

# THUS SAITH THE LORD

A STUDY OF GOD'S WORD

## Interpretation – How Can We Understand What God Wrote?

God's people have been reading God's Word for thousands of years and have often asked themselves the same question that Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch: Do you understand what you are reading? (cf Acts 8:30) We saw last week that without the help of the Holy Spirit, we won't truly be able to understand God's Word. But we also saw that such help doesn't eliminate our need to study carefully. In fact, it is often through careful study that the Holy Spirit will help us to understand what it is that God's Word has for us. Since the Bible is both a divine and human book, we must study it with God's help, but we should indeed study it.

So how do we go about studying God's Word? Where do we begin? This is a question that is hotly debated and often argued over. Theologians can get technical here and use words like exegesis and hermeneutics, but what they essentially mean can be boiled down to a very basic concept: how do we figure out what the Bible means? The best way to do that is to ask a simple question that will help orient our thinking:

**The Big Question:** What did the original author mean to communicate to his original audience?

All the fancy theories and in-depth methods that scholars use to study the Bible are helpful in so far as they help us answer this basic

question.<sup>1</sup> While there are a lot of theories, tools, and further elaborations on how to answer this question, we will focus on a few general principles that can go a long way in helping us understand the Bible.

## **When you read your Bible, study the context.**

One of the simplest, most important principles you can learn about Bible study is to always read things in their context. Context is simply a fancy way of saying “surrounding.” When we talk about context, we are asking about the surrounding words (immediate context), the surrounding history and culture (historical context), and the surrounding of all Scripture (biblical context).

### **Immediate Context**

***True or false: The Bible says there is no God.***

Did you know that the Bible says, word for word, “There is no God”? It’s true. The catch is that the quote is part of Psalm 53:1, and the whole verse reads “The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” This might seem like a silly example at first, but understanding this principle is very important for studying God’s Word. Whenever we want to know what something means, we need to read the words that come before and the words that come after.

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<sup>1</sup> A major discussion within modern hermeneutics (the name given to the study of the study of the Bible) is whether meaning is located in the intention of the author, in the text itself, or in the understanding of the reader. These issues tend to get very messy and very technical very quickly, and for this reason we will avoid such discussions and assume that the meaning the original author intended for his initial audience is the meaning of the passage Christians should seek. For the brave soul that wants to go deeper in studying these complicated questions, see the two appendices in Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pages 465-521.

You most likely understand this principle already at some level. You may have found yourself saying something like, “That’s not what I meant. If you had been listening to everything I had said, you would have known that what I meant by that was…” One of the best ways to unravel a confusing passage is to look at what the author says before and after. Often that will give the necessary clues to understand a passage.

For example, people love to quote the phrase “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13). While this is a powerful statement, what Paul actually means here is not that I can accomplish great physical feats or that I can succeed at anything I put my mind to. Rather, Paul is talking about the fact that no matter what happens, he can be content and thankful (cf Philippians 4:10-12). In times of plenty, Paul continued to trust God. In times of hunger and lack, he was content in Christ. That’s not easy! But although it was not easy it was possible since Paul was able to find contentment through Christ.

***Can you think of any other examples where knowing the context of a passage will be important for understanding what is being said?***

This involves not just the words before and after but what is going on in the book as a whole. For example, be careful when quoting Job! Much of Job is the speech of Job’s friends – whom God threatens at the end of the book because they had “not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath” (Job 42:7). Even the speeches of Job must be examined carefully, as God is not completely pleased with Job’s attitude throughout the book (cf Job 38-42).

***What is the best way to learn the context of a book to make sure you avoid making such mistakes?***

## Historical Context

For example, the verse “Remove not the ancient landmark” (Proverbs 22:28; 23:10) has often been used to argue that things should stay the same. While there is indeed wisdom in being cautious towards whatever the latest fad is, this interpretation misunderstands what “the ancient landmark” is referring to. These were boundary markers that divided property (see Deuteronomy 19:14), and so moving the ancient landmark would mean moving the property boundaries. This verse is a warning against stealing.

We want to be careful here. Knowing the first century Roman context of 1 Corinthians or the ancient near eastern background behind the book of Proverbs can be helpful, but this does not mean that Christians who aren’t experts in history can’t understand their Bibles. Knowing the historical context will often bring greater clarity, and on some occasions might be necessary for understanding challenging passages (such as the “ancient landmark”), but a Spirit-illuminated believer can read God’s Word profitably without needing a Bible dictionary at hand.

***What resources have you found to be helpful in your own study of God’s Word?***

## Biblical Context

God’s Word is never going to contradict God’s Word. Because Scripture is inspired and inerrant, and because all Scripture ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16), we want to read the Bible as a whole. When you read stories in the Old Testament, the God behind that history is the same God of the New Testament. The letters of Paul and the letter of James are not going to conflict, even if they emphasize slightly different points to different audiences. We can ignore no verse of Scripture, because all of it combines together to give us the perspective of God.

***What are some passages of Scripture that people tend to ignore?***

***What should we do when what we read in one place in the Bible seems to conflict with something else?***

This does not mean that understanding how all the pieces fit together will always be easy. Theologians who hold to inerrancy and inspiration all believe that God’s Word is a unified whole, but how that unity works may differ in the details. Questions such as how the Old Testament law applies today or how to reconcile passages that emphasize free will and passages that emphasize God’s sovereignty may be answered differently by serious students of the Bible. But in the end, we should make every effort to read the Bible as a whole, and when we still can’t figure out what’s going on should have the humility to trust God rather than our own wisdom.

### **When you read your Bible, consider the genre.**

Let’s start by defining our terms: What is a genre? Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines genre as “a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.”<sup>2</sup> That’s a very technical way of saying that genre is a type of art, music, or writing. Many people are familiar with different music genres – such as classical, rock, country, jazz, etc. Many are also familiar with different genres of movie – comedy, action, romance, horror, etc. The Bible itself comes in different literary genres, different styles of writing that the authors of Scripture use.

***Can you think of some of the different types of writing in Scripture? (we will later look at stories, poetry, and letters but even these could likely be broken down further)***

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre?utm\\_campaign=sd&utm\\_medium=serp&utm\\_source=jsonld](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld) Accessed March 18, 2022.

## **The Importance of Genre**

While the principles given in the previous section deal with all the writing of the Bible, there are some rules that are specific to the type of writing in the Bible. We are still asking what the author meant, and still studying the immediate context, historical context, and biblical context. But how I read a poem is different than how I read a story. And both are different than how I read the letters of the New Testament. There are many types of writing, many genres, and different genres require us to watch out for and pay attention to specific things.

***Why do you think God communicated in so many different genres?***

***Which genre do you find yourself drawn to the most?***

## **The Danger of Genre**

Although understanding genre can be a big help in thinking through how to study a particular passage, several recent misunderstandings of God's Word have come under the guise of "genre." This is particularly true in two realms: (1) creation and (2) prophecy.

- **Misunderstandings about creation.**

It is trendy to label Genesis 1-3 as being part of the "creation myth" genre. This means that Genesis is written in a stream of ancient near eastern stories about the interactions between original humanity and the gods. We wouldn't necessarily expect, it is then argued, that Genesis is giving us a historical account of the beginning of the earth, but rather is giving key insights on how the deity and humanity interact and relate. This does not mean that Genesis is trying to deceive. The argument is made that the original readers would have understood the genre and realized this was an account that was revealing important theological truths, not a literal account of where we came from.

***What do we lose if Genesis 1-3 is “mythic”?***<sup>3</sup>

***What problems do you see with this “mythic” view?***

- **Misunderstandings about prophecy.**

Others will argue that because some of the Old Testament prophets and Revelation are “apocalyptic,” and because their writing uses poetry and a lot of figurative language, therefore what they prophesied should not be taken literally. Old Testament prophets were talking about the church (although they didn’t know it) and Revelation is about church history as a whole, not a seven-year period at the end of time. While both Revelation and the Old Testament prophets use much imagery, the prophecies that they made should be taken literally. Simply because poetry is at times used to describe God’s restoration of Israel does not mean that God’s restoration of Israel is simply a metaphor.

***What do we lose if interpret prophecy as being a metaphor for what God is going to do?***

## **Examples of Genre**

Even though some might take the study of genre too far, there is much to be gained from paying attention to genre. We will briefly consider

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<sup>3</sup> Not everyone will use the word “myth,” and some will argue that “myth” is being used in the philosophical sense of “an story that communicates an underlying worldview.” For someone who holds that the genre of Genesis suggests that the creation account was not intended to be historical but pushes back against the use of the term “myth” see John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*, especially the discussion on pages 136-139.

a few tips for each genre, but realize that studying each genre could be an entire lesson on its own.<sup>4</sup>

- **Stories**

***How does God use stories to communicate His truth?***

When studying stories, we want to pay attention to characters, setting, and plot. We always want to come to stories realizing that simply because a story is told doesn't mean that God approves. Sometimes there are no good guys in the story (e.g. Judges 17-18). Sometimes the good guys are disappointing (e.g. David and Bathsheba). But stories are designed to demonstrate moral principles for us, as well as teach us how God thinks about life and how we should, too (cf 1 Cor 10:6; Romans 15:4; Hebrews 11).

- **Poetry**

***How does God use poetry to communicate His truth?***

Poetry is heavy on the figures of speech, symbolism, and repetition. Poetry can communicate ideas, but it does so in ways that are designed to be artistically beautiful and to impact the emotions as well as the mind. When you study poetry, pay attention to the images the author is using. Read carefully and slowly, observing how different themes develop and are repeated throughout.

- **Letters**

***How does God use letters to communicate His truth?***

Letters is the genre we are probably most familiar with. Letters are very similar to sermons, they are trying to reason, persuade,

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<sup>4</sup> For an 8 part series on studying the Bible, many lessons of which deal with specific genres, see Pastor Ben's series on Hermeneutics, available at <https://www.colonialindy.org/hermeneutics-class.html>



and argue with the reader to take the position of the writer. They clarify, explain, and apply what God has said and try to make sense of what God is doing. When reading letters, it is helpful to focus on the flow of logic. Figure out what the author is trying to argue for, and how he is going about arguing for it.

Many of these genres could be broken down further, for example there is much similarity but also some differences between stories that are parables and stories that are historical narratives. There are also more genres than we had time to cover, such as legal material (e.g. Leviticus), genealogies, wisdom literature (e.g. Proverbs), and others. But this is hopefully enough to give a brief introduction to the concept of genre. Throughout the years reading through different genres and hearing preaching on different genres, you will come to develop an understanding of how genre works.

Studying God's Word is not something we can do on our own, we need the help of the Spirit. Yet even with the Spirit's help, studying God's Word will take work. But for those willing to humbly seek God's help and put in the work of diligent study, the reward will be a clearer understanding, a better understanding of God, and a closer walk with Him.