

Methods for Interpreting the Bible

The nature of the Bible generates a set of questions that we must ask to interpret it rightly:

- We must ask **literary questions** because the Bible is a collection of human writings.
- We must ask **historical questions** because the Bible is a collection of ancient books written across many centuries and centered upon historical events.
- We must ask **theological questions** because the Bible is a collection of divinely inspired writings centered upon the nature and acts of God.

I. Literary questions

Understanding the meaning of a passage in the Bible requires attention to the literary context. Every text in the Bible has concentric layers of surrounding texts that provide necessary context that shapes its meaning. Words get their meaning from

- sentences, which get their meaning from
- paragraphs or sections of poetry, which get their meaning from
- larger sections and chapters, which get their meaning from
- books of the Bible, which get their meaning from
- the grand narrative that unifies the Bible as a whole.

- The context of words
 - What does this word or phrase mean (both in English and in the original Hebrew or Greek)?
 - Pro tip for non-readers of Hebrew and Greek: compare multiple good English translations (e.g., ESV, NIV, NRSV, NASB, CSB). Where English translations differ substantially, there is probably something difficult about the Hebrew or Greek original that a commentary can explain.
 - How can I discern its meaning in part from its use within its sentence, paragraph, and book?
 - How is this word or phrase used in other parts of the Bible? An unusual or technical word or a very specific phrase might be an allusion to another text and context within Scripture (e.g., John 1:1 starts “In the beginning,...” echoing Genesis 1:1).
- Interpreting paragraphs and sections
 - What is this section or chapter about?
 - Is there an explicit statement summarizing the main idea or theme of a section (like a topic sentence)?
 - How does this fit into the surrounding sections of the book and into the book as a whole?
- Interpreting books
 - What type of book is this?
 - What does the literary structure or form of the book (or a particular section of the book) tell us about the author’s purpose and method of communicating, e.g., is it narrative, poetry, law, song, wisdom saying, letter, parable, prophetic vision?

- Interpreting within the grand narrative of the Bible
Where does this text fit in the big story of the Bible?
- Resources for answering literary questions
Study Bible cross-references to other biblical texts, study Bible notes,
Bible dictionary or handbook, commentaries

II. Historical questions

- Who wrote the text and when (if that is known)?
- What are the historical people, places, events, things, or customs in the text, and how might knowing these historical facts contribute to the meaning of the text?
- Resources for answering historical questions
Study Bible notes, Bible dictionary or handbook, commentaries

III. Theological questions

Beliefs/doctrines

What does this text teach about God?

What does this text teach about human beings?

How does this text prepare or foreshadow the coming of Jesus or reflect the person and work of Jesus?

Spiritual formation/wisdom/ethics

How does this text transform my mind?

- Truth to believe
- Promise to believe

How does this text lead me to relate to God?

- Praise/thanks: How does this text show me something good about God's character or actions for which I should give thanks and praise to him?
- Confess: How does this text show some sin in me that I should confess to God?
- Lament: How does this text show me the evil effects of sin in pain and suffering that I should bring to God in lament?
- Ask: What does this text lead me to ask God to do in me and in the world?

How does this text show how God wants me to live?

- Command to obey
- Example to imitate or avoid
- Principle about what is right/wrong or good/bad
- Virtue to cultivate or vice to put to death
- Goal or ideal to pursue with faith and hope

IV. Resources for Studying the Bible

Books about Bible study methods

Matthew Harmon, *Asking the Right Questions: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Crossway, 2017).

Daniel Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, rev. ed. (P & R, 2022).

Study Bibles

ESV Study Bible

NIV Study Bible

These works offer helpful essays on the sections of the Bible, short introductions to each book of the Bible, and study notes at the bottom of each page that explain the literary, historical, and theological aspects of each passage in the Bible as well as maps, illustrations, charts, and timelines that make the Bible come alive.

Reference Works

Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 5th ed. (2019)

New Bible Dictionary, 3rd. ed. (1996)

These two reference works provide short articles explaining the literary, historical, cultural background of the books of the Bible along with key words, people, places, objects, and events. Many pictures, maps, and diagrams help illustrate biblical concepts. The dictionary is organized alphabetically by topic, and the handbook is organized by the order of the books in the Bible.

Commentaries and Study Guides

See the church library

Video Guides about Bible Books, Literary Types, Themes, Words

The Bible Project (<https://bibleproject.com/>)

See especially the video collections “How to Read the Bible,” “Old Testament Overviews” and “New Testament Overviews”

Searchable Online Bible Texts for Finding Books, Words, or Phrases

Literal Word (<https://esv.literalword.com/>)

ESV or NASB translations available here

ESV Online (<https://www.esv.org/>)

Good cross-references for related Bible texts (click the superscript letters)

ESV Study Bible and several others available with annual subscription

Bible Gateway (<https://www.biblegateway.com/>)

Several dozen different English translation available here