

Literally Reading the Bible

In this class, we will, like, literally, show how reading the Bible correctly is, like, literally the best thing ever.

*Almost this whole session is taken from *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* by Fee & Stuart, chapters 1-2.

What the Bible is not (*Bible Project*):

- A rule book – a divine behavior manual.
- Theology dictionary – written to answer all our questions about God.
- Inspirational Writings – a grab bag of spiritual one-liners and inspiring stories.

What the Bible is:

- One epic narrative that tells the story of God from the perspectives of His followers through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – and that can help us know Him more and better

Why the Bible is Hard to Understand

We don't speak the original languages and weren't alive then. (duh).

Everyone interprets. Every time you read a book or watch a show you are interpreting what you're experiencing. You are seeing it through your:

- Experiences
- Culture
- Knowledge
- Intelligence
- Personality
- Preferences

You see everything through you colored glasses.

We don't experience the text objectively, but subjectively.

We have to try very hard to be as objective as we can. Because, like Fee & Stuart say, "sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text."

That's a nice way of saying that when we aren't

careful we can make the Bible say what we want it to and then blame the Holy Spirit for it.

(PS: I'm pretty sure this is the sin that God warns us about when He says, "don't take the Lord's name in vain." So go ahead and cuss, sin-free. There, that second part is me giving an example of what I'm warning against. :)

When we read ourselves into the text, or make the text mean what we want it to, it is heresy, sure, but there is a word for this kind of interpreting: Eisegesis.

"Eisegesis is the process of interpreting a text or portion of text in such a way that the process introduces one's own presuppositions, agendas, or biases into and onto the text." (*Wikipedia*)

Eisegesis is _____. It is the reason for so many of the damaging theologies throughout history that may have pushed people away from God:

- Supporting slavery
- Supporting wars
- Supporting authoritarian structures of control
- Oppression of minorities
- Oppression of women
- Oppression of equal rights

(Take a time travel machine, if you have one, to week 11 to see how these are not supported by the Bible. I can't wait to set the record straight!)

This kind of reading into the Bible has also been the root of so many modern cults and the errors of cult-like pseudo Christian teachers.

Can't we just read the "plain meaning" of the Bible and avoid interpreting and eisegesis?

Nope. Two reasons:

- The Bible you are reading is in English so someone is interpreting for you
- "Plain meaning" means different things to different people. Many times, the "plain meaning" is what the teacher wants the Bible to say.

This is the last days and all. So Paul's warnings to Timothy apply:

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“For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” (2 Tim 4:3-4)

What you can do is to avoid basing your faith on the personal whims and desires of celebrity preacher quotes/memes is to learn to read the Bible correctly.

Which is exactly what Paul told Timothy to do in the context of the passage I quoted above:

Right before: “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (v2).

Right after: “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (v5).

How do We Read the Bible Correctly?

First, we need to remember that the Bible wasn't written to us or even for us primarily.

Each book of the Bible was written by and to people of a specific culture, period in history, in a specific language with grammar and idioms that those people would understand.

God used real people, rooted in real history with real personalities, real experiences, and real preferences, to share His story.

God used different genres to do this:

- Narrative history, genealogies, biographies, chronicles (week 4)
- Parables, riddles (week 5)
- Laws, sermons, letters (week 6)
- Poetry, songs, proverbs, wisdom literature, prophecies (week 7)
- Apocalypses (week 8)

To interpret correctly, we need to understand the “then and there” of each part of the Bible. What we need to do is called: exegesis.

“**Exegesis** is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, particularly a religious text.” (Wikipedia)

An easy way to differentiate is like this (not the actual definitions):

- **Eisegesis** – to read _____
- **Exegesis** – to pull _____ of

The first goal of anyone who wants to know God and His word is to find out what the original intent of the words of the Bible. (That's the goal of this class as well.)

The good news is that we all are already exegetes (someone who uses exegesis)! We've all said things like:

- “Back in those days...”
- “What Jesus meant was...”

We all do it. So now let's do it right!

Some ideas on how to do this:

- Context: what are the geographical, historical, political issues of that time and what genre is this passage? (Historical Context)
- Paragraphs/Passages: what is the overall theme and message of the passage, not a single sentence? Genre matters, too. (Literary Context)
- Message: What is the occasion and purpose of the passage?

Example: In Mark 10:24, after talking to the rich young person, Jesus says, probably shaking his head, “How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Have you heard about the gate in Jerusalem that is called the “Needle's Eye” where camels have to bend down to go through it? So, while it is hard, a camel can go through the eye of the needle.

But there is no such gate. And this interpretation confuses the whole point of the passage: that it is impossible for rich people to be saved.

The apostles understood this and is why they gasped, “who could be saved then?” (v26)

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The whole point is then summed up by Jesus: it's impossible for rich people to be saved, but God does the impossible (v27).

How often do we see that passage bent to fit the idea that, of course, rich people can be saved! I'm guessing this is something we rich people in America struggle with more than in poorer places when this passage is read. After all, we want the Bible to say that we can be saved and our riches won't hinder that.

In context, that's the opposite of what Jesus is saying. We want to see ourselves as the Apostles, but in this story, if we are going to relate best to any characters, we would be the rich young ruler.

So, basically:

- Context: social status driven by wealth, a young guy who has everything also wants some eternal security (for cheap)
- Paragraphs/Passages: narrative teaching that in context shows 1) that the rich person would rather keep his treasure now than store it up in Heaven, and 2) that kind of attitude (that rich people share) is antithetical to Christianity
- Message: true riches are found in God and to truly follow Christ we need to sacrifice everything to Him (29-31)

It's super hard not to take the next step while exegeting a passage: what does this mean for me? That's called hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is a part of – and sometimes used interchangeably with – exegesis. Once we find out what a passage meant then and there, we need to determine what it may mean for us here and now.

It is important not to begin with here and now. If we do, we will read ourselves back into the text (eisegesis) and most likely get the wrong message.

Sometimes, it is difficult to understand specifically what something means because it's ambiguous – because we aren't yet good at exegesis or even because the text isn't 100% clear – but what is always true is this: the original writer did not intend the text to be ambiguous.

Also, “a text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers.” (Fee & Stuart)

So we need to use good exegesis on every text we approach and then consider hermeneutics.

To do this, we need to use a good translation of the Bible. And not all translations are good.

Are there Bad Versions of the Bible?

_____.

Every version we have available was interpreted by someone or a team of people. So it matters very much:

- Who these people are
- What manuscripts they used
- What theory of translation they prefer

Another thing that makes the Bible trustworthy is the fact that almost all of the current versions of the Bible were translated by groups of experts. Read the first few pages of most modern Bibles to see answers to all three of these questions.

It's not some dude in his basement taking a break from hacking email servers. It's world renowned scholars, textual critics and language experts.

Also, as we discussed previously, most modern translations use the 5000+ Greek NT manuscripts and thousands of Latin and other language manuscripts.

That just leaves the theory of translation. There are two main ones and one smaller option:

- Formal Equivalence – this prefers to translate word for word as much as possible
- Dynamic Equivalence – this prefers to translate thought for thought
- Free Translation/Paraphrase – this tries to make the passage readable for modern readers

Generally, no Bible is fully one of these things. They are on a scale, where the preference for one doesn't mean they eschew the other. (That's 26 Scrabble points - 13 for “eschew,” double word score.)

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The reason there are different perspectives on translation is because it's not clear the best way to express the Bible's meaning to us. Consider a couple examples:

- Should we use “lamp,” “flashlight,” or “torch” when the Bible uses “lamp?” If we leave it lamp we probably don't lose the meaning (we can all figure that out). But it's dynamically accurate to say, “flashlight” since that's our version of a “lamp.”
- Should we use “holy kiss” even though modern people in the U.S. don't usually greet each other with kisses? Would it functionally be more accurate to say, “the handshake of Christian love?”

There isn't a right or wrong answer here.

But when the translation is based on the wrong manuscripts there are ____.

Consider the NKJV/NASB versus the NRSV/NIV for 1 Samuel 8:16:

- NKJV/NASB: “he will take... your finest young men and your donkeys”
- NRSV/NIV: “he will take...the best of your cattle and donkeys”

The NKJV/NASB uses a miscopied Hebrew text (Masoretic) where the Hebrew word for “your young men” is *bḥwrykm* and “your cattle” is *bqrykm*. (It's like the difference between television and telephone.) We know it is miscopied and not the original oral tradition because of the easy to mis-scribe parts don't sound the same, they just look the same on a page. Plus, we know that donkeys and young men don't go together in Hebrew passages that are similar.

The NIV/NRSV uses the Greek Septuagint, which was obviously translated prior to the error being introduced into the Hebrew Masoretic text, and preserves the original cattle and donkeys (which makes a ton more sense in context.)

Another example of the unreliability of the NKJV from Mark 1:2:

- NKJV: “As it is written in the Prophets...”
- NIV: “as it is written in Isaiah the prophet...”

The NIV is more accurate because it uses the best early manuscripts (Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac) while in the oldest manuscripts used by the NKJV, a copyist “corrected” the citations that follows (Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3) to be more precise.

There are also theological changes in the NKJV (see 1 Cor 6:20 vs NIV where the NKJV adds in theology that wasn't originally there to the text, “and in your spirit, which are God's”).

Finally, there are issues with readability of the NKJV. What are “coals of fire?” Like magic coals? Nope, they are simply burning coals (NIV).

I'm not even going to get into the craziness of the people who call the NKJV the “authorized” version (by a secular king, not God, bucketheads!) and what these preachers say to distort the message of Christianity. Look, if you want to read it because it looks cool and some parts sound majestic (because of Old English), do it. But for fun.

You should also not read paraphrases exclusively. They may be good for occasional reading, but they are generally one person's commentary on a passage, rather than a group of interpreters who attempt to remove bias through numbers and effort.

For study, we should use a better, newer translation, either a Formal or Dynamic Equivalency. Then use another from the opposite when studying.

So:

- If you use NLT also use something like HSCB or ESV.
- If you use NRSV, also use the NIV (2011) or CEV.
- If you use the MSG, please, for God's sake, also read pretty much any other one. ;)
- If you just have to read the NKJV do so with another better translation (get an interlinear).

_____ read New World Translation (Jehovah's Witness) or Latter Day Saints version of the King James Version (Mormons). These have been edited to fit their specific heresies. (Eisegesis big time.)

TRANSLATIONS

This helpful screen capture was made by some dude on the internet (see below) from Fee & Stuart's (other) book, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*. Yeah, this issue is so important and dense that they wrote a whole book about it. I'm good with just telling you to read the NIV and then moving on to week 4.

COMPARISON OF ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

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FORMAL EQUIVALENCE WORD FOR WORD

- **theory:** 'literal' or *word-for-word*
- **aim:** to retain the *form*, i.e. the words and structure, of the original text as much as possible
- **result:** an English translation that is primarily accurate, yet also comprehensible

INTERMEDIATE

- **theory:** mediating between 'literal' and 'idiomatic'
- **aim:** to retain the *form* of the original text where possible, without compromising its *function*, i.e. to convey meaning
- **result:** an English translation that is both accurate and clear.

FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE MEANING FOR MEANING

- **theory:** 'idiomatic' or *meaning-for-meaning*
- **aim:** to retain the *function* of the original text, i.e. to convey meaning, as much as possible
- **result:** to produce an English translation that is primarily natural and easy to understand

Paraphrase = re-wording a text in the same language, rather than translating it from one language to another.

PARAPHRASE

