

Chapter 3 - What Does It All Mean?

We now turn to the question of discovering the meaning of the text. Ultimately, we want to know how God wants us to live it out in our own lives, but in order to discover this we must first discover as reliably as possible, the original intended meaning of the inspired author. This is called exegesis. Having done this, we must then understand how the original meaning applies to our present age and context. Next we should make specific prayerful application and the final task is to live it out. The first two tasks – understanding the original meaning and its present relevance – are the concern of a subject called hermeneutics.

Over the centuries countless saints have earnestly tried to understand God's word to them from their reading of Scripture and some helpful guidelines have emerged. There are now many good books and websites devoted to the subject of hermeneutics.

Approach without pre-conceived notions

A friend of mine, who is on the church staff as a youth worker, went into the pastor's office, closed the door behind him and told him that he had got a young lady pregnant. Also, that this lady was married and a member of the church. The pastor looked horrified until my friend said that it was all right because the lady concerned was his own wife! I don't think I would have been taken in because I have played such tricks myself, but of course there was nothing untruthful or deceitful about what my friend said. The problem was entirely the pre-conceived notions of the pastor.

The main problem in our approach to understanding scripture is that we too have many pre-conceived notions. We have probably heard countless sermons of variable quality, read many books of varying scholarliness, and perhaps had quite a

diet of pithy quippy bible reading notes to stimulate our quiet times. As a consequence, when we read a passage we all too often think we already know what it says and means rather than letting the passage speak to us afresh, untainted by our pre-conceived understanding.

We will have to work hard to avoid this and other pitfalls, but I hope that the following paragraphs will help to equip you to study with fresh eyes and an expectant heart.

Nurture a keen sense of surprise

Some years ago I was doing some major building work at home and had arranged for the building inspector to visit. He arrived and parked his car but when he did not immediately emerge I thought he must be looking at the drawings to familiarise himself with the work before coming in. After 10 minutes I decided to approach the car and introduce myself. When I asked if he had been looking at the drawings he replied “Oh no! I have been admiring the view!” I have lived there for years, but I have never sat for 10 minutes just admiring the view.

The trouble with staid old Christians like myself is that we are so familiar with our bibles that what we read no longer surprises us. We are too familiar with it. We should try to nurture a keen sense of surprise, a childlike inquisitiveness, a humble teachability. Ask the Holy Spirit to restore to you a child-like innocence as you read the bible. I suggest you keep a note of the surprises you encounter as you read. They are often a fruitful place to start deeper study. The letter to the Hebrews is full of surprises for those who notice them.

Listening to the Author

Many people get a great deal out of reading the bible and asking God to speak to them through it. This type of “devotional” reading can be a source of great joy and Christian growth and I do not intend to take anything away from such people. But the principal concern in such reading is not to understand the original meaning of the text, but to enjoy conversation with God. This may be fine for our devotions, but it will not do for our study. It will not do as a foundation for truth and progression towards maturity.

We need to find out what God intended the text to mean. We need to listen to the human author. Some people say “It doesn’t matter what the human author meant to say, all that matters is what God wants to say to me through it.” I would agree with the second half of the statement, but not the first. Yes of course the whole point of study is to discover what God wants to say to me through it. But does it matter whether or not we understand what the human author meant to say? Paul clearly thought it did, for he wrote to the Corinthians to clear up a misunderstanding over a previous letter: “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - **not at all meaning** the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.” (1 Cor 5:9-10)

It is quite ridiculous to suggest that the intention of the original authors is unimportant. That is the same as saying that the Bible is just a random collection of sayings that God uses to construct messages he wishes to convey to us. The author (principally the divine author but also the human author, in so far as he understood the divine purpose) had a particular meaning in mind when writing the passage, and that is its

meaning. It has no other¹. It is wrong, therefore, to think that any given passage can mean different things to different people – at least it is wrong to suggest that this is a proper state of affairs. If a passage is taken to mean different things by different people it is because it is misunderstood by those people – either because the passage is difficult to understand, or because they have made mistakes in its exegesis.

Having, hopefully, understood the meaning of the passage, there may be many varied applications depending on the reader, and God may indeed use the passage to convey something quite different from the original intent. This is all good and valuable, but it is not exegesis. It is not the meaning of the passage.

Asking the right questions

Having prepared our hearts and enlisted the help of the Holy Spirit, how can we discover the author's intended meaning?

The most useful key that I have found is a very simple one. It is to ask the questions that the author is seeking to answer. So often we turn to scripture to find the answer to a question we, or someone else, is asking. This leads to searching for “proof texts” which are often taken out of context, and leads to an attitude of buttressing our beliefs with scripture rather than asking the scripture to shape our beliefs. How often do preachers take a “text” for their sermon and then preach what ever they want to, jumping from text to text, or even going on to use stories and illustrations to “prove” their point. I think

¹ Scripture may have an historical meaning and a future prophetic meaning, such as the prophecies concerning Isaiah's wife and children, which are also prophecies about Christ. But these double meanings were part of the original intention of God, though Isaiah probably did not know this.

there is a danger in this approach, setting an example for the congregation of proving our opinions with scripture rather than humbly letting the scripture examine our hearts, beliefs and practices. Surely we should be setting an example in our pulpits of opening the word and letting God wash us and instruct us as He thinks fit.² Let us resist our habit of coming to the text with our questions and consequently finding “answers” that the author never intended. We should not forget that God gave us a story book not a systematic theology.

Here is an example. Some people want to know whether an interpretation of a tongue should be a prophecy or a prayer. In other words, should it be God addressing us or us addressing God? Some will turn to 1 Corinthians 14:2 as a “proof text”. It says “For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.” Job done. Or is it? Is Paul answering this question when he makes this statement? Does he intend us to understand this statement in this way? Now, I think we have to admit the answer to both these questions is no! I leave you to examine the context yourself. Others, in answering this question will turn to 1 Corinthians 14:5, “He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.” “Ah”, they say, “This shows that an interpreted tongue is the same as a prophecy.” Is this Paul’s intended meaning? I hardly think so! Paul is not even thinking about what *direction* an interpreted tongue will face; he is answering a question about the relative benefit to the church of prophecy and *uninterpreted* tongues. It is wrong to ask Paul to answer our question from these verses. It is not his

² I once visited an abbey and heard a ten-minute sermon on one of Jesus’ parables. It was quite extraordinary. There were no illustrations, no stories, and no lengthy expositions. It was a very simple and direct reading and application and it spoke to me more powerfully than anything I had heard in the previous year.

intention. If we are to find an answer to our question, we must look for a place where that question is being intentionally answered. And if we cannot find such a place, then we should be satisfied that God is not too hung up about it. You might like to look at vv13-17 and see if you think we can ask Paul the question in this passage.

This issue of asking the questions that the author is seeking to answer is a very important one for all of scripture, including the letter to the Hebrews.

Historical Context

Usually the only source material available to help us discover the historical context of a book is the bible itself. Because of the distance in time and culture between the biblical authors and ourselves, it is sometimes difficult to reconstruct with certainty the issues that are being addressed.³ A bible handbook or commentary introduction can often help, but beware of unfounded speculation sometimes found by the barrow load in commentaries.

An example of historical context we can discover from the text itself is that Jesus was speaking to Jews who were expecting a Messiah but were in danger of rejecting Him. The gospels tell us this, and whenever we read the gospels we must remember this simple fact. Many parables and teachings have this thought behind them. For instance, when Jesus says “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:2), He is much more likely to be thinking about unfruitful

³ For instance 1 Corinthians 15:29 “Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?” No one knows what this refers to, we can only guess.

Israel rather than unfruitful Christians who have not led anyone to Christ for the last three years.⁴

Also, we know from non-biblical sources that there was a serious problem with Gnosticism and other heresies from the early days of the church. This helps us to understand what was probably behind some of the letters such as 1 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and 1 and 2 John.

A simple appreciation of the major historical events is worth bearing in mind. I heartily recommend reading a history of the early church. This helps to give some appreciation for the kind of pressures Christians were living under. For instance, if we knew the date that Hebrews was written, and to whom it was written, it would help us understand the reason it was written. Sadly, we know neither fact. But by careful reading of the letter we can make some informed guesses and tentatively try to fit these to the history of the early church.

Table 1. Outline history of the early church⁵

AD 0 (ish)	Jesus born
AD 30	Jesus crucified
AD 31- 37	Stephen martyred and Paul converted. Believers flee to Antioch.
AD 39- 40	Anti-Semitic riots at Alexandria as Caligula demands worship

⁴ I have only given two possible interpretations by way of illustration. I am not suggesting there are no others.

⁵ Moffat, *The first five centuries of the church*

AD 44	James, Jesus' brother murdered by Agrippa. James the Just leads the <i>Nazarenes</i> – the believers within the Jewish faith in Jerusalem.
AD 46	Severe famine, Paul's first mission journey starts.
AD 48	Galatians' written? James written?
AD 50	Claudius expels Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2). 1&2 Thessalonians written from Corinth (2nd mission).
AD 51-3	Proconsulship of Gallio (Acts 18:12)
AD 54-57	1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans written.
AD 60/61	James the Just, leader of Nazarenes in Jerusalem stoned by Sanhedrin.
AD 60-63	Mark's gospel written. The other synoptics follow. Paul sent to Rome. Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, Philippians, Titus, 1 Timothy written.
AD 64	Rome burns, some Christians blamed, tortured and killed. 2 Timothy written. Christians no longer considered a Jewish sect in Rome.
AD 67	Paul's death under Nero (reigned 54-68). Jews revolt against Rome. Nazarenes withdraw from Jerusalem to Pella in the Decapolis creating tension between Nazarenes and unbelieving Jews (who accuse them of deserting).
AD 68-70	The siege of Jerusalem. Epistles and gospel records beginning to circulate. 1 Peter written?

AD 70	The destruction of the temple. Jewish religion reorganised around the synagogue and the Nazarenes expelled from the Jewish faith as heretics. Jewish Christian Church reorganised by Simeon in Jerusalem. Heretical cults begin to arise.
AD 93?	John writes his letters and Revelation during Domitian's reign (81-96). Paul's epistles collected. Since the destruction of the temple, the Nazarenes have renewed zeal in arguing in the synagogues that Jesus is the Messiah. A curse on the <i>Nazarenes</i> is added to the synagogue liturgy in an attempt to prevent Nazarenes attending.
AD 100	John's Gospel written. Rabbi Akiba becomes prominent.
AD 113	More Jewish rebellion. More Christian martyrdom, including Ignatius. First vestige of episcopacy.
AD 117-138	Hadrian emperor of Rome (in Britain 121-122). Christianity still illegal, but tolerated.
AD 132-135	Rabbi Akiba backs Simon Bar-Kokhba's claim to be the Jewish Messiah. Jewish rebellion crushed. Jews (including Jewish Christians) expelled from Jerusalem. Jerusalem church becomes gentile under Marcus.

When studying the New Testament we need to look out for clues to help us identify the historical context. What can we learn about the recipients? What can we learn about the author? What can we learn about the reason for writing? How is the letter structured? We should note these during our first few read-throughs of the book.

Literary context

What is the book about? It is important to understanding how each part of the text fits the whole. How does the word add meaning to the sentence? How does the sentence add meaning to the paragraph? How does the paragraph add meaning to the section? How does the section add meaning to the whole book? How does the book fit with God's redemptive purposes and add meaning to our lives?⁶ The author wrote with a reason that gives logic to the whole. That is what we must try to discover.

I was once accused of causing offence by preaching things that unsettled some people, and was quoted 1 Corinthians 10:32-33 "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God - even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved." My first thought was that I am in good company⁷ and my second was, "That was not Paul's intended meaning." Perhaps I had said something inappropriate, but it would hardly have caused anyone to go and commit a sin or dim their faith (which was Paul's meaning). There is a tendency for many of us to quote text fragments to try to back up an argument and give it more authority. But this is counter-productive where doing so distorts the original meaning of the text. If you will indulge me in a little "proof texting" of my own, let us strive to be those who "correctly handle the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15)!

It is important, therefore, to keep each verse and phrase in its context; to maintain its logical connection to the rest. In other

⁶ There is also the wider literary context of the book within non-biblical writings of the same period. Such study is beyond the ability of most readers and is not discussed here.

⁷ See John 6:60-66

words, we must try to follow the author's train of thought. Whilst reading passages containing well known verses this can sometimes be surprisingly difficult. During correspondence with a friend who was studying Galatians, he asked my opinion about Galatians 2:20. This verse is so frequently quoted that it has generally acquired a meaning that is completely unsupported by its context.⁸ He found it extremely difficult to imagine any other meaning even though it left the passage with no continuity of thought.

This is a problem you may encounter when consulting commentaries. You may have noticed that, although the book or chapter's theme may be well laid out in an introduction, once the detail of individual verses is examined, the theme often seems to have been forgotten and the interpretation suggested bears little relation to the overall theme. Gordon Fee⁹ notes this frustration with most commentaries (along with expounding the obvious while skirting the difficult, paying too much or too little attention to the grammatical details and extensive debating with other scholars rather than with the book's author.)

We will work hard at this and reap great rewards. The trick is to keep working at a passage until you have established a logical train of thought and intention through the passage that connects it in a convincing way with the rest of the book.

There are some common things to look out for, for instance the frequent use of metaphors, hyperbole (gross exaggeration to

⁸ My friend suggested "Paul had a moment by moment understanding and experience of his old man's lack of life ... Paul could do nothing unless Christ did it." In fact, Paul is simply explaining how he is legally dead, not that he lives a fully Christ-like life. See vv19 & 21.

⁹ Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, pp 16-18.

make a point) and parallelism (thoughts repeated in different words). In addition, parables are stories with, usually, a single point; they are not allegories.

Commentaries and Translations

God has not given us a Word of Life that requires a library of experts to understand. Certainly they can extend our understanding¹⁰ and help resolve some difficulties, but most of the scripture can be properly understood without dependence upon commentaries and I fear that dependence upon commentaries can so easily replace dependence upon and confidence in the tutoring role of the Holy Spirit.

I have been greatly helped by some commentaries, but more often than not I have struggled through pages of unfounded speculation (if it's a light weight) or pages of textual and grammatical analysis and then been dragged through every scholarly variation of approach and interpretation (if it's a heavy weight) only to find at the end of it that it all adds up to nothing that is not obvious, and the difficulty that took me to the commentary in the first place is ignored or skirted around.

I join with the highly regarded scholars, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, when they say in their excellent book *How to read the bible for all its worth*, "Consulting a commentary, as essential as that will be at times, is the *last* thing one does"¹¹ (their emphasis).

¹⁰ Commentaries may be especially helpful to understand all the references in the OT prophets. This will certainly improve our understanding of the detail, but will probably add little to our knowledge of God or His will for our lives.

¹¹ Fee & Stuart, *How to read the bible for all its worth*, p24

Much has been written about the need for understanding the historical and cultural background of a book and a bible dictionary or commentary can help with this¹², but “the answer to this question is usually to be found ... within the book itself. ... If you want to corroborate your own findings on these questions, you might consult your Bible dictionary ... But make your own observations first!”¹³

Occasionally, you will find a phrase where the grammar is ambiguous, or different versions render the text in quite different ways. At these points you may wish to consult a good commentary or search online for some help.

By far the most important tool in bible study is to have a good translation. If you can supplement that with a Bible handbook (to check your historical background observations) and a Bible dictionary (to look up the meaning of any cultural terms you are unsure about) then all well and good. Consult a commentary if you get really stuck.

The question of which bible translation to use is an important one, but without a definite answer. If you wish to read more on this subject I again recommend Fee and Stuart but put briefly, the issues are these:

The ‘original’ text

A huge amount of work has gone into trying to determine the most likely original reading where manuscripts differ. This has resulted in a broadly accepted Old Testament text, *Biblia Hebraica*, which is the source for most translations. It is based on the Masoretic Text with some minor improvements as a result of discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. However,

¹² The IVP Bible Background Commentary is good for this.

¹³ Fee & Stuart, p23

there are two basic schools of thought on New Testament textual criticism that have resulted in two families of Greek base texts. On the one hand, we have two similar texts, the *Textus Recepticus* or *Received Text* and the *Majority Text* (followed by the AV, NKJV and World English Bible). On the other hand, we have the critical texts, such as the Nestle-United Bible Societies (NU), followed by most modern translations (the NIV uses a range of critical texts). It is worth referring to translations from both schools.

The translation

Every translation is to some degree an interpretation. This is because firstly, in both the original and receptor languages, every word has a range of meanings and secondly, there is no exact match from one language to another in the vocabulary (individual words), the grammatical constructions, the idioms (turns of phrase), or euphemisms¹⁴. Because there is no exact match, the translators must first try to decide which of the possible variations is the most likely meaning in the original (an exegetical task) and then decide which of the available words or phrases in the receptor language are likely to most closely convey this meaning to the reader.

Both tasks are challenging and may be a source of error. Exegesis is always susceptible to some degree to preconceptions, and the accuracy of the word/phrase matching depends on the reader. Each translation has a particular type of

¹⁴ A euphemism is where an inoffensive word or expression is substituted for one that is culturally indelicate, offensive, or taboo. For instance in Heb. 13:4 “marriage bed” is used to refer to sexual intercourse. A comparison of the gospels shows that Matthew uses the euphemism “Kingdom of heaven” to mean “Kingdom of God” which may lead the reader to think Jesus was speaking about heaven, when He was actually speaking about God’s kingdom on earth.

reader in view and tries to select the most appropriate word or phrase. Some translations attempt to be as literal as possible, leaving phrasing, idioms and euphemisms in their original setting whereas others attempt what is called dynamic equivalence translation, where the meaning of the phrase is translated as closely as possible into an equivalent phrase in the receptor language¹⁵.

For example, the Good News is a dynamic equivalence translation aimed at “all who use English as a means of communication” whereas the New American Standard attempts to render a “literal translation” in “contemporary English”.

For general reading choose a version you most enjoy reading and for study compare a more literal translation (NKJV, NASB, ESV) with a dynamic equivalence translation (NIV, GN, NEB, NRSV)¹⁶. Whenever a proposed interpretation hinges on a particular word or phrase, always compare its rendering in a number of other translations (or the original language if you can) and consult a commentary.

Summary Exegetical Pointers

1. Try to recognise pre-conceptions and imagine alternative ones.
2. Nurture a keen sense of surprise.
3. Listen to the Author.

¹⁵ There are also paraphrases, such as the *Message* where the original meaning is rendered in a completely free way in the receptor language, attempting to convey the “tone, the rhythm, the events, the ideas” in a very contemporary idiom.

¹⁶ See list of abbreviations on page ?

4. Asking the questions the author is answering, not your own questions.
5. Recognise the historical context.
6. Trace the logic through the passage (the literary context).
7. If the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense
8. Obscure passages are to be interpreted in the light of clear passages.
9. Recognise that parables are not allegories where each element has its corresponding reality, but stories that, as a whole, make a (usually single) point.
10. Recognise the frequent use of hyperbole (gross exaggeration to make a point), and parallelism, especially in poetical passages and the gospels.
11. Recognise the NT tension between being in the *last days* where the kingdom of God has come, yet not in its ultimate fullness.
12. Distinguish between core gospel truths and secondary matters.
13. Distinguish between inherent truths and cultural issues.
14. Distinguish between teaching with a uniform NT witness and that where there is variation in the NT witness.
15. Narratives allow us to learn in the bible character's shoes, but we have to exercise judgement as to whether

their example is wholly good, partially good or bad.¹⁷ Narratives function in a similar way to parables: they do not usually teach doctrine, but illustrate it.

16. Psalms should be treated in a similar way to narratives. They are examples of how imperfect people related to God. Likewise, the wisdom literature (including Job) contains wisdom and foolishness from imperfect people. We can learn much from their experiences, but we must take great care in attempting to derive doctrine or claim promises based on these writings.
17. OT prophets were, for the most part, reiterating the Law and announcing the consequences of keeping or breaking it.¹⁸ Prior to the exile they mostly announced the curses that Israel's disobedience would bring and following the exile they spoke mostly about the blessings that would come if they repented. The prophets were Law enforcers. This is quite different from the function of the NT prophet which is to build up the church through revelation and inspired encouragement.¹⁹

¹⁷ The fact that someone's action or experience is recorded in the bible does not automatically mean we are supposed to follow their example. Our tendency is to assume that we should avoid the examples of the bad guys and follow the example of the good guys. But in order to do this, we still have to exercise judgement. David was a good guy but we should not follow his example of murder and adultery. Likewise, Gideon's fleece is not an example for us to follow. Our example is Christ, and we should judge the actions of bible characters against that standard.

¹⁸ See for example Deut 28-32 for a summary of blessings and curses.

¹⁹ See 1 Cor 14

Summary Application Pointers

1. A text means now what it meant then in truly comparable situations.
2. A text cannot mean now what it never meant then.
3. Interpret experiences in the light of scripture, not scripture in the light of experience.
4. Before “claiming” a promise, check it was intended for you!²⁰
5. We cannot claim authority for extending the application of a principle to a different context to its original application (e.g. from a church context to an individual or to a Christian business).
6. OT law is not binding on Christians unless restated as applying in the NT. We are not the people to whom it was addressed.

²⁰ E.g. Jer 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you...” is a lovely promise, and it may well reflect God’s heart towards you, but it was not given to you. I was given to the Jews in exile, telling them that they had a full 70 years of exile ahead of them before God would return them to their homes.

Likewise 2 Chron 7:14 “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray...” is not a promise to your church. It was a promise to Solomon about God listening to the nation’s prayers in the event that they become disobedient. God may respond in a similar way to you, but this is not a promise that He will.