The Interpretive Journey[1]

I.   **Basics of the Journey**

A.   Step 1: Grasping the Text in Their Town

Question: "What did the text mean to the biblical audience?"[2]

First of all, the role of the interpreter is to ascertain the original intent of the biblical author. This task is called "exegesis." Exegesis is "the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning."[3] One must keep in mind that the books of the Bible were written by individuals to particular groups for a particular purpose. Without understanding the original intent of the biblical author, one may never properly apply the text for a contemporary audience. In order to understand what the text means *now*, one must come to an understanding of what it meant *then*.

This is done by careful observation of the text. Read and reread the text, in order to get as much out of the text as possible. This is also where one will engage in any historical, literary, and grammatical analysis.

B.   Step 2: Measuring the Width of the River to Cross

Question: "What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?"[4]

There is much that separates today's audience from the original audiences of Scripture. Today persons are separated from the biblical audience by differences in language, culture, government, situation, covenants, and time. These differences must be addressed if one is to cross this river.

C.   Step 3: Crossing the Principlizing Bridge

Question: "What is the theological principle in this text?"[5]

The "theological principle" is part of the meaning of the text. This is the principle or principles that cross time and space. It is a timeless truth. To identify the "theological principle" one must recall the differences (Step 2) and similarities between today's audience and the original audience. After this, return to the meaning for the biblical audience (Step 1) and try to identify

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[1] Adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 21–25.

[2] Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 22.

[3] Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 19.

[4] Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 22.

[5] Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 23.

the broader theological principle reflected in the text. The "theological principle" acts as the "principlizing bridge" that allows us to cross the river.

Next, one must consider the parts and the whole of Scripture. Each passage must not be studied in a vacuum. One must study the text in light of the whole counsel of Scripture.

Example: There once was a man who was depressed and seeking answers opened his Bible randomly to a page to see what God would say to him. First, he came across the verse "And Judas hung himself…" Horrified, he opened the Bible again at random and saw the random phrase, "Go and do likewise." Dejected, he opened the Bible again one final time and came to the verse, "What you must do, do quickly."[6]

The following are guidelines for formulating theological principle(s):

A. The principle should be reflected in the text.
B. The principle should be timeless and not tied to a specific situation.
C. The principle should not be culturally bound.
D. The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture.
E. The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and the contemporary audience.

D. Step 4: Grasping the Text in Our Town

Question: "How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?"[7]

It is this step by which the interpreter takes the theological principles from a text and applies them to today. Often this means taking an abstract theological principle and deriving specific ways in which it may apply to today's audience.

These are the overall principles that will guide us as we interpret the text. The remainder of the class is devoted to the specific tools that are applied to this endeavor.

E. Example from Joshua 1:1–9 (see handout)

Discussion Questions

1. What are the four steps of the interpretive journey?
2. What are some of the differences that determine the width of the river to cross?
3. What are the guidelines for developing theological principles?

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[6] I. Howard Marshall, "How Do We Interpret the Bible Today?," *Themelios* 5.2 (Jan 1980): 9.
[7] Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 24.

II.   Choosing a Translation

A.   The Languages of the Bible

Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew with a few passages written in Aramaic. Nearly all of the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, with a few of Jesus' words in Aramaic (e.g. Mark 5:41; 7:34; 14:36).

B.   Modern Translations

Bible translations are necessary for most of us to interpret Scripture. Most of us don't have access to the original languages in which the Bible was written. There are several types of translations available for those who read English. But which one should you choose? The translation you choose should correspond to the individual and the reason for which you're using the Bible. Is it for a child? Are you reading it devotionally? Are you doing intense study throughout a book of the Bible? There are two important factors when choosing a translation: (1) understanding – can someone comprehend what they are reading; and (2) accuracy – does the translation most accurately portray the original author's intent?

What translation is best for the practice of interpreting Scripture? Before answering which is the best, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the development of translations and translation theories.

C.   Development of Translations[8]

The King James Version (also known as the Authorized Version) was commissioned by James I of England in 1604 and published in 1611. It was commissioned to settle a dispute between the Anglicans and the Puritans. In subsequent years the Authorized Version underwent several revisions including: English Revised Version (ERV, 1881–1885) and American Standard Version (ASV).

The difference between the KJV and the ERV and ASV are the texts behind the translations. The underlying Greek text behind the KJV is called the *Textus Receptus*. The *Textus Receptus* simply means "received text." This name signifies that it was the standard Greek text at the time. I use the term Greek loosely, since "the textual basis of the TR is a small number of haphazardly collected and relatively late minuscule manuscripts.[9] In about a dozen places its reading is attested by no known Greek manuscript."[10] This leaves the KJV and the NKJV at a distinct disadvantage.

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[8] Adapted from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Journey into God's Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 76–78.

[9] Miniscules are Greek cursive letters similar to lower case that date from the ninth century onward.

[10] D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 36.

The Greek text behind the ERV and ASV is what is called an *eclectic* Greek text, that is, several Greek manuscripts were utilized. This allowed translators to use the most reliable and oldest Greek manuscripts, including Codex Vaticanus (c. 325) and Codex Sinaiticus (c. 350) to name a few.[11] With regard to the OT, since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (not discovered until the 1940s and 1950s), translators are able to utilize Hebrew manuscripts that were roughly a thousand years older than anything previously known (250 BC–AD 135).

Other translations have followed suit utilizing the best available and oldest manuscript evidence for both the Old and New Testaments. These include: Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, New Century Version, and the English Standard Version to name but a few.

D. Translation Theories

No translation is perfect. That's right your beloved Bible translation is not perfect. The reason no translation can be perfect is because the Greek and Hebrew languages that make up nearly all of the original text of the Bible are not exactly like English or any other receptor language. Both Greek and Hebrew utilize different alphabets, vocabulary with a different semantic range, and different syntax. Here's an example:

Kai epetimēsen autō ho Iēous kai exēlthen ap' autou to daimonion kai etherapeuthē ho pais apo tēs hōras ekeinēs
And rebuked   it   the Jesus and came out from him the demon   and was healed   the boy from the hour that

One can see that something must be done. Imagine reading a Bible that was translated in such a literal way. What we really need is a more accurate translation. We need a translation that keeps the meaning of the text, while putting it into language that today's reader understands. Given this, wouldn't it make more sense to translate the above example, "And when Jesus rebuked the demon it came out of him and the boy was healed instantly." Let's turn to a look at today's translation theories.

1. Formal equivalent: This theory attempts to translate the original languages of Scripture into the receptor language (the language one is translating into) by staying close to the original word usage and word order when possible (sometimes called *literal* or *word-for-word*). Certain concessions are made in order for the text to make sense in the receptor language. This type of translation "will keep the historical distance intact at all points."[12] Some examples are: KJV, NKJV, HCSB, NASB, NRSV, and ESV.
2. Free or Paraphrase: This theory attempts to translate *ideas* from the original language into the receptor language by freeing itself from original word usage and word order. Actually most paraphrases are derived from popular English translations (The Living Bible is derived from the American Standard Version). This type of translation "tries to eliminate as much of

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[11] Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus were not discovered until the 19th century.
[12] Fee & Stuart, *How the Read the Bible,* 35.

the historical distance as possible."[13] Some examples are: The Living Bible, Phillips, Contemporary English Version, and The Message.

3. Functional equivalent: This theory attempts to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions of the original language into *equivalents* of the receptor language (sometimes called *idiomatic* or *dynamic equivalent*). This type of translation "keeps historical distance on all historical and most factual matters, but 'updates' matters of language, grammar, and style."[14] Some examples are: NIV, NEB, and NLT.

E.   Choosing a Translation[15]

Here is a list of suggestions for choosing a Bible translation:

1.   Choose a translation that uses modern English.
2.   Choose a translation that is based on the standard Hebrew and Greek texts. The standard Hebrew text is *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (*BHS*). The standard Greek text is either the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* (*GNT*) and Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*.
3.   Give preference to translations by a committee over those by an individual.
4.   Choose a translation that is appropriate for your particular purpose. For instance, for devotions or for children you may want to choose the *New Living Translation* or *New Century Version*. If reading to unchurched people you may want to consider the *Contemporary English Version*. For your own serious study of the Scriptures you may want to consider *New American Standard Version, New International Version, NET Bible,* or *English Standard Version*.

Discussion Questions

1.   Which approach to Bible translations do you prefer? Why?
2.   Why does "literal" not always equate to "accurate" when it comes to Bible translations?
3.   Which particular translations do you like to compare as you study Scripture?

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[13] Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible,* 35.
[14] Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible,* 35.
[15] Adapted from Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word,* 82–83.

III.   Serious Reading: Immediate Observations Part 1

Proper interpretation of a biblical text is not as hard as it may seem. The Scriptures were written for the everyday person, not just the trained biblical scholar. Hopefully this easies one's mind a bit.

First things first, before one ever even opens the Bible for study, one should be on the lookout for the *plain meaning* of the text. As noted earlier, the Bible is not a complicated book, only understood by the scholar in the ivory tower. The trained scholar has an advantage, because they have spent years practicing biblical interpretation skills. Since the plain meaning of the text should be sought, one must be wary of novel and unique interpretations. The Bible has been studied for centuries. There is nothing new under the sun. So, when interpreting a passage of Scripture, the most sensible understanding is probably the meaning intended by the author. It is now that this discussion moves to the necessary steps for immediate observations.

A. Steps for Immediate Observations

1. Begin by reading the book that the text within which you are studying is found. You may find it helpful to read the text in a couple of types of translations (formal, free, functional equivalents).
2. Reread the immediate context, that is, the chapter(s) in which the text you are studying.
3. Begin writing down everything you observe in the passage. Do not limit the depth of the observations you record. Write down the significant and insignificant.
4. Your observations at this stage should be focused on such features as the setting, names of persons and places, "repetition of words, contrasts, comparisons, lists, cause and effects, figures of speech, conjunctions, verbs, and pronouns."[16]
5. Begin by breaking down the small sections (words, phrases, and sentences). This will aid you in your quest to understand the larger chunks of the text (paragraphs, chapters, and stories) and how it all fits together.

B. What to Look for in Sentences[17]

1. Repetition of Words: First, note any repeated words in the sentence you're observing. Next, look to see if any words are repeated in the surrounding sentences. Example: 1 John 2:15–17 ("world," "love"); 2 Cor 1:3–7 ("comfort"); John 15:1–10 ("remain"); Matt 6:1–18 ("father"); 1 Cor 15:50–54 ("perishable" and "imperishable").
2. Contrasts: Contrasts are differences between items. Look for persons, items, and ideas that are contrasted with one another. Example: Prov 14:31; Prov 15:1; Rom 6:23; 1 John 1:5–7.
3. Comparisons: Comparisons are the similarities between items. Look for persons, items, and ideas that are compared with one another. Example: Prov 25:26; Isa 40:31; Jas 3:3–6.

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[16] Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 30.

[17] Adapted from Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 30–37.

4. Lists: A list consists of two or more itemized things. Example: 1 John 2:16; Gal 5:22–23; Gal 5:19–20.
5. Cause and Effect: Example: Prov 15:1; Rom 6:23; Rom 12:2; John 3:16.
6. Figures of Speech: "Figures of speech are images in which words are used in a sense other than the normal, literal sense."[18] Example: Ps 119:105; Isa 40:31; Matt 23:37.
7. Conjunctions: Conjunctions are those little words that connect phrases and sentences together. Some common conjunctions are: *and, for, but, therefore, since,* and *because*. Example: Rom 6:23
8. Verbs: Verbs are terms that describe action. When observing the text try and identify whether the verb is past, present, or future. Is it a command or imperative (Eph 4:2–3)? Is the verb active or passive? In other words, is the subject doing the action ("Bill *hit* the ball.") or is the subject acted upon ("Bill *was hit* by the ball"). Example: Col 3:1; Eph 1:11.
9. Pronouns: When you identify a pronoun, try to find its antecedent, that is, the person or thing to which the pronoun refers. Example: Eph 4:2–3; Col 3:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:27–30.

Discussion Questions

1. Read 1 John 1:5–7. Which things to look for in sentences do you see in verse 5? In verse 6? In verse 7?
2. Read Romans 12:1–2. Which things to look for in sentences do you see in verse 1? In verse 2?

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[18] Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 34.

IV.   Keep Your Eye on the Horizon: Immediate Observations Part 2

    A. What to Look for in Paragraphs[19]

    1. General and Specific: At times an author will make a general statement and then move to specifics that either support or further explain the general statement. The order may be reversed. Example: Gal 5:16–23; 1 Cor 13:1–12.
    2. Questions and Answers: Sometimes an author will raise a rhetorical question (this is sometimes believed to be a questions the author's opponents would raise if they were present) and then answer that question. Example: Rom 6:1–2; Mark 2:1–3:6.
    3. Dialogue: This overlaps with questions and answers. Mark 2:1–3:6 is in fact a dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is still important to note who is involved in the dialogue, the topic(s) discussed, the tone of those speaking, the type of dialogue it is. Example: John 3:1–21; John 4:1–45.
    4. Purpose and Result Statements: These are phrases or sentences that the author uses to explain the reason, result, or purpose of an action. They are usually introduced by, *that, so that,* or *in order that*. Example: Eph 2:10; John 3:16; Deut 6:3; Ps 119:11.
    5. Means (by which something is accomplished): When a reason, result, or purpose is stated begin looking for the means by which the reason, result, or purpose was accomplished. Examples: Rom 8:13; Ps 119:9.
    6. Conditional Clauses: These are clauses by which an action is conditioned on another action taking place. These usually take the form of *if…then* statements, although the words *if* and *then* are not always present. Examples: 1 John 1:6; 2 Cor 5:17; Deut 28:1.
    7. The Actions/Roles of People and the Actions/Roles of God: Identify the actions performed by people and those performed by God. Example: Eph 5:1–2.
    8. Emotional Terms: Be sure to write down words and phrases that use emotional language. Make sure to note titles that express relationship also, like, *father, mother, brother, child, daughter,* and *son*. Example: Gal 4:12–16; Jer 3:19–20. Also be aware of the tone of a passage. Does the author convey fear, anger, joy, or disappointment? Example: Phil 1:3–11 and Gal 3:1–6.
    9. Connections between Paragraphs and Episodes: After looking at sentences and paragraphs, one should turn their attention to surrounding paragraphs (usually in letters) and episodes (usually in narratives). One should look for connections similar to those, which you looked for within sentences. Look for such things as cause and effect relationships, repetition of terms, themes, and ideas, and other such relationships. Examples: Mark 8:22–26, 8:14–21 (before) and 8:27–30 (after). Col 1:3–8 and 1:9–14.

Example

Mark 8:22–26 (Jesus heals a blind man)
Mark 8:14–21 (Jesus and his disciples – dialogue about understanding)
Mark 8:27–30 (Jesus and his disciples – Peter's confession = disciples understanding)

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[19] Adapted from Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 47–54.

Connections between all three episodes:

1. All are dialogues.
2. First and last have the disciples with Jesus.
3. The middle has Jesus and the blind man.
4. Jesus asks questions in all three.
5. "Village" is repeated in the middle episode and "villages" in the third.
6. The blind man forbid by Jesus to go to the village, disciples forbid by Jesus to tell anyone about Peter's confession.
7. Middle episode has several terms that refer to sight:
   - *blind* man (2 times).
   - man's *eyes* (2 times).
   - Do you *see* anything?
   - *looked* up.
   - I *see* people.
   - they *look.*
   - his *eye's* were opened.
   - his *sight* was restored.
   - he *saw* everything clearly
8. Sight terminology in the first episode:
   - *watch out*.
   - Do you still not *see* or understand?
   - Do you have *eyes* but fail to *see*?
9. Blind man literally blind, however the disciples spiritually blind.
10. Peter's confession means the disciples can now see.

Conclusion: The progression of the blind man seeing clearly parallels the disciples process of seeing (understanding) clearly who Jesus is.

10. Story Shifts – Major Breaks and Pivots: Major breaks and pivots are areas where the story or writer appears to take a new turn. These changes are significant, because they can help one to better understand how a particular paragraph or episode fits into the larger picture of the book or letter. Examples: Eph 1–3 (primarily doctrinal). Predominantly explanatory and descriptive verbs. Eph 4–6 (primarily practical). Predominantly imperatives (commands). 2 Sam 1–10, 13–21, and 11–12.

Example

2 Sam 1–10 = David's success (positive episode)
2 Sam 13–21 = David's setbacks (negative episode)
2 Sam 11–12 = David's sin (pivotal episode in the book)

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think it is important to observe both the details of a text (**III**) and the larger patterns within a text (**IV**)?
2. Besides what is listed for observation in **III** and **IV**, what other characteristics of a passage do you find it helpful to observe?
3. What are the benefits of careful observations? What happens if the interpreter does nothing more than observe?

V.   Discovering the Historical-Cultural Context[20]

At the beginning of the course we discussed the need to understand what the Bible meant to its first audience, that is, those persons or groups that made up the biblical authors' audience. We've already begun that process by closely observing and analyzing the text. But this is not enough. Although a very important step, and perhaps the most important step, we still need to move onto investigating what we can know about the author, his audience, and the situation for his writing if at all possible. This is where discovering the historical-cultural context comes in to play.

A.   What is the Historical-Cultural Context?

The *historical-cultural context* refers "to information about the biblical writer, the biblical audience, and any other historical-cultural elements touched on by the passage itself. Historical-cultural context relates to just about anything outside the text that will help you understand the text itself."[21]

B.   What to Look for?

Look for information about the biblical writer. Who is it? Where is he writing from? What is his purpose for writing? What is his connection with the biblical audience? Do they have a past?

Look for information about the biblical audience. Where do they live? What obstacles are they facing? What do they look like (Jews and/or Gentiles)? What did a day in their lives look like? Are they old covenant believers or new covenant believers?

One should also ask questions about "any customs, political activity, economic conditions, glimpses of everyday life, business and trades, worldview–anything to do with the cultural context of the passage."[22] One should also ask questions about "geographical locations, distances, transportation, agriculture, and the topography of the land."[23] How were families organized? What did synagogue worship look like? And many other questions need to be asked and answered.

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[20] The following is adapted from Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word,* 50–61 unless otherwise noted.

[21] Duvall and Hayes, *Journey into God's Word,* 51.

[22] Wayne McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 70.

[23] McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills,* 70.

C.   Principles for Historical-Cultural Interpretation[24]

1.   The Original Historical-Cultural Background

"First, *we must understand each passage consistent with its historical and cultural background.*"[25] If we come to an understanding of the text inconsistent with the original recipients setting, we have arrived at the wrong understanding. So there is a need to understand the historical-cultural context in order to properly understand and interpret the biblical text faithfully.

An example may be helpful here. Revelation 3:14–22 records Jesus' words to the church at Laodicea. He states in verse 15, "I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were either one or the other!" What are we to make of Jesus' description of their deeds, which are neither hot nor cold? Laodicea was located near both hot springs (by Hierapolis) and a cold stream (by Colossae), both of which were useful. However, this was not the quality of water that made its way into Laodicea. Water traveled to Laodicea via pipes, a process that led to lukewarm water that was "putrid and emetic."[26]

In essence, Jesus is saying that the people of the church of Laodicea are useless. Neither are they like hot water, useful for a comfortable bath (bath houses), nor are they cold, that is useful for drinking water. Rather their spiritual state is described as lukewarm, which is good for neither bathing nor drinking.

2.   The Original Impact

Second, "*We must determine the impact that the biblical message would have had in its original setting.*"[27] In a sense this is thinking like the biblical audience. That means recognizing our own preconceptions and cultural baggage that we bring to the text. We can never get rid of this, but by recognizing it, we can at least set it aside while we attempt to discern the mind of the biblical audience. We do this by studying resources that discuss the historical-cultural context.

Take the cross for example. Today people wear them around their neck and from their ears. It is placed upon a steeple and displayed proudly on and throughout churches. However, in the first century the cross was a source of derision and shame. The Jews believed that anyone who hung on a cross was accursed. When one considers the sort of people that were punished by means of crucifixion one can understand why. Those who were sentenced to die by crucifixion were those found guilty of murder, treason, and rape. In fact it was so horrible that Roman citizens could not be crucified except by word of the emperor. So when Paul writes about the scandal of the cross, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who

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[24] This section is adapted from William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 174–179.

[25] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 174.

[26] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 176.

[27] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 176.

are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18), and elsewhere, "[W]e preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:23–24), the audience got just how odious and scandalous the cross really is. Today we read this and skip right over the historical-cultural context. We miss the shame and ignominy of the cross. We only recognize that Christ crucified is the power and wisdom of God that saves. This is true, but we miss how the cross and crucifixion was understood in the 1st century, and just how much of a stumbling block it was for the apostle Paul and all Christians to proclaim a crucified Messiah.

3. The Correct Expression

The third principle relates to the contextualization of the historical-cultural interpretation: "*We must express biblical truth in our language, in ways that most closely correspond to the ideas in the biblical culture.*"[28] This means that we articulate biblical ideas and some jargon in a manner that impacts our current culture to the same extent that it impacted the biblical culture.

In Judges 3:12–30 we find the record of an episode from the life of Ehud, the left-handed assassin. When I taught this to my class, I compared Ehud to a current hero of our culture, Jack Bauer. Like Ehud, Jack fights for his government, taking missions that others are either unable or at least unwilling to do. Yet, Jack puts his life on the line time and time again for the good of his country, its members, and its ideals. In similar fashion, Ehud puts his life on the line by taking Israel's tribute to Moab, getting past the guards of king Eglon, and then killing him with a small concealed double-edged sword. He does all this for the nation of Israel, its members, and its ideals. Now, maybe this isn't the best example. But the point is people in our culture know who Jack Bauer is. They know what Jack Bauer does. And as far as I can tell, Jack Bauer is a pretty good analogue for Ehud.

However, there is the danger of taking this too far. There is certain language and word pictures that Scripture uses that are pregnant with meaning and need to be explained to our audience. I once heard of a preacher saying that what John was trying to say by calling Jesus the "word" (John 1:1–18) was that Jesus was the "seed of God." At the conclusion of the service he commenced to throw seeds at the congregation, in some weird effort to get his point across. The problem with this is that "word" in Koine Greek (*logos*) means "word." It doesn't mean seed. John used the term "word" for a reason and this is what we must understand to get the full meaning of the text. Other terms pregnant with meaning that we need to teach and not change are but not limited to: justification, propitiation, and atonement.

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[28] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 176.

D. Dangers Associated with Studying Background

1. Ignoring the Historical-Cultural Context

Romans 16:16 says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." The person who ignores the historical-cultural background will take a verse like this and apply it directly to their current situation. Can you imagine a pastor instructing his audience to give several people a kiss hello? It would create a whole other set of questions? What is a "holy" kiss? How is one to kiss? Are there gender restrictions? Instead of recognizing that this verse has certain cultural conditions, the pastor has created problems for himself that could have been avoided had he only taken the time to explore the historical-cultural context of Rom 16:16. Furthermore, we must remember that God has revealed himself to humanity in space time history – to particular people, living in particular places, at particular times.

2. Using Inaccurate Background Information

Some have taught that the "eye of the needle" in Matthew 19:23–24 refers to the "camel's gate" in Jerusalem. However, there is no evidence for such a gate ever existing. When the author writes "eye of the needle" he means the eye of a needle. Jesus is using hyperbole to make a statement about how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Can you imagine trying to push a camel (the largest animal in Palestine) through an opening the size of a needle? You can't. And that was Jesus' point. However, with God even this is possible (19:26).

3. Elevating the Historical-Cultural Background Above the Scripture

John 4:1–42 focuses on Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well in the Samaritan town of Sychar. When studying this passage, you could end up focusing all of your time on the status of women during the 1st century, the reason for the tense relationship between Samaritans and Jews, the origin of the Samaritans as a people, and so on, and fail to miss the point of the narrative – Jesus came in flesh not just to save Israel, but all people, including Samaritan women with a shady past.[29]

4. Misappropriating the Historical-Cultural Background

Samuel Sandmel coined a term that refers to this danger, *parallelomania*. "NT scholarship has all too often been prone to turn 'common language' into 'influence,' and 'influence' into 'borrowing.' The point here is simply to raise a caution. Don't say, 'Paul got this idea from…,' unless you have good reason to believe it and can reasonably support it. On the other hand, you can very often legitimately state: 'In saying this, Paul reflects a tradition (or an idea) that

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[29] Although this is very likely the overall point of the narrative, there are numerous theological principles throughout this passage.

can be found elsewhere in…'"[30] I put this here to show that if NT scholars are guilty of such a faux pas, we mere mortals must certainly be aware of the danger of *parallelomania.*

E.   The Historical-Cultural Context of the Whole Book

In order to understand the historical-cultural context you first need to determine the historical-cultural context of the entire book. In order to do this, you will need to utilize some or all of the following resources: Bible handbooks, introductions and surveys of the Old and New Testaments, and especially good commentaries.

1.   Bible Handbooks

These resources usually include general articles about the Bible, the world of the Bible, and brief introductions to each biblical book and a brief running commentary of the book. The following are some useful Bible handbooks:

Alexander, Pat, and David Alexander, eds. *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible.* Grand Rapids, MI:
        Zondervan, 1999.
Dockery, David S., ed. *Holman Bible Handbook.* Nashville, TN: Holman, 1992.
Thompson, J. A. *Handbook of Life in Bible Times.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986.

2.   Old and New Testament Introductions and Surveys

These tools give background information and an overview of the book's content. They usually discuss such elements as: authorship, purpose for writing, provenance, date, audience, themes, etc. Typically introductions offer a more technical look at the background information and focus less on the book's content. On the other hand, surveys are less technical and tend to focus more on the book's content. These resources, although containing similar content, go into greater detail than Bible handbooks; thus, the need to break them up into Old and New Testaments. The following are a few of the better introductions and surveys:

Arnold, Bill, and Bryan Beyer. *Encountering the Old Testament.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999.
Walton, John H., and Andrew E. Hill. *Old Testament Today.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,
        2004.
Elwell, Walter, and Robert Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament.* Grand Rapids, MI:
        Baker, 1998.
Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament.* 2nd ed. Grand Rapids,
        MI: Zondervan, 2005.

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[30] Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors,* Revised ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 122.

3. Commentaries

A good commentary is usually your best bet for up-to-date information on historical-cultural issues. The best not only supply historical-cultural information for the entire book, but for your particular passage too. Besides this information, commentaries supply some of the following information such as: flow of the authors thought, syntactical information, word studies, and application. One should select commentaries based on the author, not so much the commentary series. But since I can't go on listing name after name of authors, the following is a short list of helpful and accessible commentary series:

Beginner-Intermediate
Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
IVP New Testament Commentary. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Intermediate-Advanced
Expositor's Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman.

Advanced
Baker Exegetical Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
Pillar New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Philippians Commentaries
Fee, Gordon D. *Philippians.* New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand
        Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
O'Brien, Peter T. *The Epistle to the Philippians.* New International Greek Testament
        Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.
Silva, Moises. *Philippians.* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids,
        MI: Baker, 1993.
Thielman, Frank. *Philippians.* NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,
        1995.

F. The Historical-Cultural Context of the Passage

In section B we discussed what to look for concerning the historical-cultural context. This applied to the entire book as well as the immediate passage you might be working with. So, one must be on the lookout for language that may speak to the religious, political, economic, familial, geographical issues, and so on when working with a passage of Scripture. These

elements and more must be understood to gain a fuller understanding of what the text meant to the original audience, which in turn will aid us in identifying how the text applies to our audience. Some tools that may prove helpful in this endeavor include: Bible atlases, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, commentaries, background commentaries, Old and New Testament histories, and special studies on ancient life and culture.

1. Bible Atlases

Bible atlases will help us to get a sense of distance between geographical locations and exactly where important cities are located. A good Bible atlas will not only do this, but will also describe the people of a certain area as well as give a sense of the typography of the land. The following is a list of helpful Bible Atlases:

Brisco, Thomas C. *Holman Bible Atlas.* Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998.
Lawrence, Paul, ed. *The IVP Atlas of Bible History.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

2. Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

These tools are helpful when you want more information about a particular topic mentioned in your passage. For instance, you may want to know more about the garden of Eden. So, you turn in the Bible dictionary or encyclopedia to the page where you find "Eden, garden of." Like other dictionaries or encyclopedias, a Bible dictionary/encyclopedia lists items in alphabetical order. These are very helpful tools. The following are a few helpful resources:

Butler, Trent, Chad Brand, Charles W. Draper, and Archie England, eds. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary.* Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003.
Elwell, Walter. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible.* 2 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988.
Marshall, I. Howard, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, eds. *New Bible Dictionary.* 3rd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

3. Commentaries and Background Commentaries

As you will see, commentaries serve as a sort of one stop shop for information about a particular book of the Bible. A good commentary will assess much of the information available and interact with it. While you probably will not find colorful maps, as in a Bible atlas, a good commentary will even comment on geographical elements listed in a particular passage. A good commentary will also give you some information about background and cultural elements in a given passage. However, the main point of a commentary is to help one understand the meaning of a particular passage.

On the other hand, a background commentary is a tool that focuses not on meaning of the text, but on the background elements located within the text. Much of the historical-cultural background issues are addressed in these relatively new resources. Like a commentary, they go verse by verse. Some very helpful background commentaries include:

Arnold, Clint. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary.* 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI:
     Zondervan, 2002.
Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament.* Downers Grove, IL:
     InterVarsity Press, 1993.
Walton, John H., Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background
     Commentary: Old Testament.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

4.   Computer Software and Internet Resources

Some of the above resources have been converted into electronic format. These usually offer
the user the ability to access the information using multiple searching features. These resources
tend to be less expensive than their book counterparts. However, you shouldn't just purchase
the least expensive program. You want to make sure it is a reputable resource. You can use the
biographical information in this section and in coming sections to help evaluate the various
software packages.

As far as internet resources go, you must be extremely careful. While there is some good
information available on the internet, there is much that is inaccurate and of poor quality. I
hesitate to endorse any internet resources for fear that it may lead to the assumption that
information of a similar format elsewhere may be of the same quality. However, the internet is
useful, convenient, and does supply some quality biblical resources. The following is just a small
sampling:

IVP New Testament Commentaries
http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/?source=1
Biblical Studies.org.uk: Articles, Monographs, and Books
http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles.php
Dr. Daniel Akin Resources: Introduction to the Bible and Theology
http://www.sebts.edu/president-akin/resources/default.aspx
Dr. Constable's Bible Study Notes: Introduction to biblical books and brief explanation of text
http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm
Studylight.org: Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, and Lexicons
http://www.studylight.org/
Biblos.com: Atlas and Interlinear
http://biblos.com/
ESV Study Bible Online: Bible in English Standard Version, Carts, Maps, Notes, and more
http://www.esvstudybible.org/online [free trial through Mar 31, 2009]

Discussion Questions

1.   What can happen when people approach the Bible without any concern for the historical-
     cultural context? Care to share any examples from your own experience?
2.   Can you think of an example of the historical-cultural context shedding significant light on
     the meaning of a biblical text?

3. For people living in an "instant application" society such as ours, what can persuade them to put forth effort to study the historical-cultural context?

VI.   Discovering the Literary Context[31]

A. Defining Literary Context

What is the *literary context*? The *literary context* "relates to the particular form a passage takes (the *literary genre*) and to the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround the passage you are studying (the *surrounding context*)."[32]

B. What is Literary Genre?

Genre comes from a French word meaning "form" or "kind." With respect to the Bible, literary genre is what kind of literature is found in the Bible. In the OT we find narrative, poetry, law codes, prophecy and wisdom. In the NT we find narrative, letters, history, prophecy and apocalyptic. There are also subgenres such as: parables, riddles, and speeches/monologues. It is necessary to recognize the different genres and play within the rules that govern the particular literary form you are working with. For example, if you're studying the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17), then you read them as a code of law. You would never study them as say a love letter. Neither would you want to study a love letter as if it was apocalyptic literature. It would be utterly confusing and make no sense at all. Approaching a text with the appropriate literary genre in mind will help one to expose the correct meaning of the Scripture.

C. What is Surrounding Context?

"Literary context includes not only the genre or type of literature, but also the *surrounding context*—the texts that surround the passage you are studying…This includes the words, sentences, paragraphs, and discourses that come before and after your passage."[33]

So for Philippians 2:1–18 the surrounding context is 1:1–30 and 2:19–4:23. The surrounding context of Philippians is the rest of the Pauline Epistles. The surrounding context of the Pauline Epistles is the rest of the Bible.

Included in the surrounding context is the *immediate context* of a passage. The immediate context describes what comes just before and just after your passage. What you discover about the immediate context will ultimately come to bear on how you understand the passage you're working with. The immediate context of Philippians 2:5–11 is 2:1–4 and 2:12–18. In order to fully grasp what is found in 2:5–11 you will need to consider what 2:1–4 and 2:12–18 have to say.

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[31] Adapted from Duvall and Hays, *Journey Into God's Word,* 62–73.
[32] Duvall and Hays, *Journey Into God's Word,* 63.
[33] Duvall and Hays, *Journey Into God's Word,* 65.

D. How to Identify the Surrounding Context

Understanding the surrounding context will help the interpreter to discover the author's flow of thought. One must remember that a book of the Bible is not put together at random. It is not a string of unrelated ideas. Each sentence and each paragraph and how the paragraphs fit together will help us to properly discern the author's flow of thought.

In order to determine the surrounding context of any passage you will need to do the following:

1. "Identify how the book is divided into paragraphs or sections."[34] This can be done by consulting several Bible translations to see where they break up a book into paragraphs.
2. "Summarize the main idea of each section in about a dozen words or less."[35] When doing this it will be helpful to consider two things: (1) the topic or main idea of the section; and (2) what the author has to say about the topic or main idea.
3. "Explain how the section you are studying relates to the surrounding sections."[36]

E. The Main Danger Associated with Disregarding Literary Context

1. Ignoring the Surrounding Context

This danger can most easily be seen in the context of preaching, and in some context teaching. Those who tend to be more topical in their preaching and teaching have a natural bent toward this danger. I recently heard a message on the need for Christians to encourage one another. The speaker did not spend his time on just one text that addressed the topic but on several that may or may not have touched on this theme. He closed his message by looking at a portion of Scripture from 1 Peter 3:8–9, **"Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing."** He then basically said do this and you'll be blessed. But is that really all that needs to be said? Why should I do this? What should motivate me to do this? Is there an example for me to follow? These questions were never addressed. Had he taken the time to read a little further (vv. 18–22) he would have seen that it's because ("for" [v. 18]) Jesus did for us to the ninth degree just what Peter wants us to do to one another. This is the gospel—that Jesus died for those who were evil and did evil to him. Instead of giving them what they deserved, namely death, he died so that all who believe in him may live.

Now, this speaker meant well, but he missed part of the meaning of the passage and an opportunity to proclaim the gospel because he did not consider the surrounding context. Had he considered it who knows what impact it may have had on someone listening that day.

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[34] Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word,* 71.
[35] Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word,* 71.
[36] Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word,* 72.

Perhaps, hearing about the wonderful grace of God, displayed through the sacrificial death of his Son, someone may have been saved.

Discussion Questions

1. What happens if you carefully consider the surrounding context of a passage, but ignore its literary genre?

VII.   What Do We Bring to the Text? Preunderstanding

A. Definition of Preunderstanding and Biblical Presuppositions

1. Preunderstanding

Preuderstanding "refers to all of our preconceived notions and understandings that we bring to the text, which have been formulated, both consciously and subconsciously, *before* we actually study the text in detail."[37] Example: How American preunderstanding, particularly one's culture, affects one's reading of Rom 13:1–7.[38]

2. Biblical Presuppositions

Whereas our preunderstanding should be evaluated and possibly changed each time we study the text, by submitting ourselves to the text, our biblical presuppositions should not change with each reading. Biblical presuppositions are not related particular texts but to our overall view of the Bible.

B. Categories of Preunderstanding

1. Informational: "The information one already possesses about a subject prior to approaching it."[39]
2. Attitudinal: "The disposition one brings in approaching a topic, also termed prejudice, bias, or predisposition."[40]
3. Ideological: "Both generally, the way we view the total complex of reality (world view, frame of reference) and particularly, how we view a specific subject (point of view, perspective)."[41]
4. Methodological: "The actual approach one takes in explaining a given subject. Possible approaches include scientific, historical, and inductive."[42]

C. Safeguards for the Interpretation of Scripture

1. Awareness of the danger. One must begin to recognize one's own (and then others) preunderstanding.
2. The careful use of historical analysis of the text.
3. The interpreter must allow for his presuppositions and preunderstanding to be modified or completely reshaped by the text. This is sometimes referred to as the "hermeneutical

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[37] Duvall and Hays, *Journey into God's Word,* 42.
[38] Taken from Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word,* 92–94.
[39] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 100.
[40] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 100.
[41] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 100.
[42] Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation,* 100.

spiral."[43] This is the alteration of preunderstanding. This is reshaping ones understanding of the biblical text upon each reading of the text. After each reading, one comes to the text with a renewed understanding of it. This is allowing the text to do a work on the interpreter. This comes through study and by the work of the indwelling Spirit.

D. Evangelical Presuppositions Regarding the Nature of Scripture

1. The 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament is the Bible.
2. The Bible is *the* word of God through and through. It is not a word *about* God. Although God worked through individuals that were inspired ("God-breathed") by the Holy Spirit to record his written word to humanity, it is still God's word.
3. The Bible is truthful in all it affirms.
4. The Bible is how God chose to disclose himself to most of the world. This is sometimes referred to as "special revelation."[44] The Bible serves a two-fold purpose:
    a. Scripture is the account of how he is attempting to reestablish relationship with humanity, and once reestablished how to maintain it (see Rom 1:16).
    b. The Bible is the mode God chose to reveal himself to most of humanity. Through proper interpretation one can find out who God is. Scripture is not merely an account of people and their experience with God, but God speaking through people.
5. While it is difficult to understand at times, the Bible does not contradict itself. Although written by different writers, in different languages, over more than 1000 years, it is a unified text.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between preunderstanding and presuppositions as defined in this section?
2. How do you think your own preunderstanding influences the way you read the Bible?
3. How should we deal with our preunderstanding as we go about the task of responsible interpretation?

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[43] Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 10, 324.

[44] Special revelation includes God's personal disclosure to persons in Scripture. The ultimate self-disclosure of God to humanity was in the person of Jesus Christ (see John 1:14, 18).