

#### 4) Understand the **History** and **Culture** of When It Was Written

- Culture refers to the beliefs, lifestyles, and characteristics that distinguish a group of people. Culture includes what people think, believe, say, do, and make. Different categories involved with culture include political, religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, clothing, domestic, geographical, military, and social (Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, pp. 79ff).

- Why is studying history and culture important?

(1) It gives the needed **setting** for the biblical material

(a) God's revelation is grounded in history and came through certain cultural forms (for example, Amos was not an American).

(b) Note the historical-cultural setting in these texts—

Isaiah 1:1            **Read Chronicles or Kings**

Jeremiah 1:1–3    **He is a sons of priests...we know the exact setting of Jer.**

Ezekiel 1:1        **Ezekiel is in Babylon, but is a spiritual man**

(c) There is no one form of culture that is “God's will” for everyone so that it would be sinful to have any other form of culture. This does not mean, however, that culture is neutral or that every aspect of a culture is okay.

(2) It may provide the **occasion** for writing

(a) Certain books owe their occasion for writing to historical-cultural events or other factors.

(b) Examples—

(i) Joel – the locust plague was the springboard for Joel's prophecy of the Day of the Lord

(ii) Lamentations – the fall of Jerusalem

(iii) The NT Epistles – written out of specific occasions

(3) It helps you **understand** the Bible

(a) Proverbs 22:28 – The ancient landmark

The landmark was a boundary stone that could be moved in an effort to gain a little more land. This is a command against stealing another's property.

(b) Headings of Psalms – Psalms 3, 18, 30, 34, 51, etc.

(c) Clothing – such as girdle, tunic, etc.

(d) Parable of the Sower – Methods of Sowing

Ancient fields were not squared off with neat fences. They didn't use implements to sow the seed; it was scattered by hand and would thus land on different types of soil and terrain.

(e) Lamps, lampstands (they didn't have electricity or batteries then!)

(f) Units of money, Matt 20:2

(g) Units of weight and measure, 1 Sam 17:4-7

(h) Geography, John 5:1

- A good Bible dictionary is extremely helpful in dealing with aspects of the history and culture of Bible times. Here's one that I highly recommend—

*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary: Completely Revised and Updated Edition* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995). Buy from Amazon.com for \$24.42.

## 5) Recognize the type of **literature** you're studying (called *genre*)

- *Genre* is the form of literature an author used.
- The Bible has different types of literature—prose, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, narrative, epistle, gospel, and parable

## 6) **Compare Scripture with Scripture**

- The Bible is the best commentary on itself. This is also called the “analogy of faith,” and is something you must do because all of Scripture is inspired by the one true God.
- The Bible has one “network” of truth. There are no contradictions in that “network.” There is absolute harmony within it. Every part of the network is linked or connected to every other part. Because of this the Bible can interpret itself. This means that...

(1) Scripture interprets Scripture

(2) The interpretation of a passage must be in harmony with the rest of what the Bible teaches

- How do you compare Scripture with Scripture? How does this work out?

- (1) A clearly established teaching can't be contradicted by a single statement or passage that is obscure (vague, ambiguous, not as clear).

EXAMPLES—

1 John 3:6 “Does not sin”; cf. 1 John 1:8 **some groups use this for sinless perfection**

Heb 6:4–6 “if he falls away”; cf. John 10:28–29 **some say that salvation can be lost**

- (2) Unclear or obscure texts must be interpreted in light of clear texts

EXAMPLE—

1 Cor 15:29 baptism for the dead

- A real help with this is a Bible-soaked memory. In your daily reading one passage may throw light on a passage you've struggled to understand in another part of the Bible.
- Comparing Scripture with Scripture helps you see truth from different and various angles.
- If there do appear to be contradictions, then there is either a wrong interpretation or a paradox (*a seeming* but not *actual* contradiction), but never a genuine contradiction.

## 7) Be Aware of **Figurative** Language

- The idea here is when a writer represents one concept in terms of another. He does this because the nature of the two things are similar enough that a comparison can be made to help the reader understand or “see” his point.

John 10:9 “I am the door”

- Here are some guidelines for interpreting figurative language—

- (1) Look for the normal or plain sense **first**

If it makes sense to take it literally or normally, then you should do that. Example: the animals in Isaiah 11:6–9

- (2) When interpreting literally/normally, be **aware** of contradictions, impossibilities, or absurdities. When you see these things, you know you're dealing with figurative language

Isa 55:12 “the trees of their field will clap their hands”

Gal 2:9 “James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars”

Matt 26:26 “this [bread] is my body...take eat”

Acts 7:54 “gnashing their teeth” at Stephen

- (3) Note the **context**. Does the context allow for and/or demand a figurative meaning? Sometimes a figure is explained in the context.

1 Thess 4:13–15 “asleep” is explained as being “dead,” v. 16

- (4) Note the **genre**. Some genres tend to have more figurative language, such as poetry and prophecy.
- (5) Figurative language yields a literal or **normal** meaning.

There is a difference between *interpreting* the Bible figuratively and interpreting figures normally. We must interpret according to the intention of the author. Authors use figures to give clear meaning. They do not open the door to multiple meanings.

- Some examples of figurative language—

- (1) Figures of speech that make a comparison (simile and metaphor)

With these comparisons, one thing is compared or expressed in terms of another.

Ps 1:3 “He will be *like* a tree firmly planted by streams of water”

Ps 23:1 “The Lord *is* my shepherd”

Ps 42:1 “*As* the deer pants for the water brooks, *so* my soul pants for You, O God”

Jer 23:29 “is not my word *like* a hammer?”

1 Pet 1:24 “all flesh is *like* grass”

- (2) Figures of speech involving a personal dimension (personification, apostrophe).

Here a thing, quality, or idea is represented as a person, or some *thing* is addressed as a person. You need to find the intended meaning in these expressions.

Num 16:32 “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up”

Ps 114:3 “the sea looked and fled”

Ps 114:5–6 “what ails you, O sea that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back”

Jer 47:6 “Ah, sword of the Lord, how long will you not be quiet?”

(3) Figures of speech that make an association or substitution (metonymy, synecdoche, merism, and hendiadys)

(a) Here one word or thing is substituted for another because of the close association in our minds

Gen 42:38 “you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow” **speaks of his old age, being an old man**

Rom 3:29-30 the “circumcision” and “uncircumcision” **mean Jews and Gentiles**

Mic 4:3 “they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” **this means total disarmament**

Ps 139:2 “you know when I sit down and when I rise up” **two contrasts to mean the whole, all one’s activity**

(b) This is where figures of speech used of God come in. Here you need to look for the meaning intended by the association.

(i) When human body parts are used to represent God that is called an anthropomorphism. God is spirit, and so His actions and/or qualities are described in a material sense so we understand.

2 Chr 16:9      eyes (God is omniscient)

Ps 8:3            fingers

Ps 31:2          ears

(ii) When human emotions are used to represent God that is called an anthropomorphisms. God has emotions, but not human emotions.

Ps 2:4            laughter

Zech 8:1          jealousy

(iii) Sometimes animal parts and characteristics are used to represent God. This is called a zoomorphism.

Ps 91:4          feathers and wings

(iv) Why does God do this? One man had this to say:

If I wish to speak to a deaf man, I must use gesture language; if a blind man wants to read, he must use raised type and read with his fingers. In the one case, the eye has to do the duty of the ear, and in the other, the sense of feeling has to make up for the loss of sight. And so, if God is to speak to man, He must adopt human language, and express truth in a way adapted to human ideas. Thus, in the Bible, God is described as seeing, hearing, smelling; having a voice, a mouth, nostrils, lips, breath, a hand, an arm, a back. He is said to rest, to walk, to laugh, to awake; to have a bow, a spear, a staff; to ride on horses and in chariots. Once more, He is said to repent, to be furious, to take vengeance. The more one meditates on the matter, the more clear it is that this way of speaking of God in Scripture is wonderfully vivid and effective, and that if He were only spoken of in abstract philosophical terms, ordinary people would not understand them. Moreover, there is not the slightest danger of these terms being misunderstood, because alongside of them are other expressions calculated to make us feel how inadequate human thought is to take in or express the grandeur of the Divine nature. (R. B. Girdlestone, *How to Study the English Bible*, pp. 63–64).