

Step 1: Grasping the Text in their Town - What did the text mean to the original audience?

- Repetition of Words – Many times this gives clues to the main point.
- Contrasts – Differences. Look for items, ideas, or individuals that are contrasted with each other.
- Comparisons – Similarities. Look for items, ideas, or individuals that are compared.
- Lists – More than two things is a list. Is there any order to the list?
- Cause and Effect – Very important in the Bible, always be looking for it. Key Words: therefore, for, that, in order that, so that, then, since, because, etc.
- Figures of Speech – Images in which words are used in a sense other than the normal, literal sense.
- Conjunctions – These are words like: and, for, but, therefore, since, because, etc.
- Verbs – The action of the sentence.
- Pronouns – Determine who or what the pronoun is referring to.
- General and Specific – Find the general statements that are followed by specific examples or applications of the general.
- Questions and Answers – Rhetorical Questions, or questions asked within a narrative passage. Identify the question and the answer.
- Dialogue – What is the nature of this dialogue? Who are the participants? Who is speaking to whom?
- Purpose/Result Statements – Phrases or sentences that describe the reason, result, or consequence of some action.
- Means – Does a sentence indicate that something was done by means of someone or something (answers how)?
- Prepositions – A word that helps express the relationship between two or more words. Words like through, by, in, of, on, for, before, according to.
- Conditional Clauses – Clauses that present the conditions whereby some action, consequence, reality, or result will happen. Sometimes introduced by “if” followed by “then.”
- Action/Roles of People and the Actions/Roles of God – What does God do in this passage? What do people do in this passage? What are people encouraged to do or not to do?
- Emotional Terms – Are there words that carry emotional energy or kinship words?
- Tone – What is the overall emotional tone of this passage?
- Connection between paragraphs and sentences – How does the passage connect to the one that preceded it and to the one that follows?

Step 2: Measuring the Width of the River to Cross - What are the differences and similarities between the original audience and us?

****A text cannot mean what it never meant.**

****When it comes to meaning, context is critical.**

There are different types of contexts. Knowing the background of a text can help clarify its meaning and reveal its relevance to your life.

Because God chose to communicate in a specific way, to specific people, and in a specific time period, we show proper honor for God and the way He chose to communicate by seeking to understand the historical-cultural context of the Bible.

We should not be so arrogant and prideful as to think that God cared nothing about the original audience but was merely using them to get a message to us.

Once we understand the text in its original context, we can apply it to our lives in ways that will be just as relevant.

1- Historical-Cultural Context

This kind of context involves the biblical writer, the biblical audience, and any historical-cultural elements touched on by the passage itself. Historical-cultural context relates to just about anything outside the text that will help you understand the text itself.

The Biblical Writer: Find out as much as you can about their background. When did they write this? What kind of ministry did they have? What is the relationship between the writer and the audience? WHY are they writing?

Answers to these kinds of questions will give you insight into the circumstances of the biblical writer and clarify the meaning of what he has written.

The Biblical Audience: What were their circumstances?

If it is a local church, when did that church begin?

Who first preached the gospel there?

What issues are they facing?

If it is a prophetic book, what kingdom were they preaching to?

Was it pre, post, or mid exile?

How did the audience receive this prophet?

Other Historical Elements:

Geography/Topography “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30).

What are the cultural customs of the people addressed in this book/passage?

Economic issues? Political Issues?

Example: How were Samaritans viewed, and what does that tell us about the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4?

Some people are convinced that background studies are tedious ways of making the Bible less relevant. Truthfully, when we take time to understand the (historical-cultural) context, the passage comes alive and explodes with relevance. We can see that God was speaking to real people struggling with real life and that he continues to speak to us.

The Dangers Associated with Studying Background:

Inaccurate background information – not all resources are created equal.

Elevating the background above the meaning of the text. The background needs to serve the purpose of understanding the meaning, otherwise, what is the point? Don’t get lost here.

Remember the WHY of biblical interpretation: To know and love and glorify God and be changed as we apply it to our lives. Don’t merely become a walking database of ancient facts and trivia.

Tools for Identifying Historical-Cultural Context:

<https://www.logos.com/free-edition>

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/>

<https://www.preceptaustin.org/>
<https://relight.app/>
<https://ccel.org/>
<https://www.monergism.com/>
<https://www.ligonier.org/>
<https://www.stepbible.org/>

Commentaries: A good commentary can sometimes be all you need, however, each commentary is written from a specific perspective, so it is good to be aware of this, and to consult more than one if possible. On the other hand, when it comes to historical-cultural study specifically, a commentary author's perspective generally plays very little part.

Liberal Publishers:

Abingdon – Liberal Methodist/United Methodist
Alban Institute – Liberal
Anchor Bible – Yale
Augsburg Fortress – Liberal Lutheran ELCA
Chalice Press – Liberal Disciples of Christ
Cokesbury – Liberal Methodist/United Methodist
Cowley Publications – Liberal Episcopalian and Anglican
Eerdmans – Various theological perspectives including moderate to liberal
Pilgrim Press – Liberal United Church of Christ
Smyth & Helwys – Liberal Southern Baptist
Society of Biblical Literature – Liberal
T & T Clark – Liberal
Westminster John Knox – Liberal Presbyterian Church U.S.A.
InterVarsity Press – Turning Left socially

Conservative Publishers:

Crossway – Evangelical conservative with a strong emphasis on the inerrancy and authority of Scripture.
Moody Publishers – Conservative evangelical theology and practical ministry.
Baker Academic – Conservative evangelical publisher with Reformed theological influences.
Thomas Nelson – Broadly evangelical and conservative
Holman Reference – Affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.
Zondervan – Evangelical and broadly conservative
Revell (Baker Group) – Focused on accessible and practical commentaries for lay readers and pastors.
InterVarsity Press – Evangelical but signs of socially left leaning.
Ligonier Ministries – Strongly Reformed evangelical and conservative.
P&R Publishing – Firmly rooted in conservative Reformed Christianity, doctrinally rigorous.
Thomas Nelson – Broad evangelical conservative output.

Know that you always bring something to the text:

We as readers are not by nature neutral and objective. We bring preconceived notions, influences, and presuppositions with us when we approach the Bible. We must be aware of them so that they do not mislead us.

2- Presuppositional context: All our preconceived notions and understandings that we bring to the text, which have been formulated, both consciously and subconsciously, before we study the text in detail.

Preunderstanding can be both good and bad. It can include all you learned in sermons, Sunday School, things you have taken from certain hymns, popular Christian songs, books, sermons, art, experiences in the past, and your culture. It may be correct, and it may be incorrect as well.

We do not need to eliminate our preunderstandings, but we do need to submit them to Scripture and be willing to change them considering studying the Scriptures. Being aware of the specifics of some of our preunderstandings will help us do this.

The Dangers of Presuppositions:

- One danger with preunderstanding is assuming that ours is always correct. This is pride and is a barrier to understanding the Scriptures. Pride “encourages us to think that we have the correct meaning before we have made the appropriate effort to recover it. Pride does not listen. It only thinks it knows.
- When we come to the text with a specific theological agenda. Rather than allowing our theology to be shaped by the text, we choose what parts to affirm and focus on. This is not seeking to submit to God and His Word, and we as readers then place ourselves over the text. Instead, we need to place ourselves under the text, seeking to know what God means in the text.
- When we have studied a passage in the past, we gain a preunderstanding of that passage, and so we never again study it as if there might be more to glean from it. This is the danger of familiarity, in which our study can become stagnant.

Cultural Baggage:

Our cultural assumptions can sometimes weigh us down on the interpretive journey.

What is Culture? It is a mix of family and national heritage. It is a mix of language, customs, stories, movies, jokes, literature, and national habits. Americans share a common culture but also differ from family to family as well.

We generally do not intend to culturally misread the Bible. It is just something we reflexively do. We want to recognize this, and then and do what we can to avoid it.

How does culture affect our interpretation?

- We tend to fill in all the gaps and ambiguities in biblical texts with explanations and background from our culture.
- Based on our culture, we subconsciously create a world of interpretive possibilities and interpretive impossibilities. We have limited our ability to understand the text. Our culture tells us what is possible and what is not before we even grapple with the text.

Foundational Beliefs That We Do Not Set Aside

1. The Bible is the Word of God
2. The Bible is trustworthy and true
3. God has entered human history; and so the supernatural does occur
4. The Bible is not contradictory; it is unified, yet diverse. Nevertheless, God is bigger than we are, and He is not always easy to comprehend. As a result, the Bible also has tension and mystery to it.

3- Literary Context: The immediate textual surroundings of a passage, including the literary genre, style, and the words, sentences, and paragraphs that frame the passage. It guides interpretation by showing how a particular verse or section fits within its broader text to reveal the author's intended meaning.

- Different literary genres have unique rules and devices that influence how the text should be understood.
- Understanding literary context prevents misinterpretation by ensuring that each passage is seen in its natural setting within the Bible's unified message. It emphasizes grasping the original author's intent and the passage's function within the entire book and the broader biblical narrative

Simile - a figure of speech that draws comparison by correspondence or resemblance.

Metaphor - a figure of speech that makes a comparison by actual representation.

Hyperbole - a figure of speech consisting in exaggerated or extravagant speech used to create a strong impression and not intended to be understood literally.

Irony - a figure of speech using words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, the literal meaning.

Euphemism - the use of good or acceptable words for bad or offensive things or subjects.

Dysphemism - (opposite of euphemism) uses harsh/offensive words instead of pleasant or acceptable ones.

Anthropomorphisms - gives physical attributes to God, which graphically present His character.

Personification - where an abstraction or spiritual concept or thing is given personal traits.

Parable - an extended simile or metaphor with the comparison vague enough to make it dark.

1 Samuel 16:14-23 Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him. ¹⁵ And Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. ¹⁶ Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well."

¹⁷ So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me." ¹⁸ One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him." ¹⁹ Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me David your son, who is with the sheep." ²⁰ And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. ²¹ And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. ²² And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." ²³ And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.