting one another with "a holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26). This would have been men to men, and women to women, but not men to women.

Sometimes it is a fine judgement call between whether these customs are descriptive or prescriptive. In other words, does the Bible tell us:

- "This is what people used to do, but their custom is only of antiquarian interest." E.g. removing a sandal to establish the validity of the transfer of property (Ruth 4:7).
- "This is what people used to do, but this is not a custom you should follow." E.g. the custom of a man taking his deceased brother's wife (if the brother died childless) as a second wife to raise an heir for his brother.
- "This is what people used to do, and you should follow the principle behind their action." E.g. greeting with a handshake rather than a kiss.
- "This is what people used to do and you should do the same thing." This is the argument for women to wear head coverings for worship.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 1, The World Behind the Text

God – the Author of Scripture

1. God, the ultimate author

We have seen that the Bible is coloured by the background of the men who wrote it, e.g. the customs of their culture, their experience of life, and their understanding of God through the revelation he had given up to then.

The Bible is also coloured by the ways in which it was given, e.g. direct words from God such as the Ten Commandments, visions, the reflections of godly men, historical records.

This gives the Bible great variety.

But we must not forget that supremely in the "world behind the text" is God himself. He prepared the times and places and people through which he would give his Word.

The Bible is BOTH the work of men and the Word of God.

Does this mean that writing the Bible was easy? Not at all. The minds of the human authors of Scripture were intensely involved in their compositions. See, for example, Luke 1:1-4.

2. Two implications

(a) It is possible that the writings of the human authors of Scripture mean more than their authors understood. See 1 Peter 1:10-12.

For example, the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:7 is, "To your offspring I will give this land." The word for "offspring" is singular, but it is normal for this to mean plural descendants. Nevertheless in Galatians 3:16 Paul makes a major point out of the singular noun: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

(b) If God is the ultimate author of Scripture then when we understand Scripture we understand the mind of God. But this sort of communication takes place only when the Communicator wants to communicate. See 1 Cor. 2:11-13.

This means that a proper understanding of Scripture depends on having the right spiritual relationship with God, i.e.

- being born again;
- having a humble mind which relies on the Holy Spirit;
- developing spiritually.

Review

1. What is the main thrust and emphasis of the writer? Don't jump to conclusions. What is the author actually saying? Are there other passages that throw light on the passage? Notice contrasts as well as comparisons. Use reference books to learn about the background.
2. Consider what the passage reveals about the author's beliefs? Is truth revealed in a new way, or is new truth revealed?
3. What did the text mean to the author and people of his day? If it is an Old Testament passage, in what ways is its message developed in the New Testament? What is the relation of the passage to the overall theme of the Bible?
4. What do you know about the author of the passage? How does this knowledge help your interpretation?
5. Does the passage contain expressions which are strange to an English speaker? How do customs referred to in the passage speak to our day?
6. Remember that Scripture's ultimate author is God. Prayer and a humble dependence on the Holy Spirit is a necessary condition for good understanding. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding" (Ps. 111:10).

Exercise

Psalm 90 was written by Moses.

- What light does Moses' life and leadership of Israel throw on this psalm?
- What beliefs are explicit or implicit in the psalm?

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 2, The World Within the Text: Hebrew Poetry

1. Parallelism

By and large Hebrew poetry does not use rhyming sounds. Instead it uses "rhyming" ideas. This is called *parallelism*. The simplest form of parallelism takes one idea and states it twice. This adds colour and interest, e.g. Psalm 23:2.

> He makes me lie down in green pastures.
> He leads me beside still waters.

There may be progression of thought in the parallel lines, e.g. Psalm 24:3.

> Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
> And who shall stand in his holy place?

The 2nd line may complete the thought introduced in the 1st line, e.g. Psalm 23:7.

> Lift up your heads, O gates!
> And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
> that the King of glory may come in.

The progression may lead to a climax, e.g. Psalm 93:3.

> The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
> the floods have lifted up their voice;
> the floods lift up their roaring.

The parallel lines may state the same idea but with contrast, e.g. Proverbs 14:34.

> Righteousness exalts a nation,
> but sin is a reproach to any people.

2. Imagery and Metaphor

All poetry makes use of imagery: vivid, arresting, appealing, appalling. E.g.

> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
> your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

- Imagery must not be taken literally. Don't attempt precise identification of images with particular realities. E.g. the green pastures of Psalm 23 are not the Bible or the fellowship of the Church. The anointing oil is not the Holy Spirit.
- Imagery may draw on other Scriptures. It is possible (though this is a long shot) that the imagery of Psalm 23 draws on the Exodus experience of Israel. It is certainly the case that much of Isaiah's poetry contains allusions to Creation and the Exodus.

- Imagery doesn't spoon feed the reader, but invites us to supply the meaning. Allow the imagery to stimulate your imagination. But don't allow an over-active imagination to lead you away from obvious meanings – commentaries are a great help in this regard!
- Imagery may change suddenly and without warning. E.g. in Psalm 23:5 David doesn't say, "Now, let's change the picture and imagine that God is a host rather than a shepherd."

A metaphor allows us to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another. David doesn't say, "The LORD is *like* my shepherd." He says, "The LORD *is* my shepherd." This gives his statement greater immediacy.

Metaphors can be difficult to translate from one language to another. In Hebrew the expression "to lift up someone's face" means "to show them favouritism;" to be of "long nose" means "to be patient;" "kidneys" are what we mean by "heart" and often "heart" is what we mean by "mind." In Greek "bowels" means "compassions." These sorts of metaphors are often translated into English equivalents.

3. Artistry

Hebrew poets often shape their compositions with great care.

<u>*Acrostic poems*</u> begin each line of the psalm with successive letters of the alphabet, e.g. Psalm 34. Psalm 119 is the most famous example. The acrostic form may aid memorisation.

<u>*Chiasmus*</u> is a form of parallelism in which the words in the second line appear in the opposite order to that of the first line, e.g. Psalm 51:1.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;

according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

The structure is ABB´A´ and the focus is on the central idea (in Psalm 51:1, the love and mercy of God).

The artistry of chiasmus may be applied to a whole composition. E.g. Psalm 104.

A		vv. 1-4	Bless the LORD, O my soul! God makes his abode in the heavens
	B	vv. 5-13	The Earth and the Sea are formed The Earth is satisfied
		C vv. 14-23	Man opens and closes this section. Sun and Moon mark the day and night shifts.
	B´	vv. 24-30	The Earth is full and the Sea is full God satisfies all his creatures with food
A´		vv. 31-35	God's presence causes the Earth to tremble! Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 2, The World Within the Text: Narrative

40% of the Old Testament and one half of the New Testament is historical narrative. This is tremendously important – it tells us that Biblical religion is about real historical events – God has acted and spoken in time and space, most especially in the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This study aims to help us read Biblical narrative more intelligently. We will use the Book of Ruth as an exemplar of Biblical narrative.

1. When is the narrative set? Its place in Redemptive History.

The Bible as a whole tells the story of redemption – there is an overall plot which takes us from Eden (Genesis 1-3) to Paradise (Revelation 21-22). The place of each sub-plot within this larger framework is very important.

Ruth opens with a very clear time marker: "In the days when the judges ruled." What where the days of the judges like? Religious, moral and political chaos.

The opening of Ruth is even more specific: "…there was a famine in the land." Famine is a "covenant curse" – this suggests that the story opens during one of the periods of disobedience described in the Book of Judges.

Ruth also closes with a time marker: "Now these are the generations of Perez:…Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David." Ruth's story is a "prequel" to David's story.

Moreover, Ruth's story is part of the larger story of Jesus (Matt. 1:5 and context).

So the place of Ruth's story in the bigger History of Redemption is very clear.

It is very important to pay attention to whether a story occurs before the birth of Christ, between his birth and death, between his resurrection and ascension, or after Pentecost.

2. What does the narrative say? The details on which it focuses.

Biblical narratives are very short compared to modern novels. They are, therefore, much more selective in the details they record. The story of Ruth tells us almost nothing about village life in Bethlehem; Ruth's physical appearance is unimportant; Boaz's age and marital status are not recorded. What is important is:

- *Names* Naomi means "sweet", but she changes her name to Mara, "bitter". Elimelech means "my God is king", but he lives like a rebel. Bethlehem is the "house of bread", but it is a place of famine. Mahlon (Ruth's first husband) is "sickly" while Boaz (her second husband) is "in him is strength"; moreover the kinsman who had a prior claim on the right of redemption is unnamed, he is just "Mr. So-and-so." Strangely we do not know what Ruth means – she is an enigma! Look also at 4:11 where "be renowned" is literally "be called a name."

- *Food and fruitfulness* Notice the references to Bethlehem ("house of bread"); famine; barley and wheat harvests; parched grain; winnowing; offspring (literally "seed," 4:12); satisfaction; nourishment. Notice especially the measures of barley in 2:17 and 3:15 – why this detail?

- *Family ties* Husband, wife, father, sons, daughters-in-law, mothers, mother-in-law, clan, kinsman, widow, brothers. The responsibilities of kinship are stressed throughout. Especially both Boaz and Ruth are held up as fine examples of "loyal love" (1:8; 2:20; 3:10). The verb "to redeem" fills 4:1-8.

3. How is the narrative structured? The shape of the story.

Because narratives are often very short, the structure of the plot becomes very important.

Watch out for "inclusios". These are brackets on the story. E.g.

- Ruth's story opens with a man called "My God is King" and it closes with the name of Israel's greatest king.

- Chapter 1 opens with famine and closes with barley harvest.

Watch out for plot markers. The development of the plot may be highlighted by references to people or times. E.g.

- Have you noticed that in chapters 1-3 Naomi gets the last word, and in chapter 4 she is the subject of the last word. In contrast the last words of Ruth are in 3:17. Is this story about Naomi as much as it is about Ruth?

- The scenes in the story are set in progressively shorter time frames. It starts with a period of ten years (chapter 1); then a period of 2 months (chapter 2); then a period of two days (chapter 3); then a period of a morning (chapter 4).

Watch out for turning points in the plot. E.g.

- The note of hope introduced by "Now Naomi had a relative…" (2:1). Notice how the narrator delays naming Boaz to increase suspense.

- The change in Naomi's outlook – compare 2:20 with her speech in chapter 1.

- The trump card played by Boaz in 4:5.

- Notice especially the unique reference to the action of God in 4:13.

Watch out for chiasmus in the narrative. It is not unusual, especially in the Old Testament, for narrative to be given a chiastic (or "ring") structure. E.g.

A Elimelech, "My God is King", but there is no king in the day of the judges (1:1).
  B Ruth is barren; Naomi is empty. (Chapter 1)
    C Ruth and Boaz: "Whose young woman is this?" (Chapter 2)
      D Naomi's advice (3:1)
    C' Ruth and Boaz: "Who are you?" (Chapter 3)
  B' Ruth has a son; Naomi is fulfilled. (Chapter 4)
A' David, Israel's greatest king (4:22).

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 2, The World Within the Text: Prophecy

The prophetic books from *Isaiah* to *Malachi* comprise approximately 25% of the Old Testament. In this study we will use *Amos* as our exemplar.

1. Who were the prophets?

The Hebrew Bible classifies the books from Joshua to 2 Kings as the *Former Prophets* and *Isaiah* to *Malachi* (minus *Daniel* and *Lamentations*) as the *Latter Prophets*. Here our concern is with the Latter Prophets.

The Greek from which we get the word "prophet" suggests "a person who speaks in front of another."

The three main Hebrew words used for prophets mean (a) "a person called to speak on behalf of another person"; (b) a seer; (c) a visionary.

The prophets often indicate that they were conscious of speaking from God, e.g. "declares the LORD" (351 times, e.g. Isa. 3:15); "thus says the LORD"; "the hand of the LORD was upon me" (Ezek. 3:22); "the Spirit entered into me…and he spoke to me" (Ezek. 3:24); "the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and he said to me" (Ezek. 11:5).

The only true prophets were called by God (Deut. 18:18-20; Jer. 14:14-15).

Prophecy is often (though not exclusively) written in poetic form. Imagery and word play are especially common, e.g. "Gilgal shall surely go into exile" (Amos 5:5) plays on the similar sound of "Gilgal" and "go into exile".

2. The prophets spoke about the present

The prophets spoke to their own day. Often they spoke to their own people, but sometimes they spoke (or wrote) to the kings of foreign lands (Amos 1:3-2:3). This *forth-telling* prophetic ministry made application of the Torah (Amos 2:6-12), threatened punishment (Amos 2:13-16) and called the people to repentance (Amos 5:4-15).

It is often necessary to know something about the time and the place of the prophecy. Does the prophet minister to the kingdom of Israel or the kingdom of Judah? Did the prophet minister before or after the exile? What was the economic/political/religious climate in which the prophet ministered?

Amos ministered in the days of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC, Amos 1:1). Jeroboam was the most successful of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel; he restored the borders of the land and built up the trade of the nation. However, the wealth generated by Jeroboam was not evenly distributed – the rich oppressed the poor and moral decline set in (Amos 2:6-8; 4:1-5).

The prophets' concern for pure and sincere religion (Amos 5:21-23) and mercy, justice and righteousness in society is valid today.

3. The prophets spoke about the future

As well as forth-telling, the prophets also *fore-told*. Fore-telling had three horizons:

(a) *The near future*

Many prophecies concern events that will take place within decades:

- Amos 1:2-5 is a prophecy against Damascus. One reason for Jeroboam's success was that Assyria defeated Syria (Damascus) – Israel was able to take advantage of this and develop favourable trading terms with Damascus.
- Amos 7-9 concerns the destruction of Israel by Assyria. This took place in 722 BC, 31 years after the death of Jeroboam.

Sometimes prophecies are couched in conditional terms, e.g. Jonah to Nineveh.

(b) *The far future*

Some prophecies contain promises that cannot be sustained by near-horizon fulfilments. E.g. the promises of restoration after the Babylonian exile. Amos 9:11-15 was fulfilled, but only in part; the present order of creation cannot bear the weight of a promise like v. 13.

(c) *The end*

There are also prophecies which reach right to the end of history. The technical term for this is eschatology since it deals with the "Eschaton". E.g. Joel 3:17-18.

4. Later prophets' use of earlier prophetic writings

Watch out for the way that later prophets make us of earlier prophets' writings. They pick up theology, themes and catch phrases. E.g. compare Joel 3:16 with Amos 1:2, and Obadiah 1-9 with Jeremiah 49:7-22.

The implication is that the prophetic writings were circulated (at least among those who associated themselves with the prophets) and preserved carefully. We know, for example, that Daniel read and meditated on Jeremiah (Dan. 9:1-2)

5. The New Testament's use of prophetic writings

While the majority of the prophetic writings receive no direct attention in the New Testament, some are quoted and others alluded to. James used Amos 9:11-12 during a debate in Jerusalem to justify the evangelism of the Gentiles (Acts 15:14-18). Sometimes the way in which the New Testament uses the prophetic writings seems peculiar to us, e.g. Matt. 2:15,17-18. This should alert us to the fact that prophets sometimes said more than they knew (1 Pet. 1:10-11; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 2, The World Within the Text: Gospel

The vast majority of what we know about Christ we know from the Gospels. The Gospels are generally easy to read and understand. Yet there are also depths and complexities in them that will engage our minds for the remainder of our lives.

1. What is a Gospel?

The Greek word "gospel" ("euangellion" = evangel) is literally "good-news." As a form of literature, gospel is unparalleled in ancient literature; it is a new genre. The closest thing to a gospel in the ancient world is the "bios", i.e. the "life" of a famous figure, such as Julius Caesar. But "euangellion" was not a new word.

(a) *Roman Usage*

"Euangellion" was used in the ancient world to refer to some "good news" event in the life of the emperor, e.g. the emperor's birthday or the day of his accession. It was a public holiday, a festival, a new situation for the world. The report of the event was "euangellion". E.g. a 9 BC inscription found in Asia Minor concerning Octavian: "The birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of joyful tidings which have been proclaimed on his account."

C.f. the Christian use of the term "euangellion". For Christians it concerned the birth of the King, his accession to universal authority and the new situation in the world. We can readily understand why the term was adopted.

(b) *Jewish Usage*

The word "euangellion" was also used by the translators of the LXX. It appears, for example, in Isaiah 52:7-10, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings ***good news***, who publishes peace, who brings ***good news*** of happiness, who publishes salvation…" Thus, "euangellion" bears the connotation of future salvation, a new dispensation.

2. What is the Context?

(a) *Historical Context*

Unlike the other NT documents, the Gospels have two historical contexts:

(i) *The primary audience of Jesus and the disciples* The events reported ought to be interpreted in the context of their original life-setting.

(ii) *The audience of the gospel writer* The materials selected by the evangelist, their arrangement and the vocabulary used were determined in part by the immediate use to which the author meant to put them, e.g. Mark writing to the Christians in Rome about AD 60, just before a period of persecution. This needs to be understood if interpretation is to be accurate. However, since we have no

inspired account of when or why any of the Gospels was written, we need to be careful about the importance we give to this point.

(b) *Literary Context*

The Gospels comprise sayings and narratives, what Jesus taught and did. Jesus taught in a wide range of styles; he used parable, narrative, simile, hyperbole, irony, etc. A disproportionate amount of material is devoted to the accounts of the days before and the events surrounding the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus.

(c) *Theological Context*

The Gospels have a Christo-centric theological purpose; they portray the coming of the Kingdom. They present to us a unique period of history, between the incarnation and Pentecost.

3. Why Four Gospels?

The event (the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of the Son of God) is so huge that no single account provides a comprehensive record of the work and teaching of Jesus.

The needs of the various congregations for which the Gospels were written were so diverse that no one Gospel could satisfy them all.

It may be the case that Mark wrote first, about AD 60. Matthew and Luke wrote independently of one another, possibly using Mark as a common source; they may have used another common source and separate, independent sources.

There is only ONE Gospel. The so-called Gospels are more accurately titled "the Gospel *according to* Matthew," etc. Each witnesses to the same event. It is only fair that each witness is allowed to speak for himself (i.e. interpreting each Gospel as a book in its own right and not as part of a *harmonised* document).

Each of the evangelists had his own specific purpose for writing. Luke states his explicitly at the start of his Gospel; John at the end of his. The purpose should be ascertained as clearly as possible as this will facilitate better understanding.

Comparison of parallel passages may help to discover the particular message of each evangelist. E.g. the introductions to the four accounts of the Gospel:

- *Matthew*: fulfilment of the Old Testament
- *Mark*: proclamation of the promised King
- *Luke*: carefully researched historical narrative for a cultured Greek audience
- *John*: the revelation of God by the Word

4. The Aim of Interpretation

The Gospels are to be interpreted in a living way that aims at a response of faith. Since the Gospels are about Christ, they are to be interpreted Christo-centrically.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 2, The World Within the Text: Epistle

Epistles are closely argued documents, densely packed with doctrine, in which the significance of individual words cannot be overlooked. Unlike the Gospels, they have only one historical horizon: the people for whom they were originally written.

1. Genre of Epistle

The epistles are *occasional* documents, i.e. called forth by specific occasions. Here lies some of the challenge and excitement of the task of interpreting them: coming to grips with the people, the places, the time and the circumstances of their original situation. The epistles are practical, applied, pastoral theology, e.g.:

(a) In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul deals with eschatology. But his purpose was to comfort bereaved Christians and to exhort some who had given up their daily employment to go back to work.

(b) Paul had to deliver an exalted Christology when writing to the Church at Colossae because of the heresy that was creeping in among the believers.

(c) Quarrelling between two women at Philippi was behind the Christology of Philippians 2. Paul's purpose was to instruct in the importance of humility.

(d) Romans 8 has much to say about providence and the sovereignty of God; Paul's purpose was to encourage suffering Christians.

Epistles are not books of theology; they are more like sermons than treatises; they were dictated. Hence they convey a human urgency not found in books.

Because the epistles were written to address specific people with specific issues, we get some, but not all, of Paul's theology in each.

2. Literary Interpretation

Greek letters had three principle parts: an introduction (names of sender and recipients, and greetings); a body; and a conclusion (greetings to other people, farewell salutations). Paul used the same structure, but he added two sections:

Introduction ***Thanksgiving*** Body ***Exhortation*** Conclusion

The use or modification of this structure gives useful interpretative guidance, e.g.

(a) There is no *Thanksgiving* in *Galatians*. Paul is angry with the Galatians for their willingness to compromise the gospel, so he will not flatter them before correcting their errors. Message: compromise of the gospel is deadly serious.

(b) In *Galatians*, *Thanksgiving* is replaced by a defence of Paul's apostleship. The Church in Galatia was under the influence of Judaisers from Jerusalem who were casting doubt on the apostolic authority of Paul. Paul had to defend his authority. Message: apostolic authority to teach the gospel is of foundational significance.

(c) In his *Introduction* in 1 Corinthians, Paul calls the recipients "the church of God that is in Corinth…those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." They lived in a city known for its immorality, and they themselves had loose-livers among them. Message: live up to what you are.

(d) In the *Thanksgiving* section of 1 Corinthians, Paul introduces one of the themes of the letter and summarises the crux of the solution, i.e. charismatic imbalance and ignorance of the already-not yet of the Kingdom: "…you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, *as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ…*" (1 Cor. 1:4-8). Message: the life of Christ is seen in the Church now, but the final revelation of this life awaits the Eschaton.

(e) In his final salutations to the Church at Rome, a Church characterised in part by a division between Jewish and Gentile believers, Paul strikes a note of peace, Rom. 15:33. Message: the gospel brings peace, so be at peace.

(f) In closing *Galatians*, Paul is curt, Gal. 6:16, adding a warning. Message: this letter is written in earnest; be serious in your response.

3. Interpretative Approach

It's best to read an epistle in a single sitting.

Sift what is applicable to today. E.g. 2 Tim. 2:3 ("Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus") has clear application; 2 Tim. 4:13 ("When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments") does not have an immediately clear application.

When asking whether a text applies to us or not, we are to be self-consciously aware of our biases. E.g. we take 1 Cor. 14:34-35 (women forbidden to speak in church) to be normative, but not 1 Cor. 14:1-2,5,23,29 (the use of *tongues* in worship). We need honest interpretative principles to guide us in matters like this.

(a) *The text cannot mean now what it did not mean when first written*.

(b) *Identify shared life experiences*. God's word to us has the same authority and application as when originally given when we share the same life experiences. E.g. "repent and believe" has undimmed urgency and authority.

(c) *Be careful of extending applications beyond the meaning of Scripture*. For example, 1 Cor. 3:16-17 concerns the unity of the Church; it cannot be legitimately applied to the care we should take of our bodies.

(d) *Identify underlying principles*. For example, 1 Cor. 10 deals with food sacrificed to idols. What is its application today?

(e) *Identify matters of indifference*. These vary with culture and background, e.g. eating, drinking and observation of days. Cultural variations, e.g. over head coverings for women, are probably indifferent matters.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 3, The World In Front of the Text: The Reader

This chapter is titled "The Reader" rather than "The Student" because the Bible is to be *read* – to be enjoyed as literature. In fact, it was originally read or sung. The analytical atomisation of the Bible into verses, phrases and words has its place, but we must remember the warning: "he who takes a thing apart to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom." In other words, the Bible is to be read as a whole. This is good news for God's people – we may benefit from the fruit of scholarship, but we are not condemned to hang on the tailcoats of the scholars. We can read the Bible for ourselves, and God will speak to us by the Holy Spirit.

1. Respect the integrity of the text

Postmodernists claim that a text has no meaning apart from the mean supplied by the reader. This is nonsense! Every text carries the meaning invested in it by its author – and the more skilled the author the more effectively he makes the text carry his meaning. The reader's role is to engage with the text in order to discern the message of the author.

This is especially so when the text is the Bible. We daren't twist the Bible to fit our agenda. We will be ready to receive, believe and obey.

Does God give guidance when we read the Bible?

(a) The Bible clearly and unambiguously commands us to repent and believe the good news.

(b) The meaning of the Bible and its applications are bound up together, so that it is impossible to have one without the other. So if we have understood a portion of Scripture, we will also have received guidance from God – and we must obey God's voice in Scripture. "What do the Scriptures principally teach? The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

(c) But we must be careful of pulling texts out of context. If I were seriously ill, and came upon John 11:4 ("This illness does not lead to death.") could I take that as a promise of healing? That is not what the words mean originally (Lazarus did die). If I have respect for the integrity of the text, I will not impose on it a meaning foreign to the original.

(d) However, God *may* impress a text on my heart, and he *may* guide or comfort in that fashion. But in such instances the guidance must be weighed against other Scriptures; the counsel of God's people must be sought; and circumstances/opportunities must be considered.

2. Recognise your presuppositions and expectations

Having said that, the fact is that we do come to the Bible with presuppositions and expectations. It is only healthy to be aware of these, as they colour/cloud our reading of Scripture.

If we believe in the Big Bang and evolution of life over billions of years, we will have difficulty reading Genesis 1 as historical narrative. We will be unable to read the passage according to its genre, and this will necessarily distort our interpretation of it.

If we presuppose that there miracles do not occur, this will pre-dispose us to naturalistic explanations of, for example, the ten signs and wonders performed by Moses in Egypt.

If we take it as read that the charismatic gifts described in a few passages in Acts continue today/ceased with the passing of the apostles, this will determine to large measure our interpretation of 1 Corinthians.

It is tremendously difficult for people raised on a particular way of reading the Bible to jettison their perspective when it is challenged. Credo-baptists find paedo-baptist interpretations of Scripture impossible to adopt, and vice versa.

3. Have regard to your heart when you come to the text

"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:19-21).

Your reason for reading, and the condition of your mind and heart while you are reading, will influence the way you read and the way you respond to what you have read.

The Bible is a spiritual book. God breathed it by his Spirit, and it is to be received by people who are dependent on the Spirit. God's word *always* changes us – for good or for ill.

The Bible is directed to our hearts as well as our minds. E.g. "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also" (2 Cor. 6:11-13).

As we read, our minds, imaginations and emotions ought to be alert.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 3, The World In Front of the Text: The Church

Have the studies to date have suggested that the Bible reader is an individual? That is unfortunate, because the Bible has been given to the church as a community, and it is meant to be read in community: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you [plural] richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16).

1. The church and the Holy Spirit

The church is the community within which the Holy Spirit lives and works:

"…in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21-22).

"Do you not know that you are [plural] God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you [plural]? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

It is a mistake to think that the Spirit dwells only in individuals and the he dwells in the church by virtue of the fact that the church is the coming together of those indwelt individuals. Rather, the church is the place where the Spirit dwells, and union with Christ means incorporation into the church and therefore into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

In this context, our Spirit-illumined understanding of Scripture is an essentially corporate experience. So Paul prayed in Eph. 3:16-21 "that according to the riches of his glory [God] may grant you [plural] to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your [plural] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you [plural], being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

So we ought not to think that the Spirit always illumines us in a personal, individual and immediate way. Thank God for the wisdom he has imparted to the church to interpret Scripture down through the centuries.

2. Pastors and teachers

Understanding the Bible was never intended to happen apart from the teaching ministry which Jesus Christ has instituted in the church. Paul writes to the church of Ephesus that Christ "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the

knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13).

Those who teach must handle the Word faithfully and accurately.

They must do this in a way that models good interpretative method for the listeners.

3. Interpretative tradition and scholarship

Tradition and scholarship are sometimes given scant regard. This is unfortunate.

The church has been interpreting the Scriptures from the very beginning. This has resulted in a rich tradition of tested and refined interpretation. Very few of us have opportunity to engage directly with this tradition, but Bible scholars do, and this tradition influences the best entry level commentaries.

However, antiquity does not guarantee accuracy. John Calvin and Matthew Henry are not the last word on Bible interpretation. Be prepared to read the best whatever age or culture it comes from.

Sadly scholarship does not always go hand-in-hand with faith. But accurate, though unbelieving, scholars are able to shed important light on technical matters that aid accurate interpretation.

4. Understanding and obedience

Good interpretation of the Bible is greatly helped by healthy interaction within church – the teaching elder learns from the congregation and vice versa. Part of the reason for these studies is to help us all make useful contributions to our fellowship when we come together for Bible study.

The effectiveness of the teaching ministry is seen in the way it is lived out by the church. Paul wrote to Philippi: "Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:15-17).

This is the ideal of interpretation – the Bible being explained and applied by the teaching elder in such a way that the whole congregation receives its truth and lives out what it says. And this is taking place not just because one or two are able to interpret for the rest, but those who interpret also gain insight and understanding by their mutual fellowship within the church.

Understanding and Enjoying the Bible

Part 3, The World In Front of the Text: Christ in the Scriptures

Above all else, the Bible is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said to a group of Jewish leaders, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (John 5:46). After his resurrection, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to [two of his followers, and later to all of his disciples] in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Cf. 1 Peter 1:11.

Clearly Christ is the centre of the New Testament. This study looks at the more demanding subject of Christ as the focus of the Old Testament.

1. How not to find Christ in the Old Testament (in general)

It is tempting to think that reading the Old Testament as a Christian means just looking for references to Christ. Two traps lie in this path:

- *Unwarranted allegorical interpretation* Plain historical narrative is reduced to allegory in an effort to "find" Jesus in the text. The stories of Ruth and Boaz, and Jonah – which undoubtedly point to Christ – have been handled this way. You are probably allegorizing when you look for Christological significance in incidental detail, e.g. "the captain of the boat represents…"
- *The emphasis of the text is lost* Going too quickly to a Christological interpretation of a text bypasses the intention of the author. This may mean that the full Christological weight of the text is lost. This is a particular issue for Reformed Presbyterians reading and singing the Psalms.

2. Christ is God

The God of the whole Bible is the Trinity. God Almighty, Possessor of heaven and earth, Yahweh, the LORD of Hosts, who revealed himself in the Old Testament is not just God the Father – he is the Triune God. So it is the Son of God (and God the Father and God the Holy Spirit) who reveals himself to Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses.

There are occasions when the Son and the Father are revealed as distinct persons, e.g. "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps. 110:1).

3. Christ and the Story of Redemption

It is helpful to recognize that the whole Bible tells a single story, and to find Christ in this story as he is revealed at each stage.

(a) *The storyline of the Bible is "creation, fall, redemption, consummation."* How is Christ seen in each stage? In what way does he act in the story? Does he speak? Is he promised, or is he fore-shadowed?

(b) *The main theme of the story is God's covenant dealings with his people.* Christ is made known through the covenant because he is the mediator of the covenant and it is he who ultimately seals the covenant with his own sacrificial death.

(c) *God enters personally into the story*. The story of redemption isn't just a "story" (a nice tale with a good moral) – it actually happened (and is happening) because the Son of God entered the story through the incarnation.

In this way the Bible in general and the Old Testament in particular is delivered from being an allegory or an extended metaphor or an antiquarian curiosity. All that happened in Genesis to Malachi was directed towards the happenings of the Gospel accounts of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus; and the Gospel accounts lead naturally to the application of salvation in Acts and the epistles and the prophecy of Revelation. *Christ is the centre of attention*.

4. Tracing Christ in the Old Testament

(a) *Occasions when God appeared to his Old Testament people* These are called "theophanies". Speaking of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Isaiah 63:9 says, "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." 1 Corinthians 10:4 refers to Christ as "the spiritual rock that accompanied" Israel through the wilderness. John 12:39-41 says that the vision of the divine glory revealed to Isaiah in the temple was a vision of the glory of Christ.

(b) *Promises and prophecies of the Messiah* Most obviously we will find Christ in the many promises and prophecies. The New Testament sometimes makes surprising applications of the Old Testament to Christ, e.g. Matt. 2:15 gives Hos. 11:1 an unexpected Christological application; and Heb. 1:10-12 refers Ps. 102:25-27 to Christ.

(c) *The offices of prophet, priest and king pointed forward to Christ* Remember that it is the office, and not the person who filled the office, which pointed to Christ. Thus, although individual prophets, priests, and kings may have been unwilling, mortal and selfish, their failures do not cloud their function as types.

(d) *The sacrificial system pre-figured Christ* The priest, the altar, the sacrifice, the tabernacle and the temple point to Christ. See Heb. 9:1-5.