

How Readest Thou?

Three Questions You Must Ask of Every Text

How Readest Thou? Jesus once asked a Bible scholar that very question. The story is in Luke 10:25-37. It begins with the scholar¹ testing Jesus' own scholarship to see what He would say.

The scholar's test question was: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded with a counter-question: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"² In essence, Jesus turned the table on the scholar by implying, "You're the scholar; you tell me. How do you interpret what the Scripture says?"

That's the million-dollar question that echoes across time and down to you today. How are *you* to interpret the Bible, and to do so *correctly*? Well, it isn't as complex and arbitrary as some think. In fact, much of it boils down to common sense and a basic understanding that the Bible is a written document whose forms of expression are similar to other works of literature. As with any literary work, you must pay careful attention not only to *what* the writer is saying, but also to *how* he is saying it, that is, to the literary techniques he is using to communicate his thoughts. So it is with the Bible. The *what* and *how* are both important.

One of the best methods for digging out the *what* and *how* of the text is for you to engage the text, so to speak, in a mental dialogue or conversation or, better yet, an *interview*. In this technique, you allow the text to reveal its components by asking it the right questions—exegetical questions—and then by stepping out of the way to *listen* objectively for its answers.³ This listening type of dialogue or interview begins with three fundamental questions that you must ask of every text:

1. What does the text actually say?
2. What did the text mean to the original audience?
3. What is the meaning of the text for today?

What does the text actually say? This question involves content—the five Ws of the text: who, what, when, where, and why.

- a. Who is speaking, who is being spoken to, and who else is present?
- b. What is happening, what's the situation, what's the issue?
- c. When is it happening?
- d. Where is it happening?
- e. Why is it happening?

To answer these questions properly, you must read the verses or chapters before and after a passage for the complete context.

Determining what the text says also involves paying attention to its *composition*—the sentence structure and wording of the text. How is it being said grammatically? What is the subject of the sentence? What is the tense of the verb? What are the definitions of the words?

¹ Literally, a "lawyer," that is, an expert in the Law of Moses; someone who devoted his life to the study and interpretation of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

² "How readest thou?" in the King James Version.

³ Otherwise, you interject your presuppositions and agendas into the conversation. You engage in a monologue, rather than a dialogue with the text. You slant the interview to make the Bible say what you want it to say. The end result is that you use the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamppost—for support, rather than illumination.

Concerning the definition of words, several points are important. First, words must be understood within their immediate contexts. Any given word may have several meanings, but not all of its possible meanings apply each and every time. Choosing the correct definition is not like ordering from a menu where you may pick from a variety of items to suit your taste. Rather, it is the use of a word in a given context that determines its meaning. Take, for example, the word "house." It normally refers to the building where one lives. But it would be misleading and somewhat ridiculous to use that definition in Joshua 24:15: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (KJV). Here the word means "family," rather than "building."

Another caution is also in order. Like all modern readers, you will have the tendency to define biblical words with twenty-first century concepts in mind. Instead, you should strive to understand biblical words according to the definitions used in biblical times. This is not always easy to do; yet the task is not impossible. Always start with the context. Often the biblical writer will define his terminology or give a clue to a word's connotation within the text itself. Allow him to define his own terms; don't impose your definitions on him. If you need more help than the context provides, then consult a biblical language dictionary. Stephen Renn's *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Hendrickson, 2005) or W. E. Vine's *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (AMG, 1996) are helpful and easy to use, even if you have no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek.

One last word about words. Not only do biblical words need to be understood in terms of the biblical times, but the words of any Bible translation must also be understood according to the time period of the translation. This is especially true of older translations like the King James Version.

For example, in 1611 when the King James Version was first published, the word "let," as used in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, meant "to prevent." Today, "let" means the exact opposite: "to allow." You can easily be misled if you apply modern English definitions to old English terms. Therefore, whenever you're unsure about the meaning of a word, the best advice is: "Don't presume; look it up."

What did the text mean to the original audience? This question involves putting yourself in the sandals of those who first received and read the text. What impact did the words have on them? How did they understand and respond to what was said?

Here again, you must be careful not to read your modern-day presuppositions into the text. Try to think historically. Pay attention to the overall context for clues concerning the historical, religious, cultural, and philosophical backgrounds. If you let the text be your first source of information about these matters, then much of the Bible's message will come through. Although it would be ideal, it's not necessary to become an expert on the ancient world in order to make sense of the text. Just the awareness that the Bible is speaking from a life setting different from your own is half the battle. If you need more help, consult what the historical experts have to say in a comprehensive Bible dictionary or commentary, such as the *Anchor Bible* series.

Keep in mind, however, that the main objective is not to focus on the historical background per se, but on the *intention* of the text within that background. It is the message the biblical writer conveyed to the people of his day that is important.

What is the meaning of the text for today? This question involves applying the original intention of the text to modern life. But be careful not to put the cart before the horse. You should ask this third question only after you have adequately answered the first two.

Don't be like moſt people who ſkip queſtions one and two and go ſtraight to queſtion three. Remember, you muſt firſt *liſten* to the text—to hear what it ſays and what it meant to the original audience—before drawing any conclusions. Otherwiſe, you run the riſk of reading into the text ideas that were never there in the firſt place. Try to get an objective handle on the text before ſubjecting it to your ſubjective feelings.

More miſtakes are made here than anywhere elſe, precisely becauſe each of uſ brings hiſ or her own emotional, cultural, and religious baggage to the text. Thiſ iſ why there are ſo many different opinions about what the Bible teaches. Yet, the proper application of a text doeſ not need to be a matter of gueſſwork. The pitfalls of ſubjectiviſm can be avoided if you'll follow a few baſic guidelineſ.

1. Let the text eſtabliſh its own parameters of application. A text cannot mean ſomething today that would have been entirely foreign to the original author and hiſ readerſ. Thiſ principle may not always lead you to what the text meanſ, but it will help you identify what it cannot mean. Thiſ iſ eſpecially uſeful when interpreting prophetic paſſageſ.

2. Compare your application of a given text to the major themeſ and teachingſ found elſewhere in the Scriptureſ. No modern application ſhould be contrary to the perspectiveſ offered in the Bible aſ a whole.

3. Don't aſſume that the Bible functionſ aſ a divine "ouija board" to answer all of your personal queſtionſ: who to marry, where to live, what job to take, etc. It waſ never intended for that purpoſe. On thiſ point, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have thiſ to ſay in their book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*:

[The Bible] contains all that a Chriſtian really needſ in termſ of guidance . . . But it doeſ not always contain answerſ aſ ſpecific and personal aſ ſome people would wiſh, and it doeſ not contain all its information in every chapter of every book! Too impatient to find God'ſ will from the Bible aſ a whole, people make miſtakeſ—they allow themſelveſ to miſinterpret individual partſ of the Scriptureſ (p. 84, 1982 edition).

4. Distinguish between textſ that are *prescriptive* (commanding what ought to be) and thoſe that are *descriptive* (reporting what waſ). Also diſtinguiſh between textſ that have a *universal* application and thoſe that pertained to a *particular* circumſtance. In other wordſ, don't aſſume that all textſ have direct applicationſ, iſſue direct commandſ, or eſtabliſh universal normſ for today. Many textſ are addreſſed ſolely to the people and ſituationſ in biblical timeſ, and therefore ſimply deſcribe what took place.

For example, Actſ 2:42-47 reportſ that the very firſt Chriſtians in Jeruſalem ſold their poſſeſſionſ, pooled the proceeđſ, and "had all thingſ in common." The text iſ deſcriptive. The firſt Chriſtians engaged in a form of communal living centered around ſhared mealſ and daily meetingſ in the public courtſ of the Jeruſalem temple. Notice, however, that the text giveſ no preſcription or command that a communal liſtyle ſhould be the norm for all Chriſtians henceforth. Neither iſ there any indication in the reſt of the New Teſtament that ſuch waſ ever the caſe aſ Chriſtianiſy expanded beyond Jeruſalem.

Even if a text iſ preſcriptive, however, be careful to note whether the command iſ universal or particular. For example, in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 the Apoſtle Paul iſſueſ a ſpecific command for each member of the Corinthian church to ſet aſide a ſum of money at the beginning of each week for the famine-ſtricken church in Jeruſalem. Paul intendſ to collect theſe donationſ when he arriveſ in Corinth and then deliver them to Jeruſalem. Obviously, the particular criſiſ that concerned Paul in the firſt century iſ a thing of the paſt. The circumſtanceſ have long ſince changed. Thuſ, theſe verſeſ are no longer a direct command for *you* to aid thoſe ſame famine-ſtricken ſaintſ. Nor do theſe verſeſ command you to give an offering at church every Sunday morning, aſ ſome like to apply them. However, even though the direct command in thiſ text iſ no longer applicable, you may ſtill draw a general leſſon or principle from Paul'ſ example, namely, giving generouſly to thoſe in need. In thiſ ſenſe, you can learn ſomething from every Bible paſſage, even though every paſſage may not be a direct command or have direct application to you.⁴

⁴ *Deriving moral leſſonſ or principleſ from a text, provided they are in accord with recurrent biblical teaching, ſhould not be confused with the ſubjective and inappropriate practice of "ſpiritualizing" a text for the purpoſe of creating ſome novel or ſelf-ſerving application.*

Summary: The three questions you must ask of every text are part of what's known as the grammatico-historical method of interpretation. The *grammatico* portion concerns question one: "What do the words of the text, in terms of their grammatical content and composition, actually say?" The *historical* portion concerns question two: "What did the words mean in the life and times of those who first heard them?" (that is, within their historical, religious, cultural, and philosophical context). These first two questions involve carefully examining or "listening" to the text.

Question three ("What is the meaning of the text for today?") involves application. Answer it by evaluating the data gathered from questions one and two, and then by appropriating the applicable information, if any, to your life.

In essence, these three questions are hermeneutics in a nutshell. They are the foundation of the interpretation process. All other principles and techniques are built on them. *Don't read the Bible without them!*