The Essence of the new Testament: A Survey

EDITORS:
Elmer L. Towns
Ben Gutierrez
SECOND EDITION

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A Survey

Elmer L. Towns
Ben Gutierrez

EDITORS
Dedicated to

Andreas J. Köstenberger

for his influence in the lives of several contributing authors of this work.
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You are about to study the most influential book ever written, the New Testament. Of course that claim includes the Old Testament because it is the foundation upon which the New Testament rests. These two books comprise the Bible, God’s message to the world.

The New Testament’s influence is illustrated by the many people throughout history who have read its message of salvation from sin and freedom in Christ Jesus, have believed the promises of God, and have had their lives changed.

It is also illustrated by nations and empires that have been founded upon and influenced by the Bible. Their laws have been based on Judeo-Christian values, and their citizens have attempted to live by the Protestant/Puritan ethic. Following the principles of God’s Word has made them a great nation.

The Old Testament tells of God’s creation of the universe, including planet Earth. It tells how God created the first man in his image and gave him life, liberty, and fellowship with himself. It shows that man’s task was to worship God, obey him, and serve him in a beautiful environment. It also speaks of the origin of sin that has had a devastating impact on the entire human race. Then the Bible tells the story of God’s plan of salvation, how people must please God by their lives and worship him.

God chose one man, Abraham, and one group of people, the Jews, to fulfill his plan of redemption for all. God gave them principles for living, the Ten Commandments, and the land we know as Palestine. God gave them kings and rulers, and prophets as his messengers, to guide them to worship him, to gain victory over their enemies, and to embrace his plan on how to glorify him in their lives.

The Jews, the nation called Israel, failed to obey God and follow Him. In 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, their capital, and burned the temple, then took the rest of the population into captivity in Babylon—all as a sign of God’s judgment for their sin. Seventy years later some of the Jews returned to the Promised Land, and in succeeding years a few other Jews returned.

Prophets delivered God’s message to the Jews scattered among the nations and those in the Promised Land. The last prophet who delivered a message from God to his people was Malachi whose ministry concludes the Old Testament. Then followed approximately 400 years of silence, called “silent” because God was not speaking through prophets.
The New Testament begins with four biographies of God’s Son, called “Gospels,” each emphasizing a different aspect of Jesus’s life. A virgin gave birth and called her Son “Jesus,” as an angel had directed her. Jesus was reared in Nazareth of Galilee and “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people” (Luke 2:52). At about the age of 30 he began preaching the message of God’s kingdom and performing miracles to show that he was the Messiah. The people heard him gladly, but the Jewish religious and political leaders rejected him and plotted to kill him. He was crucified by Roman soldiers but died as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world (John 1:29). Three days later he arose from the dead and spent 40 days preparing his disciples for a worldwide ministry, preaching the message of his death and resurrection as the basis of salvation for as many as would believe.

The book of Acts (the second section of the New Testament) tells the story of the beginning and growth of groups of believers called the church. The church was victorious wherever it went because many gladly began following Jesus, but at the same time there was persecution from the Jewish establishment and later from the Roman authorities. The power of the church came from their prayers to God when they asked him to use their preaching to change lives. The Holy Spirit worked in hearts to spread the message, and the church carried out the commission given them by Jesus: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts gives the history of the early church from Pentecost to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome (approximately AD 62).

Simon Peter, the leader of the Twelve, preached on Pentecost when the New Testament church was introduced to the world. He also preached the gospel to Cornelius, a Roman army officer, marking the introduction of the gospel to Gentiles.

Paul, the other leader in spreading the gospel, was a Jew born in Tarsus (Turkey) who originally had a high position among the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem. After his conversion Paul carried the gospel to modern-day Turkey, Greece, and several islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and ultimately to Rome, Italy.

New churches were planted wherever the message was preached, and they grew in size and influence. Because of the diverse backgrounds of new believers, and the influence of sin in their lives, problems arose in those churches.

Paul had to (re)visit these churches to clear up doctrinal or lifestyle problems; but he also began writing letters to address a variety of important issues. These letters became the basis to teaching doctrinal beliefs and church practices. The letters of Paul make up the third section of the New Testament.

The fourth section of the New Testament is called General Letters or Epistles. These include a letter to the Hebrews in Jerusalem, a letter from James the half brother of Jesus, and letters from the apostles Peter, John, and Jude. These were written to solve specific problems among churches and/or believers.

The last or fifth section of the New Testament is the book of Revelation, written by John the apostle when Jesus appeared to him and said, “Therefore write what you have seen, what is, and what will take place after this” (Rev 1:19). John sums up God’s
message in the Scriptures by describing the state of Christianity that was symbolically represented in seven churches in and around Ephesus in western Turkey. He then describes the events of the last days, including the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time. He concludes with a brief description of heaven and life in eternity.

Also included in this survey of the New Testament are four important preliminary chapters that provide a background for your study. The first chapter explains “How We Got the New Testament.” Chapter 2 is “Interpreting the New Testament.” You will need this orientation to help you clearly understand the message of each of the twenty-seven books that appear in sequence. Chapter 3, “The History Between the Testaments,” gives an in-depth account of the historical events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Finally, chapter 4, “The Essence of the Synoptic Problem,” examines the issues surrounding the similarities and differences among what we call the “Synoptic Gospels”—Mathew, Mark, and Luke.

This New Testament survey is the result of a team of writers who have taught this course at Liberty University and other educational institutions. This book represents the overflow of our academic studies, our experiences with students like you, and our passion to know God and his Word. We want you to study the New Testament so you will learn about God and in that experience find God’s will for your life. Our prayer is that you enjoy studying the New Testament and that, in your research, you reach out to touch God. But more importantly, we pray that, in return, God may touch you.

Elmer L. Towns
General Editor

Ben Gutierrez
General Editor
Chapter 1

HOW WE GOT THE NEW TESTAMENT

The history of how the New Testament was written, copied, and translated is an important topic that impacts the foundation of the faith of Christianity. This chapter answers the following questions: How did we get the New Testament? Who decided which books would be included? Why were some ancient texts not included? Why are there so many translations?

THE WRITING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament consists of 27 books that were written between about AD 45 to approximately AD 95. Some authors penned their books themselves, while others typically dictated the contents of a letter or narrative to an assistant or a scribe. This assistant would write down what was spoken, and the author would then check the document for accuracy. Apparently, Paul handwrote some of his first letters (Gal 6:11) and dictated his later ones, adding his handwritten salutation to authenticate them (Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17; see also 1 Pet 4:12). The books of the New Testament were written on leather scrolls and papyrus sheets.¹ These books were circulated independently at first, not as a collection. Perhaps itinerant preachers such as the apostle Matthew stayed in the home of a rich believer who had a library and a slave to serve as his personal scribe. Matthew may have allowed a scribe to copy his Gospel. Hence, the Gospel of Matthew was circulated widely as he traveled from church to church. Paul instructed that some of his letters be circulated (Col 4:16). We do not know if the actual letter (called an autograph) was circulated to various churches or if copies were made by scribes to be circulated.

Oldest complete Coptic Psalter.
In any case copies were eventually gathered into collections. Apparently, there were collections of Paul’s letters (cf. 1 Pet 3:16). They were copied into codices, which are similar to modern-day books, with the pages sewn together to form a binding. In this form the documents were easier to read. Leather or scrolls were harder to use because the entire book had to be unrolled to find a passage. Also, papyrus sheets cracked if rolled into a scroll; hence, the flat papyrus pages were sewn into a book. In Latin the codex collection was called Ta Bibla, the words we use to designate our Bible. But the codex form forced decisions to be made, none more important than this: Which books would be included?

THE CANON

Setting the Table for the New Testament

Several factors need to be considered when addressing the formation of the canon. Canon refers to a permanent list of authoritative books recognized as Scripture. The formation of the Old Testament canon, which will not be discussed here in any detail, gave the church the idea of forming the New Testament. Some scholars place the gathering of the 39 books of the Old Testament to Ezra. Remember, the first five books of the Old Testament had been gathered as the Pentateuch. Other scholars say the Old Testament was gathered into a canon when the Septuagint was translated from Hebrew into Greek. Therefore, the concept of a canon would have been familiar to the writers of the New Testament and Jewish Christians in general.

God “inbreathed” the writings of Scripture so that the writers wrote the Word of God without error. God chose three languages for his self-revelation. First, the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. Some parts of Daniel and Ezra were written in another Semitic language, Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Greek.

The Greek of the New Testament was different from the classical Greek of the philosophers. However, the archaeological excavations have uncovered thousands of parchments of “common language Greek,” verifying that God chose the language of common people (Koine Greek) in which to communicate his revelation. Koine Greek was common Greek for the common people. It became a universal “trade language,”

Greek Papyrus.
and enabled the New Testament to be accessible to much of the ancient world quickly and effectively.

We do not have the original manuscripts or “autographs” of any book of the Bible. These were lost, mostly during the persecution of the early church. Roman emperors felt that if they could destroy the church’s literature, they could eliminate Christianity. Others were lost due to wear and tear. The fact that some early churches did not keep these autographs but made copies and used them demonstrates that they were more concerned with the message than the vehicle of the message. God in his wisdom allowed the autographs to vanish. Like the relics from the Holy Land, they would have been venerated and worshipped. Surely “bibliolatry” (worship of the Bible) would have replaced the worship of God.

While some may have difficulty with the idea of not having the original manuscripts, scholars who work with the nonbiblical documents of antiquity usually likewise do not have access to those originals. When considering the manuscript evidence, it should be remembered that there are close to 6,000 Greek manuscripts and an additional 13,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament. This does not include 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate and more than 1,000 copies of other early versions of the Bible. These figures take on even more significance when compared to the similar statistics of other early writings.3

Motivators for a Canon

Some writers have supposed that Christians did not discuss a canon for New Testament books until several centuries after the life of Jesus. However, because of the presence of the heretic Marcion (died c. 160), this is unlikely. Marcion was a church bishop who had a negative view of the God presented in the Old Testament. He rejected the Old Testament and had a severely shortened New Testament canon, consisting of only the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul’s letters. However, even these were edited to remove as much Jewish influence as possible. The church excommunicated Marcion and swiftly rejected his teachings and canon.

Another heretical movement, Gnosticism, developed in the second century. In general this group believed that salvation was found in attaining “special knowledge.” The Gnostics had their own set of writings defending their beliefs and practices. Included in their writings are false Gospels (for example, the Gospel of Thomas). The Gnostics and Marcion raised the question as to which books were genuine and authoritative for Christians.4 Metzger concludes, “All in all, the role played by Gnostics in the development of the canon was chiefly that of provoking a reaction among members of the Great Church so as to ascertain still more clearly which books and epistles conveyed the true teaching of the Gospels.”5

Early Canon Formation

It should not be assumed that only through the pressure of outside groups that the Christian canon emerges. The early Christians were Jewish believers. They already had the concept of a canon due to their use of the Old Testament. A primary vehicle through which God, in the Old Testament, developed agreements among his people
was through a **covenant**. A covenant agreement was a written document stating the stipulations between God and his people. Jewish people were familiar with describing the implications of God’s activity through the use of a written document. The development of authoritative writings among the early Christian apostles was a reasonable outcome of this concept. The early Christians did not leave this writing to whomever decided to write, but set up an authority structure to make sure that things were transmitted properly from one generation to the next.

There are several other clues that show that there was a canonical consciousness (awareness of the New Testament books) among the earliest Christians. First, is the use of the *nomina sacra* (sacred names). If you were to hold in your hands a manuscript of the Greek New Testament you would make an interesting discovery. The reader would notice several contracted terms that would have to be decoded by the reader. These contracted terms have been labelled the *nomina sacra*. There are around fifteen words that are contracted. Among them are the words Jesus, Lord, spirit, cross, Israel and heaven. The *nomina sacra* are important to the issue of canon because it gives a strong clue that an early writing community was working together. The plausibility that such a notational system could be developed by individual authors working in isolation is very low.

Second, there is the clue of the **titles of the Gospels**. The theory that many Gospels were written and circulated by various authors and only at a late date did the four Gospels that are contained in the New Testament appear, struggles to take into account the uniformity of the Gospel titles. All four Gospel titles state the Gospel (singular) of either Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Matthew, Mark and Luke do not state who wrote the Gospel within the document itself. So to affirm the late addition of Gospel titles assumes that the Gospels circulated throughout the ancient world without anyone knowing who wrote them. Further, it is to assume that having circulated for years, an unidentified group of people unknown to us decided to choose these four Gospels and place on them uniform titles is improbable, without leaving behind traces of earlier titles. This uniformity of titles seems to point to the early acceptance of the four Gospels and their external validation by an early Christian community. As stated earlier, the early Christians set aside the use of the scroll and replaced it with the codex. To break from the use of the scroll to the codex (a document similar to our modern day book) seems to primarily be due to the fact that in one document all four Gospels could be read together.

Third, there is a **canonical-consciousness** already apparent in the New Testament documents themselves (2 Pet 3:16). The epistle of 2 Peter appears to reference a collection of Paul’s letters and establish a connection between Paul’s writing and the authoritative documents of the Old Testament. The clear reading of this text shows that Peter understood Paul’s writing on the same level as authoritative Scripture. Paul’s letters also appear to be held in a collection similar to what emerges among the Gospels. The main reason that this argument is dismissed is because the authorship of 2 Peter is questioned. Some liberal scholars deny Peter’s authorship of 2 Peter because they want to deny his citation of Paul’s letters in 2 Peter 3:16 as Scripture (a very circular
argument). However, even if one accepted that Peter did not write 2 Peter this still puts a canonical consciousness very early in the Christian movement. It seems plausible to suggest that Peter wrote 2 Peter (which is affirmed by early church tradition) and was aware of Paul’s writings which were held on the same level as authoritative Scripture.

Fourth, a final clue is the Muratorian fragment. The Muratorian fragment is a Latin document that contains a list of New Testament books recognized as authoritative. In addition to merely naming the books it gives descriptions of some of the books. The contents contain some information about authorship and descriptions of some of the books. While scholarship is divided over this issue, it is possible that the Muratorian fragment is from the second century. This would push the development of a canonical list very early in the Christian movement. While none of these arguments alone make a decisive claim for an early canon, the evidence pointing toward an early canonical consciousness appears to be substantial. The idea that the canon only developed due to the fact that other groups challenged the canon seems to be wrong. It is equally likely that the heretical groups that challenged the canonical writing were reacting to the early canonical consciousness of the early Christian movement. In the year 367 AD, the canon of the New Testament was officially recognized by the church. The influence of Athanasius appears to be in a long line of thinkers that were aware of what books made up in the canon. He is the one who has been credited for officially setting down the markers of the New Testament canon.

The Main Criteria for Canonicity

The process in which the canon was formed is rather complicated. However, some offer the following six tests for a book to be considered part of the canon: (1) apostolicity, (2) antiquity, (3) orthodoxy, (4) catholicity, (5) traditional use, and (6) inspiration.

The test of apostolicity means that a book must be written by an apostle or one connected to an apostle. When applied to the New Testament, most books automatically meet this requirement (those written by Matthew, John, Paul, and Peter). Mark and Luke were both associates of Paul. James was a half brother of Jesus, and Jude is either an apostle or the half brother of Jesus. The only book that has much difficulty with this criterion is Hebrews. Many in the early church believed that Paul wrote Hebrews, but many New Testament scholars today suggest it was written by Luke. If we do not know who wrote the book, how can we connect it to the canon? Hebrews 13:23a says, “Be aware that our brother Timothy has been released.” Whoever the author of Hebrews was, this reference places him within the Pauline circle.

Antiquity refers to the age of the writing. Not all canonical books were written by an apostle. Some were written by someone who was closely associated with an apostle. There are books in early Christianity that were doctrinally sound and meaningful to the church. These would be similar to how certain contemporary Christian books are meaningful to Christians today. Yet, Christians would not consider these on the same level with Scripture due to their time of writing. In a similar way, if a book appears too late, outside the apostolic period, then the book would be considered non-canonical.
The rule of faith refers to the conformity between the book and orthodoxy. “Orthodoxy” refers to “right doctrine.” Therefore, the document had to be consistent with Christian truth as the standard that was recognized throughout Christian churches (e.g., in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, etc.). If a document supported heretical teachings, it was rejected.

Catholicity (or widespread acceptance) refers to the support a particular book had among churches in the early Christian communities. Some early Christian writings only had local recognition. However, many of the New Testament documents had been virtually received universally by the earliest churches. There were some books like Hebrews that was received by most early Christian communities, but not all.

Traditional use refers to the widespread and continuous use of a document by the churches. As the Christian movement developed out of those formative years some documents emerged as the ones to be read and studied as a part of church life. It was not only the acceptance of certain books by certain Christian communities but also the use of those books in Christian worship that compelled them to be recognized as canonical.

Inspiration is the claim by the biblical author that the message of the book was given by God. While the vocabulary and style was that of the author, the message of the book was from God. Further, in the early stages of the church history, the recipients of these books affirmed in them God’s inspiration. The allegorical method was employed by some of the early Christian thinkers because they believed that more than the mere words of an apostle were contained in these documents. They believed they were the Word of God.

Applying these criteria to the books contained within the New Testament, and to those that were left out, shows the consistency of the canon as it was handed down. Some “Gospels” have been found in recent years and have raised quite a stir, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas. Why are not these “Gospels” not considered authoritative for Christians? First, these Gospels cannot be definitively linked to apostles, even though apostles are named in the titles. Second, some heretical teachings in each document contradict the teachings of Scripture. Third, none of these documents was used universally or continuously by the church. Therefore, they each fail on these earliest criteria.

The Logical Argument

The a priori argument states that God would guard the gathering of the books into the canon because he had originally written each book. The Fragment of an Exodus passage from the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.
HOW WE GOT THE NEW TESTAMENT

argument is based on the following premise. (1) God had a message he wanted to reveal to man. (2) God chose a multiple number of authors who would write the message for others to understand. (3) God knew that his revelation would be attacked from without. (4) God knew that the recipients of his revelation were not scholars but average people in average circumstances. (5) Therefore, God could be expected personally to guarantee the contents (revelation), the accuracy of the words (inspiration), and the compilation of the different messages from all his messengers into one coherent unit (canon). In this way the message would be transmitted to future generations (inerrancy) so there would be no corruption, alteration, deletion, and/or addition to the Word of God.16

THE BIBLE IN TRANSLATION

Early Translations of Scripture

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew (with some Aramaic) and the New Testament in Greek. The Old Testament was translated into Greek by Jewish scholars about 200 years before the birth of Jesus. This translation became known as the Septuagint, abbreviated as LXX. At times the LXX is a fairly literal translation, but at other times it substantially deviates from the Hebrew text.18 Also prior to the writing of the New Testament, the Old Testament was translated into Aramaic, the primary language of Israel. At first these translations were done in the synagogue so the congregation could understand the Scripture when the Hebrew text was read aloud. The synagogue leader would verbally translate the Hebrew text into Aramaic, and eventually these translations were written down. The translations were known as Targums.

The entire Bible (Old and New Testaments) was translated into many languages early in church history. There were many Latin translations of Scripture, and these were used throughout the churches. In the late fourth century, Pope Damascus commissioned Jerome to create a standard Latin version for the church from the existing translations. The product was the Vulgate. It was quickly accepted and became the standard text throughout the church for the next 1,000 years. The Bible was also translated into Syriac beginning in the second century. A standard Syriac version, called the Peshitta, was completed in the fifth century. Translations were also done into Coptic, Georgian, Armenian, Gothic, and Ethiopic. The goal was to make Scripture accessible to Christians who did not know Hebrew and/or Greek.

The Bible Translated into English

Some parts of the Bible were translated into English in the seventh through tenth centuries. John Wycliffe began an ambitious translation project in the fourteenth century. He translated all four Gospels, maybe even the entire New Testament. His associates completed the translation of the rest of Scripture. This translation was based on the Latin Vulgate, not the Hebrew and Greek. It was so literal that it was difficult to understand at times. Wycliffe died of a stroke and shortly afterward was declared a heretic by
Christ above. To the Hebrew. the Angels.

20 Ye, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord:refresh my bowels in the Lord.
21 Having confidence in thy obedience, I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more then I say.
22 But I will prepare me also a lodging:for I trust that though your prayers I shall be grieved unto you.

23 There salute the Epaphhas, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus:
24 Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow labourers.
25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Written from Rome to Philemon, by Onesimus a servant.

THE EPISTLE OF PAUL 
the Apostle to the Hebrews.

CHAP. I.

1. Christ in these last times coming to vs from the Father, is preferred above the Angels, both in Person and Office.

2. Doth in sundry times, and in divers manners, speak in time past unto the Fathers by the Prophets.
3. Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Sonne, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.
4. Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on right hand of the Father on high,
5. Being made so much better then the Angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent Name then they.
6. For unto which of the Angels said he at any time, Thou art my Sonne, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Sonne.
7. And again, when he bringeth in the first begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the Angels of God worship him.
8. And of the Angels he saith: Who made his Angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.

9. But unto the Sonne, he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom.
10. The Sonne hath had a more excellent name then them.
11. They shall perish, but thou remaiste; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment.
12. And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed, but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.
13. But to which of the Angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?
14. Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them, who shall be heirs of salvation?

CHAP. II.

1. Wee ought to be obedient to Christ Jesus,
2. And that because he vouchsafed to take our nature upon him, 14 as it was necessary.

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.

Original page from a KJV 1611 Bible.
the Roman Catholic Church. The church declared anyone in possession of this translation a heretic as well.

The sixteenth century saw a proliferation of translations into English. With the rediscovery of Hebrew and Greek in the European renaissance and the invention of the printing press, translating the Bible into the languages of the laity became a priority for men like William Tyndale (1494–1536). Tyndale completed his translation of the New Testament in 1526. Since the English Bible was forbidden in England, it was printed in Germany and smuggled into England. He continued the task by translating the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and other Old Testament books while continually revising his New Testament translation. He was eventually put on trial and found guilty of heresy. He was executed by being strangled and burned at the stake. Tyndale’s translation is far superior to Wycliffe’s. His desire to see the common man understand the Bible is evident in his translation.

Many more versions were produced following Tyndale. The Coverdale Bible (1535) was the first complete Bible printed in English. This was essentially a revision of Tyndale’s translation. The first Bible published with the approval of the king of England was Matthew’s Bible (1537). The Great Bible (1539) was the first authorized translation and was the official Bible of England for about twenty years.

The Geneva Bible (first printed in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1560) was a significant achievement for Bible translation in English. This translation was completed by a group of scholars, not one man. The Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew text, unlike most of the translations before it. Also, many consider it the first “study Bible,” since it contained annotations, introductions to the books of the Bible, as well as maps and cross-references. Finally, it was the first English Bible translation to use both chapters and verse numbers. It quickly replaced the Great Bible in the churches.
The King James Version (1611), also known as the Authorized Version, was in part motivated by King James I of England’s lack of appreciation for the notes that accompanied the Geneva Bible. About fifty scholars were assembled, and translation began in 1607. The rules and principles they used to guide their translation were published as an eleven-page preface. The translators argued that students of Scripture should study a variety of translations and look at the alternate translations provided in the margins of the KJV. This translation was an excellent work of scholarship. Soon after publication it became the standard translation used in England. It was the dominant English translation used for over four centuries.

There has been a tradition of English translations that are revisions in the KJV tradition. The English Revised Version (ERV) completed the New Testament in 1881 and the Old Testament in 1885. The main advancements from the KJV to the ERV were: (1) the ERV updated words since the English language had changed significantly in the previous 250 years; and (2) many manuscripts older than the ones used by the KJV translators had been discovered, and these were used by the translators of the ERV. The ERV committee was composed of scholars in England and America. The American representatives had a significantly weaker influence on the committee and published their own revision of the KJV in 1901: the American Standard Version (ASV). The ASV was revised in 1952 in the form of the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

Modern Translations in English

Many translations have appeared on the American scene in recent years. The following is a summary of a selection of the more popular translations and their origin. Some of these translations are considered essentially literal, which is a translation philosophy that understands the relationship between the modern reader and the message of the text to be the same as that between the original reader and the message of the text. This philosophy emphasizes the importance of translating every word, using the same (or similar) grammatical structures as the original, preserving idioms, and maintaining consistency in translating words from the original languages. Other translations are in the functional or dynamic equivalence category, which attempts to render the ancient text in such a way as to have the same impact on the contemporary reader that it had on the ancient reader. This philosophy emphasizes that the translation should be easy to read and have contemporary English grammar. Many translations fall between these philosophies.

Essentially Literal Translations

Four popular essentially literal translations have recently been published. The most literal is the New American Standard Version (NASB: 1971, 1995). The NASB is a revision of the ASV prepared by a committee of conservative evangelicals. The New King James Version (NKJV: 1982) is an update in grammar and style from the KJV. The translators made significant changes by removing the historic second-person pronouns (such as “thee” and “thou”). They also changed verbs by removing the “eth” from the end (so “believeth” became “believes”). The style and literary quality of the
KJV was retained. The translators also used the same Greek text (the Majority Text) in translation as the KJV, as opposed to other modern translations.

The English Standard Version (ESV: 2001, 2007, 2011) is a revision of the RSV. The translators of the ESV sought to update the language of the RSV while “correcting” some of the translations they believed were of a liberal bent. The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB: 2004, 2009) is a fresh translation from the Hebrew and Greek, not a revision of a previous version. Two factors motivated the HCSB translation: (1) Bible translations must keep pace with the rapidly changing English language, and (2) significant advances in biblical research (such as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls) have given modern translators more information for more accurate translations. The HCSB translation represents a high-quality, accurate translation for today’s reader.

Functional Equivalent Translations and Attempts at Balance


The Bible that has succeeded in replacing the KJV from being the standard English translation is the New International Version (NIV: 1978, 1984, 2011). The NIV translators were a group of approximately 100 scholars who held to a high view of Scripture and were committed to the authority and infallibility of the Bible. The committee planned a revision that was eventually published as the TNIV (2005). In 2009, the publisher announced that the 1984 NIV and the 2005 TNIV would no longer be published. Instead, an updated NIV would be released in 2011. The 2011 NIV has made many changes from the 1984 NIV but remains about 95 percent the same. Changes were made for one of three reasons: (1) changes in the English language, (2) progress in scholarship, (3) a concern for clarity. The translators sought to strike a balance between an essentially literal and a functional equivalence philosophy. The NIV has been the top-selling Bible translation for over two decades.
The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV: 1989) was another revision from the RSV. This was one of the first major translations to incorporate gender-neutral language into their translation philosophy. The gender-neutral issue in Bible translation is a dialogue over how to approach the issue of the gender of certain words. Translators disagree over whether certain words and phrases in Hebrew and Greek were originally gender specific or more universal. For example, Matt 4:19 reads in the KJV, “I will make you fishers of men,” but in the NRSV, “I will make you fish for people.”

The New English Translation (NET: 2001, 2003, 2005) is another fresh translation from the Hebrew and Greek. The goal of this unique translation was to provide a digital translation that could be obtained for free on the Internet. The NET Bible contains over 60,000 translators’ notes, which often contain discussions on the Hebrew or Greek text. While the main translation is balanced and gender neutral, the footnotes contain more literal alternative translations.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament that Christians use today has a long, rich history. The original copies were written almost 2,000 years ago and were copied for over 1,000 years by hand. The dialogue over the Old Testament canon set the table for the dialogue over the New Testament canon. The heretic Marcion and Gnosticism motivated the early church to discuss which books were authoritative and which books were not. All the books in the New Testament can be connected to an apostle, have content consistent with sound doctrine, have apostolic authority, and were used widely throughout the early church. The New Testament was translated into many languages early in church history. Wycliffe and Tyndale were early translators of the Bible into English, culminating in the King James Version. Many contemporary versions now exist for the edification of the body of Christ. With the King James translators, we urge you to compare several versions of Scripture as you show yourself to be a diligent student of God’s Word, always remembering that the original intent of the biblical author is the key to interpreting the text.

For Further Reading

Köstenberger, Andreas J., and David A. Croteau. “A Short History of Bible Translation.” In Which Bible Translation Should I Use? A Comparison

Study Questions

1. What is the definition of the word canon?
2. How did Marcion and Gnosticism contribute to the development of the canon?
3. What are the three main tests a book had to pass when being considered for inclusion into the canon?
4. How has understanding the process of canonization increased your trust in the Bible?
5. Who were some of the earliest Christians to translate the Bible into English?
6. What are the differences between the major translation philosophies?
7. What translation do you use most often? What translation philosophy does it use?

ENDNOTES

1. Papyrus is a thick paper material that comes from the center tissue of the papyrus plant (2 John 12; 3 John 13).

10. For more on the authorship of Hebrews, see the chapter on Hebrews.

11. Also referred to as universality or catholicity.


13. For example, v. 114 (probably added at a later date) in the Gospel of Thomas is an affront to New Testament teaching on women and salvation (cf. Gal 3:28). Also, the entire story line of the Gospel of Judas contradicts the Gospels and Acts, especially with regard to Judas’s death (cf. Matt 27:5 and Acts 1:18 with the claim that the disciples stoned Judas).


15. Similarly, if another of Paul’s or Peter’s letters were found, these might be helpful for understanding the New Testament, but they would not be considered part of the canon.


18. It should be noted that there was not an official “Septuagint” but many versions, or “Septuagints,” because many variations existed among the manuscripts.

19. This was not necessarily just because of his translation but because of his views on predestination, authority, wealth and possessions, the Lord’s Supper, and the papacy.

20. It was edited by John Rogers, who wrote under a false name.

21. Unfortunately, most modern editions of the King James Version do not contain this preface. Those who want to appreciate the fullness of the King James Version should by all means read the preface.

22. The preface can be found at http://www.ccel.org/bible/kjv/preface/pref1.htm.

23. The KJV was translated from copies of the Old Testament and New Testament books. These copies, or manuscripts, have a wide range of dates, some being just several hundred years removed from the writing of the New Testament.

24. When multiple dates are listed for translations, the first refers to the original publication date and all following dates refer to revisions.


26. A paraphrase seeks to reword the message of Scripture in the same language. Some scholars would consider paraphrases as “translations.”


The Bible is to be read and interpreted like no other book because it is divinely inspired. It is God’s Word to humanity to reveal the saving activity of Jesus. The Holy Spirit of God is able to reveal the proper interpretation and application of the Bible to our lives. However, the Bible is also to be read and interpreted like any other book because it comes to us through the vehicle of a particular language written by an author living in a specific culture. Thus the same techniques that are used in the interpretation of other books can be applied to the Bible as well. In this chapter we will examine the importance of good skills of interpretation when reading and studying the Bible.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CORRECT INTERPRETATION

Much of the Bible can be interpreted literally without any problem. However, the approach described in this chapter, the grammatical-historical approach, is a much better way to approach Scripture. That is, readers of Scripture must understand the grammar and the historical setting of the passage in order to understand correctly and apply any passage with confidence.

In 2 Tim 2:15, the apostle Paul said, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth.” Paul commands Timothy to “be diligent,” a word that refers to examining thoroughly all you do. Timothy is commanded to be diligent in his handling and teaching of Scripture. Skeptics have said, “You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say.” Is this the principle for interpreting the Bible? No! Then what are the steps for understanding the Bible? How can Christians apply a passage to their lives today from a book that was completed almost 2,000 years ago? These questions, and others, will be answered in this chapter.

One mandatory concept that needs to be grasped is that the Bible cannot be read properly without being interpreted. Every word that is read is assigned a definition. Every sentence is understood in relationship to the sentences surrounding it. These decisions on meaning, usually taking place subconsciously, are in fact interpretations because people filter what they read through their presuppositions. Every reader is influenced by his or her worldview, doctrines, traditions, upbringing, and culture.
People do not just read it and understand it, because when a statement is read, it is interpreted. The question is not whether Christians should interpret the Bible (because all people do); the question is whether Christians interpret the Bible correctly.

CONCEPTS FOR INTERPRETATION

Two universal concepts to keep in mind when reading your Bible are: (1) context and (2) the rule of interpretation. With these two concepts in your “interpretive toolbox,” you will safeguard yourself against wayward or even heretical interpretations.

Context

There are three types of context when interpreting Scripture: (1) the literary context, which refers to the surrounding words, sentences, and paragraphs; and (2) the historical context, which refers to the culture and historical setting of the original author and audience; and (3) the theological context, which refers to the message conveyed by the author. For example, the literary context of John 3:16 is: (1) the paragraph (John 3:16–21), (2) the discourse (John 3:1–21), (3) the section of the Gospel of John it is in (John 1:19–4:54), and (4) the entire Gospel of John. You could picture it like this:

The historical context includes the culture, language, customs, time period, situation, and the context of the original author and readers. Many additional resources are available to help you understand the historical context.3

The theological context puts together the findings of both the historical and literary context. The author is attempting to communicate a message to his audience. In the New Testament, the authors are attempting to convey insight into the person and work of Jesus.

The refrain “context is king” should be repeated until it echoes in your mind. No principle of interpreting Scripture is more important than context. The majority of errors in interpretation can be resolved through studying the context more carefully. The old
adage that “you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say” is true only if you ignore literary context. The most common way this is done is through proof texting.

Inappropriate proof texting is a plague that hinders good interpretation. Proof texting refers to quoting a verse of Scripture without regard for the literary context. Sometimes proof texting is done correctly. For example, if a preacher were to state that “everyone who believes in Jesus will have eternal life, like it says in John 3:16,” he would be proof texting John 3:16. Since the statement is correct, this is an example of appropriate proof texting. This practice becomes dangerous if someone does not know the literary context of that passage. But suppose a football player said, “I know that God will help me be the greatest football player ever because Phil 4:13 says that ‘I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.’” The context of Philippians is one of being strengthened through persecution. In Phil 1:27–29, Paul says:

\[
\text{Just one thing: Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.}
\]  
Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, working side by side for the faith that comes from the gospel, not being frightened in any way by your opponents. This is a sign of destruction for them, but of your deliverance—and this is from God. For it has been given to you on Christ’s behalf not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him.\(^4\)

These verses depict the Philippians facing persecution. This should come as no surprise since Paul was arrested and beaten while in Philippi (see Acts 16) and was in prison while writing this letter. While many small indicators further this argument, in the verse immediately before 4:13, Paul describes some of the suffering he has been through. After 4:13, Paul mentions his “hardship.” All of these contextual clues indicate that Paul was not making a blanket statement that God will help Christians do anything they want to do.

The Analogy of Faith

A popular confession of faith summarizes this concept well: “The infallible rule of interpretation is that the Scripture interprets itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” The first statement explains that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture. Scripture will never contradict Scripture. Also, every text has only one correct interpretation but many applications. When a verse is unclear, one should seek to understand that verse by studying the verses on the same topic that are clearer. For example, Heb 6:1–6 is often cited as a passage that demonstrates people can be saved and subsequently lose their salvation. These verses are hard to interpret by themselves: Are they describing Christians or just those who appear to be Christians? The descriptions seem so positive (they were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, were companions with the Holy Spirit, etc.), but the text never explicitly says they are in fact Christians. Since this is an unclear passage, a comparison with other passages that address this topic will be
necessary for clarity. Reading John 6:39; 10:28–29; and 1 John 2:19, passages that are much clearer on the issue, will help to clarify the meaning of Heb 6:1–6.

**CONSIDERATIONS IN INTERPRETATION**

Interpreting a passage of Scripture involves a **conscientious reading** of the text. Careful readers of Scripture will want to read the passage over and over again, meticulously figuring out how every sentence and paragraph add to the meaning of the passage they are studying. Skimming over the passage will enforce the readers’ prior beliefs about the passage. But when they engage in a deeper examination, diligently studying God’s Word, they will truly be able to understand his Word and know God more intimately.

**Observing the Parts of a Passage**

Both the details of the passage and the big picture need to be analyzed. The process starts with **observation**. Write down as many observations about the passage as possible. Howard Hendricks has said, “A pen is a mental crowbar.” Conscientious readers will discover that there are too many observations to remember without writing them down. Therefore, write them down so you can sift through them later. You need to complete this simple step, observation, before you can interpret or apply the passage. The great English pastor and author, John Stott, said:

> To search for [a passage’s] contemporary message without first wrestling with its original meaning is to attempt a forbidden shortcut. It dishonours God (disregarding his chosen way of revealing himself in particular historical cultural contexts), it misuses his Word (treating it like an almanac or book of magic spells) and it misleads his people (confusing them about how to interpret Scripture).7

What are some ways careful observers of Scripture should read Scripture? Here is a road map to reading sentences and paragraphs.

**The Place of Observation in Interpretation**

John Stott’s quote emphasizes the importance of understanding the meaning of the passage for the original audience before understanding the contemporary meaning. **Three key concepts** are observation, interpretation, and application. The order for these concepts is of utmost importance. If readers change the order, they are in danger of misinterpreting a passage. First, **observe** the passage using some of the categories discussed below. Second, **interpret** the passage, which means to figure out what the passage meant to the original audience. Third, **apply** the passage to a contemporary situation.

**Observing Sentences**

There is a difference between a “sentence” and a “verse.” Some verses will have multiple sentences. Some sentences will span multiple verses. Here are **seven things**
to look for when reading sentences. This is not an exhaustive list but a way to get started reading sentences more attentively.8

1. **Repetition:** One way an author emphasizes an important point is by repeating a word or phrase several times. For example, John 1:9–10 says, “The true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was created through Him, yet the world did not recognize Him.” John used the word “world” four times in two verses. So, in observing this text, write down: “The word ‘world’ is used four times in two verses.” Do not be concerned yet about the reason or implication of this observation; just make the observation.

2. **Contrasts:** The use of the words “but,” “rather,” and “however” signifies a contrast. Paul says in Rom 6:14, “For sin will not rule over you, because you are not under law but under grace.” When you see the word “but,” make sure to write down the two items being contrasted. In Rom 6:14, “not under law” and “under grace” are being contrasted.

3. **Comparisons and Metaphors:** Luke’s description of Jesus in Luke 22:44 is a good example: “Being in anguish, He prayed more fervently, and His sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.” Sermons have been preached describing the process of hematohidrosis in relationship to this verse. Without denying the medical condition of small blood vessels rupturing near sweat glands and blood coming out through the sweat glands, recognize that Luke 22:44 only says that Jesus’s sweat was “like” drops of blood.9 This means there was a relationship between his sweat and drops of blood. It appears more likely that the relationship was that of the size of the sweat drops, not the color.10

4. **Cause and Effect:** Study Rom 12:2 and try to figure out the cause-and-effect relationships: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” The first cause is a renewed mind, and the effect is transformation. The second cause is transformation, and the effect is the ability to discern the will of God.

5. **Conjunctions:** Romans 12:1 begins, “Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” This verse begins with “therefore,” which should cause an observant reader to ask, “Why does the author say ‘therefore’?”11 It refers to the foundation on the basis of which Paul is going to teach in Romans 12–16, which is all of Romans 1–11.

6. **Verbs:** Verbs are where the action takes place. This is true in the entire New Testament but especially in the epistles. Beyond simply noting the verb, also try to decide if the verb is active or passive. An active verb occurs when the subject of the sentence is doing the action. In the sentence “I hit the ball,” the subject (“I”) is doing the action (“hit”). Therefore, “hit” is an active verb. In the sentence “I was hit by the ball,” the subject (“I”) did not do the action of hitting but received the action. When the subject receives the action, it is a passive verb. Look at Eph 1:11: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (ESV). “Having been predestined” is passive. Christians were passive in receiving the action of predestination. The
active verb has as its subject the One who “works all things.” God is the active agent, and Christians are passive. Remember, all you are doing is making observations. Do not prematurely jump into application or theology. People must train themselves to make observations and allow the text to speak for itself.

7. **Pronouns**: Sometimes it is difficult to decipher all the pronouns in a biblical text, and many times readers take them for granted. Always write down to whom or to what the pronoun is referring. Read through Phil 1:27–30 and identify to whom all the pronouns refer:

Just one thing: Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, working side by side for the faith that comes from the gospel, not being frightened in any way by your opponents. This is a sign of destruction for them, but of your deliverance—and this is from God. For it has been given to you on Christ’s behalf not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him, having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I have.

Here are the pronouns in each verse and their definitions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| verse 27 | your = Philippians  
| | I = Paul  
| | you = the Philippians  
| | I = Paul  
| | you = the Philippians  
| | you = the Philippians |
| verse 28 | your = the Philippians  
| | them = the opponents  
| | your = the Philippians |
| verse 29 | you = the Philippians  
| | Him = Christ  
| | Him = Christ |
| verse 30 | you = the Philippians  
| | I = Paul  
| | I = Paul |

While this passage was a rather simple one, some passages in the New Testament are more confusing.
Observing Paragraphs

There are five items to look for when observing paragraphs. These can be a little more difficult because you have to take into consideration a larger section of material.

1. General to Specific: Sometimes a biblical author will introduce something using “general” terms, and then he will provide a specific example. For example, Paul exhorts his audience in Eph 4:1, “Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received.” This is a generic principle they are to follow. However, in the following verse he provides four specific examples: be humble, gentle, patient, and accepting one another in love. These four are specific ways in which to live obediently to the general command.

2. Dialogue: In John 21:15, Jesus asks Peter a question. The dialogue goes back and forth between Jesus and Peter (John 21:15–19). It is important to recognize who is speaking. The author chose to portray the events using dialogue. Many times John the Baptist is saying something, but some teachers credit Jesus with the words (cf. John 3:27–30). Make sure to note who is speaking!

3. Question and Answer: In Rom 6:1, Paul says, “What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply?” Paul expected his readers to think about this question. So he asked a question, then provided the answer in the next verse: “Absolutely not!”

4. Means: An important element in many passages is the communication of how something is accomplished. When doing this, an author is providing the means. In Eph 2:13, Paul says, “But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah.” The means or instrument that brought those who were separated from God near to God is “the blood of the Messiah.” Matthew describes Jesus driving out demons in Matt 8:16 by saying he drove them out “with a word.” The “word” of Jesus was the instrument or means that drove out the demons.

5. Purpose: Purpose statements are vitally important to understanding passages in the New Testament. Ephesians 2:8–9 is one the best-known passages in the New Testament: “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.” However, Paul gives a purpose for the salvation brought by God’s grace in verse 10 (italics added): “For we are His creation—created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.” The purpose is that those who have received the grace of God are to walk in the good works God prepared for them to do. The words “so that” communicate the concept of purpose in this verse.

INTERPRETATION AND GENRE

Before skilled readers can interpret a text, they must consider the rules of interpretation that apply to that text. These rules will be known by understanding the genre of the passage being read. When those rules are taken into consideration, it is possible to find the abiding theological principle underlying the passage with confidence. This will significantly aid the process of applying the text to a person’s life.
Considering Genre

What is genre? Genre refers to a type of literature. People encounter different genres (types of literature) every day. They have been trained to interpret them or can logically deduct how to use them. For example, the way people read a newspaper depends on the section they are reading. If they are in the sports section, they assume they are being given facts about sporting events. If they were reading the front page of a newspaper and saw a story of a cat talking to a dog, they would understandably be puzzled. But if they were to read a story about a cat talking to a dog in the comics section, they would know that reality is suspended for this genre of literature and will not stop and say to themselves, “Wait! This is impossible! Cats and dogs don’t talk!” They do not do that because they understand how the genre of comics works. Unfortunately, the Bible is written in ancient genres with which most people today are unfamiliar. Therefore, becoming familiar with these ancient genres and the rules of interpreting them will greatly aid in reading them correctly.\(^\text{13}\)

The Gospel Genre

The first four books in the New Testament are Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Gospels must be approached differently from letters and poetry because they have different rules for interpreting them. The four Gospels are biographies of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. However, they are ancient, not modern biographies. What is the difference?

First, ancient biographies did not give many details about someone’s entire life. Ancient biographies often purposely focused on one period of a person’s life rather than covering a person’s entire life span equally. Comparing the four Gospels, notice how Jesus’s birth is discussed by only two (Matthew and Luke) and his childhood by only one Gospel (Luke), but his adult life following thirty years of age is the focal point of all four Gospels, particularly the last week of his life.

Second, ancient biographies were not necessarily chronological. While ancient biographies could be chronological, they were not required to be. Luke says that he wrote “in orderly sequence” (Luke 1:3), whereby the word “orderly” could refer to chronological, geographical, or logical order.\(^\text{14}\)

Asking the right questions of the passage being read is one of the keys to good interpretation. There are two primary questions to ask when reading the Gospels: (1) What does this story communicate about Jesus? (2) What is the primary point of the passage? When trying to answer those questions, keep in mind the following considerations.

1. Historical Context: When a person reads the Gospel of John, there are two settings to consider: the original, historical setting of Jesus and the setting of the church when John wrote (c. AD 90). So when Jesus is speaking to his disciples, crowds, or Pharisees, remember that none of them is around today. Recognize that the original audience of Jesus’s words does not exist anymore. For example, when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, those in the original setting knew that foot washing was done only by Gentile slaves. Feet were always washed by an inferior. Jesus was turning
cultural norms upside down. This original context at the time when Jesus’s words were spoken is not necessarily the same context as that of the audience of John’s Gospel when he wrote the Gospel about fifty years later.

2. Literary Context: The literary context, which is the immediate and larger context of the passage, trumps all other factors in interpretation. Sometimes readers get concerned with comparing the Gospels to one another. While it is not wrong to compare the Gospels, make sure that you allow Matthew’s message to speak for itself and that your presumptions do not smother Matthew’s meaning by comparing it to Mark’s.

One way to emphasize the literary context is to read the stories before and after the passage under examination to see if a similar theme is present. For example, John 2:1–11 appears to present Jesus as offering something superior than Judaism, whether a superior law or a superior purification. John 2:12–25 presents Jesus as the new center of worship. Connecting these stories together shows that John is trying to prove to his audience that what Jesus was offering is superior to what Judaism was offering.

Another way of emphasizing literary context is to examine how characters develop in the story or how someone’s perception of Jesus grows (or does not grow). Tracing the character of Peter through Mark’s Gospel will lead to the discovery that at times Peter’s understanding seems to grow and develop (cf. Mark 8:29) and at other times his understanding is deficient (cf. Mark 8:32–33).

Authors may use different literary devices: dialogue, repetition, irony, misunderstanding, contrast, and symbols. Irony is a subtle contrast between what is stated and what is suggested. For example, it is ironic in Matt 16:2–3 that the Pharisees and Sadducees know how to interpret the sky, but they do not know how to interpret “the signs of the times” (Matt 16:3), something that is much more important. Misunderstanding is highlighted frequently in Mark’s and John’s Gospels. In reading John 3:1–10, Nicodemus is not grasping what Jesus is trying to communicate. Note the contrast in John 3 and 4; there are differences between wealthy Nicodemus and an unnamed poor woman. A final literary device is the use of symbolic language. When Jesus says, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), he does not mean that he is a plant with a long stem that creeps along the ground. He is using symbolic language to express the intimate relationship he has with the Father.

3. Description Versus Prescription: Apart from context the difference between description and prescription may be the most important principle for interpreting the Gospels. Everything in the Gospels is describing something. The author could be describing the geographic setting for one of Jesus’s messages (cf. Mark 6:39) or describing words Jesus said. However, a command given by Jesus to someone in the Gospels is not directly a command for Christians today. In Matt 8:1–4, Jesus healed a man who had a skin disease. Then Jesus gave him a command in verse 4: “See that you do not tell anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed, as a testimony to them.” If everything described in the Gospels is automatically a command (i.e., a prescription) for Christians today, then: (1) Never tell anyone if you have been healed of an illness. (2) Go show yourself to the priest (which might be the modern-day pastor). (3) Obey Moses’s commands in Leviticus 14, which
This is an example where a command (a prescription) in the Gospels does not equal a direct command today. Remember that all of Jesus’s commands in the Gospels were given to people living under the old covenant (cf. Heb 8:6–8). Even so, Matthew wrote these words in the AD 60s for the early church, which was under the new covenant. The Gospels are relevant for Christians today, but remembering the original setting of Jesus’s life and the setting of the church helps the reader understand how to balance description and prescription.

At the same time, just because “description does not equal prescription,” this does not mean that something described is never commanded. If a descriptive element is repeated over and over again and is always portrayed positively, then it may take on some prescriptive force. There are three parts to deciding if a description is a command for Christians today. First, look in the passage for clues as to what the author is trying to communicate by including the story in his narrative. Second, examine the entire book for positive and negative connotations. Third, analyze the specific context in the book that includes the story.

Historical Narrative

The historical narrative of the Acts of the Apostles is similar to the genre of Gospels, but there are some additional factors to consider. Acts was written about a transition period from Judaism under the old covenant to the church age under the new covenant. For example, Christians in Acts are struggling with the concept of how the Gentiles relate to the church between Acts 8 and 15. Many of the stories included in Acts are told by Luke not because they are normative but because they are not normative. He does not include the mundane, ordinary stories that occurred during this time but the stories that were extraordinary.

When applying the principles of description versus prescription to Acts, many themes could be considered commands for Christians today. The most prominent theme is that of mission. Acts 13 describes Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey as they were sent out by the church at Antioch. The majority of the following chapters continue to describe the missionary activity of Paul. The theme of Paul intentionally going out and spreading the gospel is repeated frequently. Therefore, a discerning reader should see that Luke is trying to communicate the necessity of the church’s being involved in missionary activity.

Parables

A parable, as used in the New Testament, is a story that has two levels of meaning. Some of the details in the story represent commonplace realities outside the basic story. One of the keys to interpreting parables is knowing how to avoid allegorizing the passage when interpreting those details. To do this, six principles should be taken into consideration.

First, there is one main point for every major character or group of characters. In the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), many details are given in the story: a man going to Jericho from Jerusalem, robbers, a priest, a Levite, a Samaritan, a beast,
and an innkeeper. How many of these are major characters? The second principle will help with this question: there are one, two, or three main points but no more. The good Samaritan, the man going to Jericho, and the priest/Levite (combined as a group: Jewish leaders) make up the three major characters or groups.

Third, always remember to consider the context. When studying the parable of the Prodigal Son, ignoring the opening verses (Luke 15:1–2) will cause the parable to have less of an impact on the reader: “All the tax collectors and sinners were approaching to listen to Him. And the Pharisees and scribes were complaining, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!’” In this parable, the tax collectors and sinner will relate to the prodigal son, and the Pharisees and scribes will relate to the older son. The introduction gives hints as to the meaning of the parable for the original audience.

Fourth, beyond the major characters and groups, all the other details are simply props used to carry the story. Make sure you identify relevant and irrelevant details. Anything that is not a major character or group is irrelevant with regard to interpretation, like the beast or the innkeeper. They are useful for telling the parable but not for interpreting it.

Fifth, the main points must have been intelligible to the original audience. This principle prevents readers from thinking the prodigal son represents the Southern Baptist Convention between the years 1970 and 1980 and the older son the United Methodists. There is no way Jesus’s original audience could have understood this interpretation, nor could Luke’s original audience have done so. If an interpretation would have been impossible for the original readers to grasp, then it is almost certainly wrong.

Finally, a warning: it is best to base doctrine on clear, more straightforward passages than on parables. Parables can be used to support doctrine, but a parable should not be the foundational passage for a specific doctrine. The symbolic language employed in parables makes their use in developing doctrine unwise.

Letters

Letters in the New Testament were intended to be authoritative substitutes for the authors who were unable to be present and speak to the recipients face-to-face. When the church at Galatia received a letter from Paul, they arguably viewed that letter as words from Paul the apostle himself. Since they did not have text-messaging, e-mails, or cell phones, it was much more difficult to communicate from a long distance back then compared to today. Therefore, letters provided an opportunity to communicate without being present personally.

The main principle to remember when interpreting letters is that they are occasional. This means that the author is addressing a particular issue or situation when he writes the letter. For example, when Paul writes Philippians, he is addressing the concern the Philippians had when they heard that Paul was in prison and that Epaphroditus, whom they had sent to minister to Paul, was sick. This was the occasion for Paul’s writing Philippians and should be kept in mind when interpreting the letter.

Since the letters were written to address different situations, sometimes they seem to contradict one another. However, a better perspective would be that the author is
seeking to address the situations individually. For example, the church at Galatia struggled with some form of legalism. Therefore, Paul emphasized their freedom in Christ (cf. Gal 2:4; 5:1,13). The Corinthians were basking in their freedom. Therefore, Paul emphasized obedience to temper their immoral extremes.

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<td><strong>Solution</strong></td>
<td>Emphasized freedom in Christ</td>
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**PRINCIPLES AND APPLICATION**

To apply a passage of Scripture properly, it must be interpreted correctly. Once it has been carefully read, as many observations as possible have been noted, and the context and genre have been taken into consideration, then the passage is ready to be interpreted. The key here is to restate the text in terms that are less temporal. The following example may help.

The underlying principle to Phil 4:13 is not a blanket statement that God will empower Christians to do anything they set out to accomplish. Instead, within this context of trials and hardships, Christians can know that God will enable them to persevere through difficult times and they need to rely on him for their material and physical needs. Richard Melick says, “Many who misapply this verse step out of God’s will for their lives. They hope to cover their actions by a blanket promise of power, but power comes in the will of God.”

If a group of Christians are ministering faithfully in the inner city and struggling to meet their needs, they must remember to trust God and rely on his strength to sustain them. Dishonesty is not the answer. Self-sufficiency is not the answer. Throwing themselves by faith upon the mercies of God is the answer.

**TOOLS OF NEW TESTAMENT RESEARCH**

The New Testament scholar has an array of tools that are employed in addition to the methods previously mentioned. While it is not assumed that everyone who reads the New Testament needs to know how to use these tools, a general awareness of these tools will give one a better ability to understand how New Testament scholars approach their study of the New Testament. The following tools will be overviewed. These are textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism and sociological criticism. The use of the word “criticism” does not bear a negative connotation. Rather, the use of this term only means that the manuscripts of the biblical books are carefully examined on the basis of objective criteria.

**Textual criticism** involves examining the Greek manuscripts that are available to the New Testament scholar. The New Testament Greek manuscripts are extremely plentiful. New Testament scholars weigh the available evidence and produce the most likely reading of a New Testament passage. Most Bible translations are the product of
New Testament scholars working tirelessly to make sure that all the evidence has been weighed and the best rendering of a passage has been produced. After years of text critical analysis the vast majority of New Testament scholars believe that the text that has been produced is very accurate to the original.

**Source criticism** attempts to identify the written traditions behind a document. This is most prominently used in Gospel studies. To understand this tool one needs to only think of writing a research paper. Within the research paper there are written sources that have been either directly quoted or that deeply influence the form and style of writing. Especially in the Gospels one can notice that one Gospel writer is citing verbatim another Gospel writer. This interplay between texts gives a New Testament scholar a unique perspective of the interaction of texts.

**Form criticism** attempts to determine the spoken or oral prehistory of a written document. The Christian movement was not an academic movement. It was a movement pressed forward due to missionary fervor. Much of the New Testament material was spoken and memorized and passed down before it was written down. The ancients who lived in oral cultures were capable of memorizing with high degrees of accuracy large amounts of oral material. Thus, it is not inconceivable that many of the Gospel stories, early Christological statements and early Christian worship material were memorized and passed down before they appear in the New Testament documents. Form criticism attempts to get a window into this oral prehistory.

**Redaction criticism** attempts to uncover the setting and perspective of the writer by analyzing the ways the author shapes his story. This is particularly insightful in Gospel studies. Since there are four Gospels, each Gospel writer is communicating the person and ministry of Jesus in different ways. It seems reasonable that the shaping of the message is influenced by the audience for whom the message was intended. In the writings of Paul, one can see Paul in dialogue with opponents and interacting with real church problems. Every person writes from a context and thus this is equally true in studying the New Testament authors.

**Literary criticism** is an attempt to closely read the shaping of the text as it appears before the reader. While biblical text can be read on a surface level and its meaning be apprehended, a closer reading of a text can reveal the sophistication at which some text are written. The New Testament contains documents from personal letters to theological treatises. It is within these more complex documents that one can discern literary devises, conscious shaping and literary sophistication that enables one to more deeply appreciate the beauty and message of the text.

**Sociological criticism** is the awareness that the New Testament was written in a cultural or sociological context that was unique to its own time. The writers of the New Testament were interacting within a political, religious and cultural context that was quite different from our context. A lack of awareness of how the New Testament authors were interacting in this context can distort the meaning of their words. A growing awareness of the New Testament world can enable the reader to avoid many cultural misinterpretations when reading the text.\(^{21}\)
CONCLUSION

Correctly interpreting Scripture is important for a vital relationship with God and true doctrine. Several universal concepts in interpreting Scripture must be considered when reading a passage. Make sure you know the context of the passage and use the clear passages to help you understand the ambiguous ones. Close observation of the sentences and paragraphs is a sure foundation to a good interpretation. Correctly identifying the genre and the rules of interpreting the passage will safeguard against correctable mistakes. Once you discover an abiding theological principle that underlies your passage, you are ready to begin the process of applying the principle. Finally, be encouraged that the more people read Scripture, the better they will become at interpreting it. The more skillful one is in interpreting God’s Word, the more intimate one’s relationship can be with one’s Creator through the living pages of God’s Word. “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

For Further Reading

Study Questions

1. What are the two universal concepts to keep in mind when reading your Bible, and how are they defined?
2. What are some different things to look for when observing sentences?
3. What is detrimental about reading the Bible superficially?
4. What is the definition of genre?
5. What does the phrase “description versus prescription” mean?
6. What are some principles for interpreting parables?
7. How can you apply some of these concepts to your own study of Scripture?

ENDNOTES

1. This kind of idiom is called a “Semitism.”
2. For a recent helpful treatment, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).
4. Emphasis added.
5. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 1, IX.
8. In the following Scripture passages, emphasis was added to indicate the words on which the interpreter should focus.
10. Note the translation of the NKJV and NLT. For other examples of comparisons, see Acts 2:2; 1 Pet 5:8; and Rev 2:18.
11. Or, as has been said: What is the “therefore” there for?
12. For example, Acts 5:11–14.
13. For understanding the prophetic genre, see the chapter on Revelation.
15. For the entire discussion on description versus prescription, see Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 107; Duvall and Hays, Grasping God’s Word, 263–69.
16. An example of this will be shown in the chapter on Acts.
17. See example under “Historical Narrative.”
