

Mind the Gaps:

What to Watch Out for When Reading the Bible

Every time a subway train pulls to a platform in the belly of London, a recorded message repeatedly warns passengers, "Mind the gap. Please, mind the gap." The gap, of course, is the narrow space between the platform and the train that passengers must step over when getting on and off.

Whenever we read the Bible, the same warning should go off in our heads: "Mind the gaps. Please, mind the gaps." The gaps here are those between our world and the world of the biblical text. The one is familiar to us, the other less so. That's why the Bible's content is often a puzzle to many people. Some honestly admit, "After I read it, I'm not sure I understand what I just read." Gaps in understanding are preventing them from stepping over the threshold between the two worlds. So, to help guide our steps, let's take a look at some of the main gaps that we must be mindful of.

First, there's the **language gap**. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—three ancient languages with very different structures and idioms than English. For example, have a go at interpreting the following verse. It's written in the style of the earliest Greek manuscripts—all capital letters with no spacing between words.

ΕΝΑΗΗΝΟΛΟΓΟΣΚΑΙΟΛΟΓΟΣΗΝΠΡΟΣΤΟΝΘΕΟΝΚΑΙΘΕΟΣΗΝΟΛΟΓΟΣ ¹

Or how about a line of Hebrew?

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: ²

It's even harder to read. The block-style letters don't resemble our alphabet at all, and compared to English it's written backwards—from right to left.

Does this mean we have to become Hebrew and Greek scholars to understand the Bible? Not necessarily. That's why we have English translations. Yet even the best translations can't convey all of the nuances and wordplays present in the original languages—hence, a gap.

Hebrew and Greek aside, a language gap can even be present when we read an English translation, especially the venerable King James Version, whose vocabulary, style, and idioms are almost 400 years old. Its Elizabethan English may have communicated well in 1611, but it's foreign to many readers today.

For example, in 1 Peter 3:1, the apostle advises wives how to win their unbelieving husbands to the Christian faith. The King James renders the advice this way: "[Husbands] also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives." This sounds contradictory. How can wives, without saying a word, witness to their husbands through conversation? Doesn't "conversation" involve words? Yes, it does by our contemporary definition. However, in 1611, "conversation" didn't refer to one's talking, but rather to one's conduct, which is exactly what Peter had in mind. Unbelieving husbands are to be won over, without a word, by the godly behavior of their wives. It's a silent, rather than oral witness. The reader of the King James Version today must be careful to "mind the language gap," or he may end up with a meaning totally opposite to what the biblical writer and the translators of the KJV intended.

Second, be aware of the **historical gap**. We are separated from the original writers, readers, and events of the Bible by a great distance of time and place. About 4,000 years have passed since Abraham cooled himself under the terebinth trees at Mamre. Nearly 2,000 years have come and gone since Peter cast his nets in the Sea of Galilee. Needless to say, the world we inhabit has changed substantially since biblical times.

As a result, what was once common knowledge about daily life and religious practices among people when the Bible was written may barely be known today.

What can a person living centuries from now know of the full impact that the Watergate scandal had on America's social and political scene like those of us who were alive in the early 1970s? Perhaps no more than we can understand what Jerusalem's Water Gate signified to the returning exiles under Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century BC? The historical gap offers a real challenge to the Bible interpreter that goes beyond the knowledge of mere facts to the emotional and motivational factors that impacted the lives of the biblical characters and original readers.

Also, the historical gap exists not just between the modern and ancient worlds. The Bible story itself spans several millennia, and during that time there were many social, cultural, political, and religious changes. It's a mistake to assume that these elements remained constant from the patriarchs to the apostles. The historical times of Jacob were not the same as those of James, nor of Joshua or Jeremiah in between. Just as today, changing factors and forces altered the lives and perspectives of each generation.

For example, the Old Testament closes knowing nothing about the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Four hundred years later when the New Testament opens—boom—those two groups suddenly appear on the page, dominating the religious scene. Who were they? Where did they come from? What did they believe? Because this was common knowledge in the first century, the gospel writers mention little about it. Yet, we are left in the dark, wanting more information than the thumbnail sketches we receive.

A third gap to watch out for is the **cultural gap**—the significant differences between our modern customs, beliefs, practices, and everyday life-styles and those of the ancient societies in the Bible. The predominant cultural influence during the Old Testament period was that of the Near Eastern, Semitic world. It was spread throughout the Fertile Crescent, but centered primarily in Mesopotamia—the area known as the cradle of civilization. In the New Testament we encounter a different cultural influence—that of the Greco-Roman world with its western, Hellenistic (Greek) orientation. Though Jews in the Old Testament and Christians in the New were at home in the larger context of their cultures, they often found themselves at odds with cultural elements that were contrary to their religious convictions.

When reading the Bible, we must take care not to distort the meaning by placing our own cultural grid on the text. For instance, our western culture values individualism. We stress individual rights and freedoms. Therefore, when Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16, "you are the temple of God," we tend to think in terms of the individual—that each individual Christian is a temple of God. Paul, however, was speaking corporately, as the context and use of the plural form of "you" ("ye" in the KJV) indicate. His point was that the whole church community, the body of believers, was God's temple.³ The cultural gap, in subtle ways, can mislead us, if we're not careful.

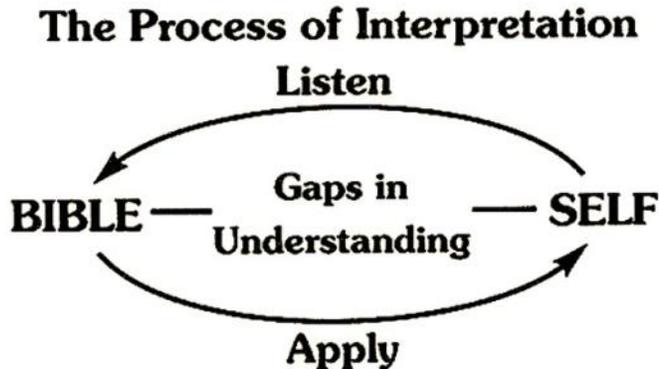
Finally, we need to be on guard for the **philosophical gap**. The ancients' outlook on life and their understanding of what made the universe tick differ from the modern worldview. Because of our scientific and technological advancements, we tend to be more matter of fact, rational, head-over-heart in our explanation of things. In the absence of scientific knowledge, the ancients, on the other hand, were more philosophical, poetic, emotional, and heart-over-head in their description of the cosmos and life's apparent mysteries.

For example, Psalm 148:4 speaks of "waters above the heavens." Because water fell from the sky and the sky was blue, the ancients believed that a vast reservoir of water existed above the heavens. Today we know there is no sea of water in the sky, but to the psalmist it certainly appeared so. And he spoke from that phenomenological perspective, that is, he described a natural phenomenon, not in scientific terms, but in the only way he could—as it appeared to the naked eye. We still use this kind of language today when we speak of the "sunrise." Scientifically we know that the sun itself doesn't actually rise. It's the earth spinning on its axis that gives the appearance that the sun is moving. We must, therefore, be cautious about pressing biblical passages too literally and reading more into them than what the worldview of the original authors would allow.

Bridging the Gaps

So how do you bridge the gaps in understanding between the Bible and yourself? Half the battle is in recognizing the gaps in the first place, and then by reading the text with the biblical worldview in mind rather than imposing your twenty-first-century concepts on the text. This improves your chances of stepping over the gaps and into the sandals of the biblical figures.

In practical terms, the following diagram offers an easy way to visualize the bridging of the gaps, which is just another way of referring to the process of interpretation. The process involves two basic steps: listening and applying.



Step One—Listening: As the interpreter, you must first "be quite" and "listen" to what the text is saying. To "be quite," set aside your presuppositions, and don't impose your world on the text. You cannot understand what the original authors had to say if you are doing all the talking. To "listen," let each aspect of the text speak to you from its world. This means defining and understanding all words according to the biblical writer's frame of reference and context, not your own. It also means being aware of the text's historical, cultural, and philosophical settings and viewpoints. After you have thoroughly listened to every word of the text, and only then, may you proceed to step 2.

Step Two—Applying: In this final step, you take all that you have learned from listening to the text and then honestly evaluate how it might relate to your own world. In other words, how does the text inform your personal, religious, historical, cultural, and philosophical settings? In step 1, you discover the Bible's point of view. In step 2, you make appropriate application to your situation.

But Watch Your Steps: Don't be like most people who skip step 1 and jump ahead to step 2. They may quickly scan the text, but don't really take the time to listen and *hear* what the text says—to let the original message sink in. This short-circuits the whole process, and they essentially end up where they started—reinforcing their own presuppositions rather than letting the text speak from the past.

Finally, the task of allowing the original words and intent of the biblical authors to come through is especially crucial if you believe the Bible is God's Word. You, above all others, should take seriously the admonition to handle the text correctly—to not add to or take away from its original meaning. So "mind the gaps," and strive to bring out the tenor of the text, rather than reading in your own ideas. After all, what is the point of reading the Bible, or any book for that matter, if you carelessly bypass, distort, or otherwise miss what the author had to say?

¹ This is the Greek text of John 1:1.

² This is the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1.

³ The sole verse where Paul does imply that each Christian's physical body is a "temple of the Holy Spirit" is in 1 Corinthians 6:19. But even in this verse and in the surrounding context, all of the words for "you/your" are plural in the Greek. Paul's point is that the individual bodies of believers comprise the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 6:15).