Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding

Tool 1: Bible Doctrine

Introduction

In this section a foundation will be laid for the remainder of the study. It is crucial to understand what the Bible is before attempting to discover what it means. The material will be presented in the form of five propositions. Each proposition will be supported as necessary by Bible verses and by the conclusions of respected Bible scholars.

Doctrinal Propositions

"The Bible is a book of divine revelation." By this is meant that God is responsible for the content of the Bible; he is its author. The message that is contained within the Bible originated in God. The spiritual truths it contains could never have been discovered by man; they can only be known because God has disclosed them to us.

"God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb 1.1-2).

Note: The Old Testament includes the phrase, "Thus saith the Lord," or, "Thus saith the LORD" some 413 times.


"The divine inspiration of the entire Bible guarantees its full authority." There are two parts to this statement. First, there is an affirmation of the fact that the whole Bible is in a very real sense the breath of God. In other words, God has undertaken to put his revelation of truth into a permanent written form. Second, the statement correlates inspiration with authority. By this is meant that inspiration is God’s certification of the Bible’s accuracy and relevance.

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof,
Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding

for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

“The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times” (Ps 12:6).

“By the inspiration of the Scriptures is meant that they are of divine origin, the product of the creative energy of God. It was the ‘in-breathing of God’ into men by which they were qualified infallibly to utter His truth.” Fitzwater, P.B. Christian Theology: A Systematic Presentation, second edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c1948, p. 36.

“What does inerrancy mean then? It simply means that the Bible is wholly true. Paul Feinberg has written, ‘Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they teach, whether that teaching has to do with doctrine, history, science, geography, geology, or other disciplines or knowledge.’” Boice, James Montgomery. Does Inerrancy Matter? Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, c1979, p. 13.

“The canon of Scripture was affirmed by men as they recognized each book’s inspiration.” Each of the 66 books were authoritative at the time of their writing because God inspired them. However, it was necessary in the course of history for the people of God to acknowledge God’s inspired Word to be just that. A consensus concerning the Old Testament canon may have been reached in the lifetime of Ezra. The entire New Testament canon appears to have received full recognition around 400 A.D.

“The word canon comes from the Greek kanon. It means, in the first place, a reed or rod; then a measuring-rod; hence a rule or standard. In the second place it means an authoritative decision of a Church council; and in the third place, as applied to the Bible, it means those books which have been measured, found satisfactory, and approved as inspired of God.” Thiessen, Henry C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c1949, p. 102.

“... the books were canonical the moment they were written. It was not necessary to wait until various councils could examine the books to determine if they were acceptable or not. Their canonicity was inherent within them, since they came from God. People and councils only recognized and acknowledged what is true because of the intrinsic inspiration of the books as they were written.” Ryrie, Charles C. Basic Theology.
“God fulfills his role in the communication process by means of illumination.” God’s part in the communication of his message is made complete when he illuminates the minds of men to understand his truth. By this is meant that the Holy Spirit endows men with understanding of revealed truth. Unbelievers are illuminated concerning salvation, and believers concerning deepening degrees of all revealed truth.

“Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” (Lk 24.45).

“Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps 119.18).

“... illumination does not deal with the transmission of the truth, but with the understanding of truth already revealed.” Thiessen, Henry C. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, c1949, p. 106.

“... the understanding has shared in the ruins of the fall, and is itself perverted; and as such it must be renewed by him who created it, otherwise it will for ever distort the light, however clearly it may shine from the page of Scripture.” Buchanan, James. *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit*, p. 56.

“Man fulfills his role in the communication process by means of interpretation.” Man is responsible to make every necessary effort so as to discover the concepts the biblical writers had in mind when they wrote the Bible. In many instances, it is necessary to bridge several gaps in order to understand the author’s original intent.

“But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed” (Jas 1.25).

“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Josh 1.8).

“All successful communication depends upon the ability of the hearer or reader to get substantially the same picture as that in the mind of the speaker or writer. At best there is some difference between what the sender is seeing and what the receiver sees.” Brooks, D. P. *The Bible: How to Understand and Teach It*. Nashville: Broadman, c1969,
"The second great need for a science of hermeneutics is to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Biblical writers ... But when the interpreter is separated culturally, historically, and geographically from the writer he seeks to interpret, the task of interpretation is no longer facile. The greater the cultural, historical, and geographical divergences are, the more difficult is the task of interpretation. In reading the Bible we find ourselves with a volume that has great divergences from us." Ramm, Bernard. Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics, third revised edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, c1970, p. 4.

**Conclusion**

At least two practical applications must be drawn from the above study of the nature of the Bible. First, because the Bible is God's inspired, inerrant revelation, it is to be read, studied, and obeyed; its timeless truths are to be applied. Second, because man possesses a role in the communication process, it is necessary for him to learn all such information as will enable him to understand the message intended by God and the human authors of the Bible.

God's Word is a revelation to be reckoned with; it is to be studied for the purpose of following Christ more closely. Christians should seek an intimate relationship with the Bible because it is their vital communication link to God. Psalm 119, all of which describes the believer's relation to God's Word, imposes the following duties on the believer:

- Choosing the Word of God
- Cleaving to the Word of God
- Keeping the Word of God
- Living the Word of God
- Delighting in the Word of God
- Longing for the Word of God
- Knowing the Word of God
- Remembering the Word of God
- Storing the Word of God
- Being thankful for the Word of God
- Fellowshiping in the Word of God
- Seeking the Word of God
- Committing to the Word of God
- Walking in the Word of God
- Loving the Word of God
- Trusting in the Word of God
- Taking comfort in the Word of God
- Meditating on the Word of God
- Respecting the Word of God
- Declaring the Word of God
- Singing the Word of God
Tool 2: Bible Interpretation

Introduction

It was stated in Tool 1 of Bridging the Gap that man plays a role in the process of communicating spiritual truth: he is responsible to accurately interpret God’s Word. Since given texts can be interpreted in more than one way, it is necessary to define accepted guidelines for interpreting them. There is a field of theology--hermeneutics--that is solely concerned with these guidelines of interpretation. Bernard Ramm explains:

“Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation.” Ramm, Bernard. Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics. 3rd revised ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, c1970, p. 1.

He goes on to state:


Some principles of interpretation apply uniformly to the entire Bible, while others are relevant only to certain portions of it. Virkler clarifies:

“General hermeneutics is the study of those rules that govern interpretation of the entire biblical text. Special hermeneutics is the study of those rules which govern the interpretation of specific literary forms, such as parables, types, and prophecy.”


The remainder of Tool 2 will focus on principles of general hermeneutics.

General Hermeneutics

Literal Interpretation

There are several approaches to hermeneutics. Conservative Christians generally agree that the Bible is to be interpreted literally. By this is meant that words and phrases are most
often to be taken in their normal, common sense. This view of hermeneutics can be summed up in the cliche, "If the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense." Literal hermeneutics are known by other terms, as Charles Ryrie explains:

"Since the word 'literal' has connotations which are either misunderstood or subjectively understood, labels like 'plain' or 'normal' serve more acceptably." Ryrie, Charles C. Basic Theology. Wheaton: Victor Books, c1986, p. 111.

Ryrie cites three justifications for literal hermeneutics (Ryrie, Charles C. Basic Theology. Wheaton: Victor Books, c1986, p. 113.):

- **The purpose of language:** "... God gave man language for the purpose of being able to communicate with him ... it follows that God would Himself use and expect man to use language in its normal sense."

- **The need for objectivity:** "Switching the hermeneutical base from literal to allegorical ... results in different, inconsistent, and often contradictory interpretations."

- **The example of the Bible:** "The prophecies of the first advent of Christ were all fulfilled literally. This obvious but extremely significant fact argues for the validity and use of literal hermeneutics in all of biblical interpretation."

Of course, acceptance of the literal view does not preclude treating biblical metaphors and allegories as such. For example, Christ's reference to himself as a door (Jn 10:7, 9) need not be understood in the physical sense, in terms of a barrier by which an entry is closed and opened. Rather, this statement should be understood metaphorically, meaning that there are certain properties which can equally be attributed to a door as well as to Christ, the former in the physical realm and the latter in the spiritual.

**Grammatical/Historical Interpretation**

Intrinsically related to literal interpretation is the matter of grammatical/historical interpretation, which consists of attempting to derive from the text the meaning that its original context demands. F. F. Bruce comments:

"A basic requirement for the understanding of these [biblical] documents is their grammatico-historical interpretation or exegesis—bringing out of the text the meaning the writers intended to convey and which their readers were expected to gather from it."

Bruce explains elsewhere:

“Each part of the Bible must be interpreted in its context, and that means not only its immediate verbal context but the wider context of time, place and human situation to which it belongs. Thus there are a number of considerations to be kept in mind if the meaning of the text is to be grasped as fully as is desirable.” Bruce, F. F. “Interpretation, Biblical.” New Bible Dictionary. 3rd ed. Ed. I. H. Marshall et al. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, c1996, p. 509.

Much of the remainder of Bridging the Gap will be concerned with the contextual areas mentioned by Bruce, including history, geography, and culture.
Tool 3: Bible Introduction

Introduction

Most modern readers are accustomed to finding a few paragraphs (or even pages) of introductory material inserted before the text of a non-fictional book or article. Such material may be written by the author or by someone else, and may come under the label of introduction, prologue, foreword, or preface. The introduction serves to orient the reader, providing such information as the purpose of the book, the occasion for its writing, and an outline of its content.

Historically speaking, the inclusion of formal introductory material is a relatively new literary phenomenon. As might be supposed, neither the Bible as a whole nor its individual books include introductions. From the perspective of the modern reader, the lack of prefatory content is a barrier to understanding. Readers who are accustomed to reading introductions before proceeding to content find themselves challenged when they are faced with a lengthy ancient text such as the Bible.

Fortunately, many Bible scholars have recognized this problem and have attempted to remedy it. In fact, there is a whole class of literature known as “Bible introduction,” made up of books which attempt to do for the Scriptures (as a whole or in various parts) what prefaces and introductions do for modern non-fiction books. Therefore, the field of Bible introduction offers modern readers a tool to bridge a gap which otherwise may hinder them from understanding and applying the Scriptures.

The Content of Bible Introductions

What sorts of features of Bible books do introductions commonly describe? To this subject the discussion will now turn.

Authorship

Discussions of authorship attempt to establish with certainty who wrote a given book of the Bible. Many Bible books do not name their authors (e.g., Acts, Hebrews), and there
have been debates about the authorship of those that do (e.g., James).

**Date and Circumstances of Writing**

Bible introductions often attempt to pinpoint a date of authorship (whether precise or approximate), particularly as this relates to the circumstances under which the writer penned the document. For example, it is traditionally held that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth, which was known in its day for its immorality. Paul’s discussion of the depravity of man in Romans 1.18-32 makes more sense in the light of his circumstances.

**Purpose of Writing**

God did not allow any book to creep into the canon by accident. Every document that makes up the Scriptures was given with a specific divine purpose which was usually obvious to the human author as well. Most often, Bible books were written for the purpose of edifying God’s people in a particular way. Bible introductions commonly try to discover the purpose of the writing.

**Intended Audience**

Introductions often discuss the book’s intended audience, including a description of both the original recipients and the destination of the writing. For example, Paul’s harsh criticism of the Corinthian church in the first epistle do not appear unreasonable given its members’ spiritual immaturity. Conversely, the mellowed tone of 2 Corinthians makes sense in the light of their repentance and restoration.

**Overview**

Many Bible introductions provide a summary or survey of the message of a Bible book. This can prove very helpful to the reader. Sometimes this overview may take the form of an outline which reveals the structure of the document.

**Other Features**

Some Bible introductions cover other features of the biblical documents, including the
Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding

following:

• sources on which the biblical authors may have relied for parts of their writing;
• the literary form or forms which make up a Bible book; and
• other key concepts which impact the proper interpretation of a Bible book.

Recommended Bible Introductions

Less Technical Works


More Technical Works


A Practical Example

It is widely recognized that one of the primary themes of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is joy. However, the significance of this fact become more apparent in the light of introductory information. Following is a sample of a thematic study that illustrates the value of Bible introduction:

The predominant theme of the epistle to the Philippians is joy. Forms of the words joy, rejoice, and gladness appear in 15 of the letter’s 104 verses. In general, joy is described as the product of a healthy relationship between a church and a minister. The minister remembers
the church with joy in his prayers (1.4); indeed, the subjects of his ministry are his “joy and crown” (4.1). He rejoices in the furtherance of the gospel (1.18), and his greatest aspiration is to enter Christ’s presence knowing that his earthly efforts have been fruitful (2.16). To this end he is willing to lay down his life as an offering (2.17-18). In the remainder of his earthly course, he is joyous for the willing financial support provided by those to whom he has ministered (4.10). In addition, his joy is made full by the spirit of unity of the people (2.2).

The minister derives joy from his ministry. But he is not alone in his gladness. The minister’s people rejoice when he is present with them (1.26; 2.28-29). And his willingness to sacrifice his life in the interest of their service, is also a source of joy to them (2.17-18).

The continual experience of joy is commanded in the epistle: “Rejoice in the Lord alway . . .” (4.4; cf. 3.1). It is, therefore, viewed as the spiritual norm for the believer. As has been noted above, various realities motivate the minister and the church to joy. The epistle makes it clear, however, that joy can only be known in the context of one’s relationship with the Lord: “. . . we . . . rejoice in Christ Jesus . . .” (3.3; cf. 1.26; 3.1; 4.4, 10).

Tenney describes the circumstances under which Paul wrote the book of Philippians:

“The four Prison Epistles, Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon, were the products of this period from A.D. 56 or 57 to A.D. 60 or 61. . . . Undoubtedly they were written during the period of imprisonment, for all of them make reference to Paul’s bonds . . . Probably the traditional view that they were written from Rome is correct, for the allusions to Caesar’s household (Phil. 4:22) and to the praetorian guard (1:13) would apply better to Rome than to Caesarea.” Tenney, Merrill C. New Testament Survey. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, p. 316.

Paul’s message concerning joy is forceful, regardless of the historical backdrop of the epistle. But it is literally amazing that he was able to produce such an eloquent personal testimony of joy while imprisoned. Quite obviously, the joy Paul commanded in Philippians is not a matter of external circumstances. In this instance, therefore, proper interpretation of the text is dependent on access to introductory information.
**Tool 4: Bible Geography**

**The Relevance of Bible Geography**

It was affirmed in Tool 1 of *Bridging the Gap* that the Bible is to be viewed as God’s self-disclosure to man. It is worthy of note that God’s revelation is not simply a list of propositions to believe and standards to live by. God’s Word is much more than this. The Bible is God’s revelation in historical and geographical context: God has spoken in time and space. John Stott probes this concept:

"Why did he have to reveal himself in a rather remote historical and geographical context, so that we have to struggle to understand the context before we can grasp the revelation? ... A better answer would be that the living God is a personal God, who made us as persons in his own image and insists on treating the persons he has made as persons. So the whole process of revelation has been the self-disclosure of a Person to persons, to real persons like ourselves who actually lived in a certain place at a certain time. In saying this, I am not denying that God has revealed his truth in words. I am rather asserting that his revelation has been 'personal' and 'propositional' at one and the same time." Stott, John R. W. *Understanding the Bible.* Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, p. 24-25.

Because the different Bible books were given in various places, and because the Bible makes numerous references to geographical places, it follows that it is best interpreted in geographical context. By this is meant that the Bible is to be read with geography in mind. The biblical authors presumed, among other things, the original readers’ knowledge of the places to which they referred in their writings. Keith Megilligan explains:

"... the Gospel writers, when presenting the life of Christ, assumed that their readers would know exactly what they had in mind when they mentioned various geographical points of interest. Further, they also assumed that the readers would understand that the message of Jesus rises up out of that geographical context. Unfortunately, many Bible readers skim over the geographical information provided in the Scriptures. They are only concerned with the *meat* of the passage. However, all the events of the Bible occurred in an historical context as well as a geographical context." Megilligan, Keith.

It is historical and geographical reality that bring the stories and characters of the Bible to life. We are able to see the relevance and application of biblical truth as we view it in time and space.

"Geography and history are vitally connected. The study of the one must be interwoven with the study of the other. Geography, apart from history, is abstract and uninteresting. History, apart from geography, is meaningless . . . Geography gives history vividness and reality. In the light of Bible geography the men of the Bible stand out as real men who lived in our world, who thought out their truth, and wrought out their destiny as all nations must." Smith, William Walter. *The Student's Historical Geography of the Holy Land.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954, p. vii.

The task of the Bible student is, therefore, to acquire yet another tool: Bible geography. Only as he does this can he truly gain the meaning intended by the divine and human authors.

**A Practical Example**

Following is a study of Psalm 125 which illustrates the fact that accurate interpretation of the Bible is sometimes dependent on the insights of Bible geography.

**Psalm 125: Bible study notes**

A Song of degrees.

1 They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever.

2 As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is round about his people from henceforth even for ever.

3 For the rod of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put forth their hands unto iniquity.

4 Do good, O LORD, unto those that be good, and to them that are upright in their hearts.

5 As for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, the LORD shall lead them forth with the workers of iniquity: but peace shall be upon Israel.
In the course of describing the land of Israel as the principal place where God chose to reveal himself, John R. W. Stott states: “Jerusalem is built on a mountain surrounded by mountains” (Stott 33). Jerusalem, indeed, is situated on a mountain (v 1); around it are various valleys, and beyond these, other mountains (v 2). The psalmist appeals to these two facts of Palestine’s geography—which would have been well-known to his original audience—in order to express two spiritual truths. Jerusalem’s position on a mountain was an indication of its stability. By comparison, those who put their trust in Jehovah are characterized by stability in their lives. Second, the location of mountains around Jerusalem, which provided a measure of security to the city, and had a notable effect on its defense strategy (Megilligan 27), are likened by the psalmist to the LORD’s protective activity on behalf of Israel.

The latter half of the psalm (vv 3-5) continues the two themes already introduced: the stability of the believer, and the security of Israel. The psalmist asserts that “the rod [Strong’s 7626; most likely, a symbol of authority] of the wicked shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous ...” (v 3). That the LORD would shield the righteous from being dominated by the ungodly does not constitute an unconditional promise to Israel as a nation. Such a protection would be conditioned on the nation’s collective righteousness. And, in that spirit, the psalmist prays, “Do good, O LORD, unto those that be good, and to them that are upright in their hearts” (v 4); he could not rightfully request the blessings of God on those who would rebel against him. On the contrary, he understood that the deviant would be led forth to judgment (v 5). Loyal to his nation, his overriding desire was that peace be on Israel (v 5), but this could only be realized to the degree that his people were faithful to the LORD.

Bibliographical References:
Tool 5: Bible History

The Importance of Bible History

When the apostle Paul appeared before King Agrippa, as recorded in Acts 26, he testified of Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. In the course of his defense, he made the following statement:

“For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things [the life, death, and resurrection of Christ] are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26.26).

Paul regarded the historicity of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to be essential to his credibility. Christianity could not be true if these events had not actually happened. Yet Paul could defend himself convincingly because they had not taken place in a corner, but where everyone could see them. Similarly, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15.14-19 that the historicity of Christ’s resurrection is so important that the validity of the whole gospel message hinges on it. Quite obviously, then, there is a vital historical dimension to the Scriptures.

Just as God’s revelation was given in a geographic context (as discussed in Tool 4 of Bridging the Gap), so it was also given in history. John Stott expands on this concept:

“Christianity is essentially a historical religion. God’s revelation, which Christians cherish and seek to communicate, was not given in a vacuum but in an unfolding historical situation, through a nation called Israel and a person called Jesus Christ. It must never be divorced from its historical context; it can be understood only within it.” Stott, John R. W. Understanding the Bible. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, p. 45.

Henry Morris corroborates:

“One of the great distinguishing features of the Christian faith is its incurable historicity! The crucial events that secured the eternal salvation of those who believe in Christ occurred not in some dreamland of another world, but rather in the realm of space called earth and in the realm of time called history.” Morris, Henry M. Many Infallible Proofs: Practical and Useful Evidences of Christianity. San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974, p. i.
Morris goes on to explain that the Christian message is forfeited entirely if its historical nature is denied:

“In no uncertain terms, the New Testament emphasizes the historical aspect of its message ..., As if to anticipate the day when men would talk about the resurrection of Christ while denying its historicity (and such are the subtle absurdities of modern neo-orthodoxy), Paul refused to leave the Gospel ‘hanging upon nothing.’ Instead, he locked Gospel events securely into their essential historical context: ‘Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures’ and ‘was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures’ (1 Cor. 15:3-4).” Morris, Henry M. Many Infallible Proofs: Practical and Useful Evidences of Christianity. San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974, p. i.

That revelation and history are inseparably interwoven ensures that the Bible is relevant to the real world. The principles of Scripture were given to real people in the past, and they apply to people everywhere and at all times.

“Some folk who have no taste for either history or geography may ask rather impatiently why God did not give us instead a simple set of dogmas to believe and rules to obey. Why did he have to reveal himself in a rather remote historical and geographical context, so that we have to struggle to understand the context before we can grasp the revelation? ... A better answer would be that the living God is a personal God, who made us as persons in his own image and insists on treating the persons he has made as persons. So the whole process of revelation has been the self-disclosure of a Person to persons, to real persons like ourselves who actually lived in a certain place at a certain time.” Stott, John R. W. Understanding the Bible. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, pp. 24-25.

Quite often, interpreting a biblical text accurately depends on understanding the text’s historical context. This is true in two ways: First, a text must be understood in the light of the historical circumstances under which it was written. Second, a text must be interpreted in the light of the history which is implicit in its content. John Stott sums it up in the following way:

“God’s purpose to call out from the world a people for himself began to unfold on a particular part of the world’s surface and during a particular period of the world’s history. It is not possible to understand its meaning, therefore, without some knowledge
Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding


A Practical Example

The message of Joshua 1.8 is a well-known one: Success is found in adherence to the laws of God, as given in his revelation to mankind. This much is clear from a cursory reading of the verse. There is more to this verse, however, and it is to be found in its historical context.

Joshua 1.1-9

1 Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass, that the LORD spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying,

2 Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.

3 Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses.

4 From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast.

5 There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

6 Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them.

7 Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest.

8 This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.
9 Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.

The power of the promises extended by God to Joshua (and, by extension, to all believers) in this passage, can only be understood in the light of their historical context. As verses 1-2 tell, Moses had died just prior to the giving of the promises. Israel's respected leader had passed on. Now, the responsibility of leading well over a million Israelites had fallen on the shoulders of Joshua. It is very likely that he felt intimidated and overwhelmed. Against this backdrop of uncertainty, God promised success to Joshua if he would honor God's law. Paul Benware explains:

"God is never thwarted by the death of His servants. Although the death of Moses must have been a depressing event to Joshua and Israel, God immediately appeared to Joshua, bringing encouragement to him (1:5). Joshua was guaranteed of God's presence and blessing (1:1-9)." Benware, Paul N. *Survey of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1988, p. 79.

So, the lesson to be learned is that, whatever challenging circumstance God may allow in the life of the believer, he will always enable him or her to have success at it. Few will ever face a responsibility as great as Joshua's, but all can rejoice in the grace of God to face the circumstances of life in a positive manner.
Tool 6: Bible Customs

The Importance of Bible Customs

An accurate interpretation of the Bible is often dependent on the reader's understanding of the customs that are implied—but not necessarily explained—in the text. G. Christian Weiss observes:

"The pages of Scripture are alive with illustrations from everyday life in the Middle East. To appreciate these allusions to daily life, one must have some understanding of the times and customs of the Middle East when the Bible was written." Weiss, G. Christian. Insights into Bible Times and Customs. Reading, England: Back To The Bible Broadcast, 1972, p. 3.

On the other hand, a lack of cultural insight is often the cause of inaccurate interpretation, as described by D. P Brooks:


Brooks goes on to note that

"[s]ome things in the Bible may seem shocking to those who fail to take into account the culture of the period in which the action unfolded." Brooks, D. P. The Bible: How to Understand and Teach It. Nashville: Broadman, 1969, p. 23.

Fred Wight expresses the same general concept:

"Many passages of Scripture that are hard for the Westerner to understand, are readily explained by a knowledge of the customs and manners of Bible lands. On the other hand, to ignore this subject is to deprive one's self of a thorough mastery of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments." Wight, Fred H. Manners and Customs of Bible Lands. Chicago: Moody Press, 1953, p. 7.

Students of the Bible whose native culture is non-Oriental must approach its contents cross-culturally; they must make mental effort to view cultural references through eyes other than their own.

"It is easy for Occidentals [i.e., Westerners] to overlook the fact that the Scriptures had
their origin in the East, and that each one of the writers was actually an Oriental. Since this is so, in a very real sense the Bible may be said to be an Oriental Book. But many are quite apt to read into the Scriptures Western manners and customs, instead of interpreting them from the Eastern point of view.” Wight, Fred H. *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands.* Chicago: Moody Press, 1953, p. 7.

It follows, then, that the tool of Bible customs, then, must be acquired by the serious Bible interpreter. Much of the biblical message is loaded with cultural content. Westerners are at a particular interpretative disadvantage, and must look through the lens of Oriental culture in order to bring biblical meaning into true focus.

**A Practical Example**

The foot-washing demonstration recorded in John 13 is rather obviously an illustration of servanthood on the part of the Lord. The picture of humble service there portrayed is fairly clear to the Western eye. However, the deep significance of the act is visible only in the light of cultural information.

**John 13.1-2, 4-5, 12-17**

1 Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.

2 And supper being ended,...

4 ... [Jesus] riseth..., and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

5 After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.

12 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?

13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

14 If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.
Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding

15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.
16 Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.
17 If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

Weiss provides the following cultural background to John’s account:

“In the countries we call ‘Bible lands,’ the majority of the people wore only sandals, and their feet readily became soiled. Most roads were not hard-surfaced, and in the rainy season they became extremely muddy and unsanitary.

“Because the feet became dirty so easily, it was customary for a man entering a home to remove his sandals in the vestibule and wash his feet before proceeding into the house. The homes of men who were affluent enough to have several servants always had a particular servant at the door assigned to the task of washing the feet of all who entered, particularly guests.” Weiss, G. Christian. *Insights into Bible Times and Customs.* Reading, England: Back To The Bible Broadcast, 1972, p. 87-88.

Luering adds further detail:

“At an early date this service was considered one of the lowest tasks of servants (1 S 25 41), probably because the youngest and least trained servants were charged with the task, or because of the idea of defilement connected with the foot. It was, for the same reason, if rendered voluntarily, a service which betokened [*i.e.*, signaled] complete devotion. Jesus taught the greatest lesson of humility by performing this humble service to His disciples (Jn 13:4-15).” Luering, H. L. E. “Foot.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Hendrickson Publishers ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994, s.v.

Therefore, in the light of Jewish customs it can be affirmed that Jesus was voluntarily assuming the role of the least-esteemed servant. In this instance, a knowledge of Oriental culture sheds light on the biblical text, making its message more radical. What a powerful example Jesus gave to his followers—both then and now!
Tool 7: Bible Language

The Importance of Biblical Language

One of the largest gaps to be bridged in successful Bible interpretation is that of language. Ramm explains:

"The most obvious divergence [between modern interpreters and the biblical writers] is that of language. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. To formulate rules to bridge this gap is one of the most important tasks of Biblical hermeneutics."


The magnitude of the language barrier is made plain by familiarity with the principles of linguistics. Ramm explains:

"The basic problem at this point is that languages are structurally different . . .

"To translate from Greek to English is not the simple task of finding an English word for each Greek word. The translator has to tack back and forth between languages that are structurally different. He has the tricky job of trying to find equivalents in the English verb system of forms in the Greek verb system.

"Nor is it easy to find words in English that closely match the word in the Hebrew or Greek text. Each word is a little pool of meanings." Ramm, Bernard. Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics. 3rd revised ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970, p. 5.

Translation is a complex procedure. There are a variety of approaches to it. In the end, however, translators agree that the aim of translation is to preserve in the translation the meaning of the original. (Beekman, John, and Callow, John. Translating the Word of God. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, p 33.) The nature and this problem being understood, a question must be confronted: To what degree must the common interpreter seek to learn about the original languages of the Bible? To this a variety of responses could be given. Ramm describes the ideal education of the minister:

"This [liberal arts education] should be followed by a standard theological education which should include studies in Hebrew, Greek, and theology. To be a competent
Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding


It is obvious that the average layman will not pursue formal theological training. In the light of this reality, Virkler describes a more realistic objective to be sought by all interpreters of the Scriptures:

“Several kinds of lexical tools are available which enable the modern student of Scripture to ascertain the various possible meanings of ancient words. While a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek certainly enhances one’s ability to do word studies, an increasing number of these lexical tools are being keyed numerically to Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, making it possible for the person who has no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek . . . to do word studies in these languages.” Virkler, Henry A. Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981, p. 101.

There is no easy answer to the matter that has been posed here. It is certain that a minimal linguistic knowledge is essential. Training in the original languages, while not always feasible, is desirable. A working conclusion is that each interpreter ought to seek out as much information as he or she can reasonably assimilate. This should include at least a functional knowledge of Greek and Hebrew reference helps that can be used by a common English reader.

A Practical Example

Following is an illustration of the difference that a knowledge of biblical Greek can make in Bible study. The text in question is 1 Timothy 4.6. It should be noted that the King James Version does not misrepresent what the Greek says here. However, it does not fully portray the depth of the original message.

1 Timothy 4.6
If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine,
The book of 1 Timothy was penned by Paul so that Timothy would know how to conduct himself in the local church (cf. 1 Tim 3.16). 1 Timothy 4.6 follows Paul’s warnings concerning those who would depart from biblical correctness in favor of false teachings. Timothy’s responsibility was to remind the believers of the truths that would keep them from being deceived by the false teachings. This much is clear from the English reading.

What is not clear in the KJV translation (but is in the original Greek) is the relationship between Timothy’s spiritual life and his ability to minister in the face of false teaching. An observant Greek reading reveals two important facts. First, there was a sense in which Timothy’s faith was static (unchanging). He had made, once and for all, some determinations about what he believed, and had pledged allegiance to the truth. Secondly, there was a sense in which his faith was dynamic. It was his duty to be continually nourished with the words of the faith. He was to keep before him the truths of Christianity; he was to grow in them perpetually.

These two facets of Timothy’s preparation for ministry are readily evident in the Greek grammar underlying 1 Timothy 4.6. The static (or confirmed) aspect of his faith is referred to by a perfect tense verb, which denotes a past action that has present effects (“whereunto thou hast attained”). The dynamic (or growing) aspect stems from a present tense participle, indicating continuous action (“nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine”). Thus, it can be concluded that a minister is to have settled his beliefs in the past, but he is to minister from a heart that is ever growing in faith. This can only be deduced from the Greek grammar. In the light of the above, the following translation is suggested:

As you suggest these things to the brothers you will be a good servant of Jesus Christ, you continually being nourished with the words of the faith and of good teaching, which you have examined thoroughly [or, confirmed yourself to].
Tool 8: Bible Study

The Importance of Bible Study Methodology

The task of studying the entire Bible can seem overwhelming. The Bible is lengthy, and its concepts profound. It can be discouraging to think of studying a book for an entire lifetime without exhausting its content. Jensen describes this frustration, and poses a worthy solution.

"The problems of Bible study ... will always exist, as long as there is a Bible being studied. But they need not appear as an impassable mountain. For the Christian who has committed his life to Christ unreservedly, who opens his heart daily to the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit and sincerely wants to study the Bible, the clue to the conquering of the mountain is probably to be found in a practical and fruitful method of study." Jensen, Irving L. Independent Bible Study: Using the Analytical Chart and the Inductive Method. Moody paperback ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, p. 20.

Traina comments on the necessity of approaching Bible study methodically:

"[T]he need for methodicalness is not usually recognized, and consequently the student is not taught to analyze the process of interpretation in order to develop a thorough, logical, step-by-step approach which he may utilize in the exposition of any Scriptural passage. Some of the consequences of such a lack are wasted time, inaccuracy, and superficiality." Traina, Robert. Methodical Bible Study. New York: Author, 1952, p. 4.

It is the contention of the author that effective Bible study is necessarily methodical. It is the purpose of this unit to familiarize the reader with the inductive method, which has enabled the author to conduct meaningful Bible study for several years. It might be asked, "What is the best method for me?" The answer: "Whichever one you develop and use to your own spiritual benefit."

A Method of Bible Study

Step 1: Observation

"The act of watching carefully—especially with attention to details
or behavior--for the purpose of arriving at a judgment"

Objectives:

- To draw meaning from the text rather than inserting meaning into it
- To be open to the message of the text
- To approach the text with an intent to discover something
- To be an objective observer, avoiding excessive reliance on others' opinions concerning the text

"Exegesis is the application of the principles of hermeneutics to arrive at a correct understanding of the text. The prefix ex ("out of," or 'from') refers to the idea that the interpreter is attempting to derive his understanding from the text, rather than reading his meaning into the text (eisegesis)." Virkler, Henry A. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981, p. 18.

"In observing a passage of Scripture, the student is urged to lay the passage before him in temporary isolation, and to approach it impartially and fearlessly. He should scrutinize it with what John Ruskin calls 'the innocence of the eye'--as if he had never seen it before . . . What he desires above all else, in a true scientific approach, is to see things as they really are." Jensen, Irving L. *Independent Bible Study: Using the Analytical Chart and the Inductive Method*. Moody paperback ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, pp. 45-46.

**Step 2: Analysis**

"Separation of a whole into its component parts; an examination of a complex, its elements, and their relations"

Objectives:

- To break down the text into its natural component parts
- To study each component part's relationship to the whole
- To give attention to detail
Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding

- To emphasize diversity, divergence, dissimilarity of elements in the text
- To categorize the concepts in the text
- To seek a more thorough understanding of any unfamiliar people, places, objects, customs, words, or concepts mentioned in the text

“When the student is face to face with the minute parts of Scripture, including even the punctuation, and when he wrestles to know its intent in its context, he is engaging in the study process known as analysis.” Jensen, Irving L. Independent Bible Study: Using the Analytical Chart and the Inductive Method. Moody paperback ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, p. 46.

“Analysis involves structure, for structure, as described in the previous chapter, involves two things: parts, and the relations of parts to each other and to the whole.” Jensen, Irving L. Independent Bible Study: Using the Analytical Chart and the Inductive Method. Moody paperback ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, p. 47.

Step 3: Synthesis

“The composition or combination of parts or elements so as to form a whole; the combining of often diverse conceptions into a coherent whole”

Objectives:
- To unify all the minute details of the text
- To answer the question, “What is the bottom-line message of this text?”
- To sum up the meaning of the text, focusing on the big picture rather than the details
- To emphasize unity, convergence, similarity of elements in the text
Step 4: Application

"The act of establishing relevance or valid connection"

Objectives:

- To understand the practical implications of the message for the original recipients
- To note any cultural realities that affect the implications of the message
- To discern the practical implications of the message for a person in your culture

"Application is the end or goal of Bible study. This application involves the Bible student himself as the one acted upon. Not what he does to the Bible but what it does to him should be the student's main concern." Jensen, Irving L. Independent Bible Study: Using the Analytical Chart and the Inductive Method. Moody paperback ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, p. 75.

"In application, then, we are concerned about relating the Bible to life today. This involves seeing how the Bible, written to initial audiences thousands of years ago, relates to audiences today— and how we should respond to it. Do the Scriptures have relevance for today, and if so how is that relevance determined?" Zuck, Roy B. Basic Bible Interpretation. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991, p. 281.

"One of the most important issues Bible interpreters face is the question of culturally conditioned Bible passages. That is, are some passages of the Bible limited to that day by the cultural setting and therefore not transferable to our culture, or is everything we read in the Scriptures normative for today? . . . If some passages are limited [by the cultural setting], then how do we determine which ones are transferable to our culture, and which ones are not?" Zuck, Roy B. Basic Bible Interpretation. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991, p. 90.
Step 5: Expression

"The act or process of representing in a medium"

Objectives:

- To translate the message and its personal implications into a form of expression for which you have an appreciation, such as art, conversation, essay, graphic, lesson, poem, sermon, song, or speech.
- To translate the message into the conduct of your daily life

"The application is usually conceived of as terminating in the life of the student himself. Actually, there is a further terminus, involving the student's communication to others." Jensen, Irving L. *Independent Bible Study: Using the Analytical Chart and the Inductive Method*. Moody paperback ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, p. 75.
Recommended Bible Study Library

Following is a list of high-quality books which will aid the building of personal Bible study libraries. Those recommended as essential are labeled with three stars; those somewhat less necessary are labeled with two stars; and those least necessary are labeled with a single star. All titles are in print as of November, 1997. Note: ★★★ books total $105.97; ★★ books total $71.92/$81.92; and ★ books total $89.92.

Bible Doctrine


Bible Interpretation


Bible Introduction


Bible Geography


Bridging the Gap
Developing Tools for Better Bible Understanding

Bible History

Bible Customs

Bible Language

Bible Study