

biblical EXPEDITIONS

READING PLAN

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INTRODUCTION

Many people know about the Bible, but few understand **how** to read it. A disciple is a student, one who understands **how** to read the Bible and applies him or herself to the study, doing, and teaching of God's word.

"For Ezra set his heart to study the Instruction of the Lord, to do it, and to teach the statute and judgment in Israel"—Ezra 7:10

Learning to read the Bible means learning a **few simple, repeatable principles**—in truth, three questions and five building blocks of context. These enable us to learn, grow, and interpret the Bible, which transforms us as disciples.

Learning to read the Bible means learning **how** to ask the right questions and knowing where to get the answers.

Learning to ask the right questions leads us through a process by which we begin to discover the **original intent of the biblical text**.

Many primarily read the Bible devotionally, which is fine. But, our devotional reading of the Bible often begins with, "What does a particular passage mean or say to me; what's its relevance?" This opens our Bible reading to subjectivity and ensures we will **misread the Bible**.

Learning **how** to read and study the Bible will impact how we read the Bible devotionally. It enables us to understand the plain, original meaning of the Bible.

We want to know **what the Bible means for us**—and rightly so, but to answer this, we have to begin with **what the Bible originally meant**.

Keep in mind: The Bible can never mean what it did not mean to its original readers/hearers.

Our goal is to discover **how** to understand what it originally meant, and then, we can answer what it means **for us**.

Within western culture, we often begin reading the Bible placing ourselves in the story or seeking to find its relevance to us. We read the Bible through the lens of ourselves. When we begin reading the Bible in this manner, we most certainly **misread the Bible**.



When we read the Bible through the lens of ourselves, this creates feelings of confusion many have in trying to read the Bible. They cannot find relevance to themselves in many passages; and, therefore, they don't read the Bible or ignore those passages.

Such an approach to the Bible can form God into our own image as we import our ideas and desires into our picture of God. Where he becomes the source of our comfort without correction, he desires relationship but requires no repentance, is our kindly companion but not our king.

The Bible belongs to its time, its space, and its culture. It is a collection of books containing ancient peoples' encounters and ideas about God. It's about him. To understand it, we must enter its world first. Only after understanding it within its world can we bring it into ours.

"The past Is a foreign country; they do things differently there." - L.P. Hartley

The Bible is not one book. It is a collection of books representing different literary genres, time periods of writing, and outlooks.

For this reason, our approach focuses on individual books and authors and not trying to find a systematic set of ideas which coherently tie together across all books and genres of the Bible, nor are we seeking a meta-narrative throughout the Bible.


The books of the Bible were written from an eastern, not western, worldview. Many of us approach the Bible as western readers, which is why we try to find coherence and cohesion throughout the whole. The east does not come from a point-of-view of western logic or coherence. Within the west, we tend to express ourselves in more abstract ways; while in the east, expression takes a more concrete form. Western thought progresses in a linear fashion; while the east thinks and communicates in a circular manner. The west thinks and communicates truths propositionally. The east communicates truth in story. And story, while containing historical reality, does not need to be history to convey truth within the east.

So, if the Bible is so foreign to our world, why should we study; why should we learn how to read it?

We do it to know God. We discover him in its pages. As ancient authors articulate their ideas and encounters with him, we learn about him and what he desires from us.



Remember: Sometimes a rock is just a rock. Not everything in the Bible has a spiritual meaning. The writers used the real world, with its spatial, historical, cultural, and spiritual realities, to communicate their messages. **Our goal** in seeking to answer the question what a passage meant is to understand the “plain meaning” of the passage within its world. When we seek to apply it to our lives, we should apply the original intent of its plain meaning and not seek to spiritualize it or “extract” hidden meanings from it.



Learning to read the Bible is a lifelong journey. Once we understand what questions to ask and where to find the answers, we are in for a lifetime of discovery and learning. All it takes is learning to the right questions to ask and how to answer them.

The **first rule** in learning **how** to read the Bible: **Context is king!**

There are **five contexts** one should be aware of when reading the Bible:

- Literary Context
- Spatial Context
- Historical Context
- Cultural Context
- Spiritual Context

When you begin to study a book of the Bible, a caution and a suggestion.

The Caution: it is easy, especially for more seasoned Bible readers, to approach the text “knowing” what it says, having predetermined theological ideas and systems in place, and possessing the sense of having it “figured out.” Resist this temptation. What we “think” we know about the Bible, even our theological constructs, provide the greatest barrier to our ability to actually read the Bible and understand it. Approach the Bible each time, as best as you are able, with fresh eyes. Allow your assumptions and systems to be challenged, even broken down. Allow yourself to be surprised. **The Suggestion:** before asking questions of meaning and interpretation, read the book of the Bible you are studying through in one setting. Just read it. Don’t try to make new discoveries. Read it. Allow yourself to get caught up in the book, its rhythms, themes, and repetitions.

The process of **interpreting the Bible** follows **three questions** in this order:

1. What was said?
2. What was meant by what was said?
3. What does It mean for us today?

It is essential to ask these three questions in this order. Getting them out of order leads to misreading the Bible.

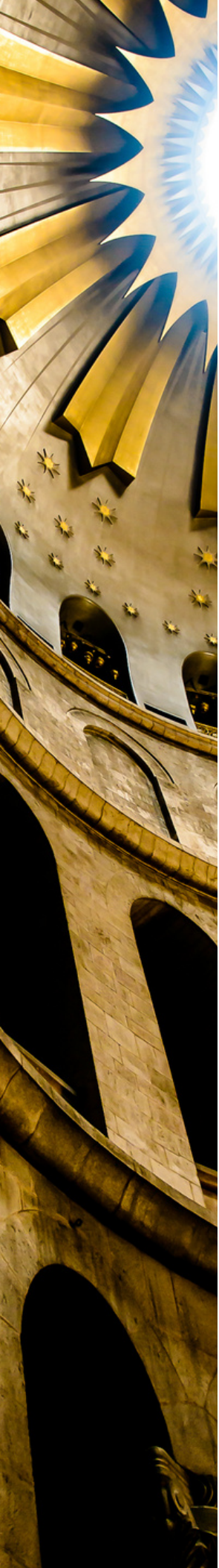
A few simple, repeatable principles—three questions and five contexts (lenses). All five building blocks of context come together, like the lenses of a camera which one focuses to gain clarity on the desired object. The five contexts come together to help you answer the second question. **Three questions and five contexts—simple, repeatable principles.**



“The musical notes are only five in number, but their melodies are so numerous that one cannot hear them all. The primary colors are only five in number but their combinations are so infinite that one cannot visualize them all. The flavors are only five in number but their blends are so various that one cannot taste them all. In battle there are only the normal and extraordinary forces, but their combinations are limitless; none can comprehend them all”

–Sun Tzu





Many inductive Bible study methods encourage you to begin by noting things like the author, occasion, and setting of the book. We encourage you **not** to do this at the outset for several reasons. First, we do not know who wrote many of the books of the Bible. Authorship comes from later traditions or assumptions made from the name of the book. This can lead to mistaken assumptions within interpretation.

Second, we also do not fully know the occasion which led to the writing of most of the books of the Bible. We may have some ideas; for example, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to address issues within the Corinthian community and respond to a letter they had written him, but we do not know the complete historical context.

Finally, we also are not entirely clear on the original audiences of many books of the Bible. Framing your reading of the Bible through these lenses at the outset often inhibits your ability to truly read and understand the meaning of the book or passage. Carefully reading a book of the Bible over and over will often provide insight and answers to some of these questions.

What was said?—Read the Text Carefully!

- **Read** the entire book through in one setting (if possible). If you can read through a second time in one setting, it will help even more. Approach your reading, as best you can, with fresh eyes (don't assume you know the text). Resist the temptation to import theological assumptions into the text. Remember: The Bible should shape and form our theology; our theology should not shape how we read the Bible.
 - Pay attention to
 - Literary genre
 - Key themes and repetitions of words and phrases
 - Key figures and places
 - What is the main arc of the book?
- **Choose** a specific passage or portion that contains a cohesive thought. Keep in mind: that the passage or portion you choose also ties into a larger section of the book as well as the book itself.
- **Read** the specific passage or portion carefully!
 - It can help to print the portion out on your own without verses and paragraphs. *Remember:* verses, chapters, and paragraphs were added much later, and they often shape, effect, and impact how we read a portion of Scripture. They were not part of the original manuscripts of the biblical books.
 - **Circle or underline** key or repeated words and phrases, as well as connection words (like “now,” “therefore,” “so,” “so that,” “but,” etc.). This helps you diagram the flow of the author's thought and follow the story, thought, and/or argument. *Remember:* the writers of the Bible were eastern, and therefore, wrote, reasoned, and argued in a circular, non-linear, manner. In the west, we think linearly; that is not how the biblical mind worked. They thought in a circular and associative manner.
- **Read** the specific passage or portion again carefully!
- **More Advanced:** Pay attention to textual variants between the manuscripts. Note variant readings.

At this stage, we are simply reading the text carefully. Paying attention to words, phrases, connection words, repetitions and patterns within the portion we are reading. **We are not drawing interpretive conclusions at this point.**


Remember: the words and phrases of the Bible meant something within their original context. We will discover those meanings with the next question.



·What was meant by what was said?–Context is King!

- **Identify the literary genre/context.**
 - Is it **narrative, poetry, parable, epistle, apocalypse, wisdom literature, legal prose, or prophetic?**
 - It is important to understand the literary context within its ancient literary context.
 - What are the literary conventions of the genre?
- For the next steps, get **four different color highlighters or pencils**. Each color will represent a different context (window) of the world of the Bible.
 - **Green Highlighter—Spatial**
 - **Blue Highlighter—Historical**
 - **Orange Highlighter—Cultural**
 - **Purple Highlighter—Spiritual**
- **Spatial Context.** The space of Scripture is as much a character as Abraham and David or Peter and Paul. The spatial context refers to the geography, topography, roadways, hills, valleys, bodies of water, flora, fauna, geology, and climate.
 - Read the portion of Scripture. Highlight with your **green highlighter** any details in the passage relating to the spatial context.
 - **Place names:** villages or cities, hills, valleys, bodies of water, regions, etc.
 - **Flora & Fauna**
 - **Geology**
 - **Climate**
 - **Agriculture**
 - Once you have identified the **spatial details**, you will need a few tools. First and foremost, you will need a good map of the region (preferably one that marks the ancient roadways). You will also use Bible dictionaries and atlases at this stage.
 - If our passage mentions a place—a village or city, hill, valley, or body of water—find it on the map. It's not enough to simply find it on the map. Often the significance of locations stemmed from their relationship to roadways and the regional dynamics of commerce, travel, communication, and security. These details and realities are often assumed by the biblical writers, yet they play significant roles within the biblical text.
 - **Keep in mind:** The Bible assumes our knowledge of the regional-economic dynamics of its world; so too, it assumes our knowledge of geo-political realities on both the macro and micro levels (see Ezekiel 27:15-26) at various historical periods (see below **Historical Context**).
 - The **spatial context** extends to the flora and fauna, climate, geology and hydrology, as well as agriculture. All of these features of the spatial world of the Bible form the world, images, metaphors, and concrete reality used by the writers of the Bible to express their message. Whenever you come across any of these features, you need to discover their reality within the world of the Bible. Bible dictionaries and atlases can provide background material. You can also search on the Internet, but keep in mind that you are wanting to discover their reality within the spatial world of the Bible.




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- **Historical Context.** The Bible contains history and frames its literature around various historical periods.
 - Reread the portion of Scripture. Highlight any details connected to the **historical context** with your **blue highlighter**.
 - **Names of people, people groups, or empires.**
 - **Chronological markers**
 - Keep in mind the historical timeline and its relationship with what you are reading. For example, if you're reading the New Testament, it relates to the Roman Period. Between David and Jesus stands a thousand years. Between Jeremiah and Paul stands almost six hundred years. Be sensitive to the historical period of what you are reading.
 - The Bible often assumes our knowledge of the historical details on the macro and micro levels. It sets its narratives against the backdrop of those **historical contexts**. For example, the Gospels assume Rome's takeover of the land of Israel beginning in the first century BC, with the collapse of the Hasmonean State. Or, the book of Kings frames many of its narratives against the backdrop of Assyrian expansion, the turbulence this caused among regional kingdoms in the Levant, and the varied responses of those kingdoms to the Assyrian threat.
 - **Cultural Context.** The Bible reflects the cultural realities of its authors and their audiences. In the Old Testament-Hebrew Bible, we refer to the culture of Ancient Israel within the broader context of the Ancient Near East. In the New Testament, ancient Judaism within the Greco-Roman world provides the cultural context.
 - Reread the portion of Scripture. Highlight details of **cultural context** with your **orange highlighter**.
 - This can be a bit trickier. *Remember:* the clearest communication of culture is language. The Bible reflects its culture and does so through its language.
 - We access it through our language and culture.
 - So, the words and phrases you circled or underlined as part of answer "What was said?" now is the time to pay careful attention to them, and ask what did those words and phrases mean in their world?
 - It doesn't matter if you don't know Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek; simply being aware of how language reflects and articulates culture enables you to begin to search for meaning beyond what the words mean in our world.
 - **Cultural Context** pertains to things like (but not limited to):
 - **Marriage**
 - **Birth and child rearing**
 - **Inheritance practices**
 - **Death and burial**
 - **Tribal and family structure**
 - **Economic life**
 - **Village life**
 - **Shepherding and farming**
 - **Laws, justice, and judgement**
 - **Weapons and warfare**





- The 2 primary means to engage the cultural context of the Bible are ancient written sources contemporary with the Bible and archaeology.
 - **Ancient written sources** offer windows into the cultural world of the Bible. They often explain cultural details or provide greater background than what we find within the Bible. Where the biblical authors may assume our knowledge or understanding of cultural details, other ancient sources often provide that background. Also, because these sources come from the same cultural context, they provide the cultural context for language we find within the Bible. These sources offer a repository of language information which can help us understand and interpret the language used by the biblical authors (for more, see **“How to Read Ancient Sources to Understand the Bible”**).
 - **Archaeology** provides a window into the material culture of the people living in the world of the Bible. In this way, it makes the lives of the people living in the world of the Bible come alive, as it enables us to visualize objects and life in the biblical world. It can illuminate passages within the Bible. But archaeology also has its limitations. Its evidence is fragmentary, and it must be interpreted, which opens it to subjective influences. It cannot prove or disprove theological claims, as it deals with physical remains, not abstract realities. Nevertheless, it enables us to touch and encounter the material culture of the people of the biblical world, which can help us understand them and the Bible better.
- **Spiritual Context.** The Bible represents a spiritual worldview, an ancient spiritual worldview, not ours.
 - Reread the portion of Scripture. Highlight details of spiritual context with your **purple highlighter**.
 - Engaging the spiritual context of the Bible can also be challenging since we approach the Bible as a spiritual book, and therefore, we tend to read our spirituality into the world of the Bible.
 - *Remember:* religion was part of everyday life in the biblical world; it permeated every part of human existence. Religion was never viewed negatively within the Bible, as it is within modern western society. Modern western society also sees religion as focused upon the individual and his or her beliefs. Within the Bible, religion pertained first and foremost to the community and its religious activities, beliefs, and observances. The individual made up the community, but the “we” always precedes the “me” within the Bible.
 - **Spiritual Context** relates to
 - **Religious Practices**
 - **Places of worship—temples, synagogues, altars, and shrines**
 - **Observances—dietary, sacrifices, circumcision, and holidays**
 - **Beliefs**
 - Like with the **cultural context**, **Ancient written sources** provide the best window into the spiritual context of the biblical world. **Archaeology** can too, but often to a lesser degree. The written sources enable us to understand the beliefs, religious practices and observances, and vocabulary, as well as interpretations and engagement with the sacred religious literature (for more, see **“How to Read Ancient Sources to Understand the Bible”**).





“Know the enemy, know yourself. Know the ground, know the weather. Your victory will then be total”–Sun Tzu

It is important to note when reading the New Testament: historically, culturally, and spiritually the New Testament belongs to the world of ancient Judaism. The world of the New Testament is **not** the world of the Old Testament.

Within the world of ancient Judaism (the world of the New Testament), Jews used, cited, and alluded to the text of the Old Testament. They interpreted it for their day and time, within their culture, and through the window of their spirituality.

Ancient interpreters, like Jesus and Paul, approached the Old Testament text with four basic assumptions[1]:

- Scripture was basically a cryptic document that should be scrutinized for every detail and hidden meaning. That meaning pertained to the immediate reality of the interpreter and his audience, **not** the historical context of the Old Testament passage.
- Scripture is one book of instruction and is relevant to the present world of the interpreter and his audience.
- Scripture is harmonious with no mistake or contradiction; therefore, those places that seem to reflect contradictions and disagreements require proper interpretation to be clarified and harmonized.
- All Scripture is divinely inspired.

[1] Adapted from James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 14-20.

Thus, when we read the New Testament, we need to be aware that these assumptions framed how ancient Jewish interpreters approached the Old Testament text.

The New Testament not only cites Old Testament passages, it alludes to them by only mentioning a few words. Many ancient Jews had committed a large portion of the Old Testament to memory; therefore, the mere mention of a few words would draw the entire passage into the mind of the audience. Ancient Jewish interpretation of the Bible, of which the New Testament was a part, functioned in dialogue with other contemporary biblical interpretations; therefore, when we find citations or allusions to the Old Testament within the New Testament, **we should not ask** what the Old Testament passage meant, but rather, we **should** pay attention to how that passage or those passages were interpreted within ancient Jewish interpretations. This often sheds important light upon the New Testament passage.

Finally, because ancient Jews knew the biblical text so well (many by heart), Jewish exegesis derived from the language of the biblical text. Two separate verses from the Old Testament were connected because of the common language and vocabulary shared between the two verses. This happens all the time within the New Testament; thus, the exegesis of the Old Testament within the New Testament derived from the language of the biblical texts, especially the combination of more than one verse.



These are key ideas in learning how to read ancient Jewish sources, like the New Testament.

It's also true when reading works like Ben Sira, Tobit, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Jubilees, 1 Enoch, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and rabbinic sources (all of which are important sources for understanding the historical, cultural, and contextual world of the New Testament).

- Once you have identified and gathered these contextual details—literary, spatial, historical, cultural, and spiritual—you can begin to discover their significance and how they relate to the biblical passage you are reading.
- **Reread your passage.** As you begin to view the biblical text through the lenses of the five contexts, you can begin to answer, what did the passage mean? How you combine these five contextual frameworks enables you to enter the world of the Bible to understand the words of the Bible. What was the original intent of the biblical text?
- Note: As you gain more experience and understanding of the contextual world of the Bible, your interpretations of passages will change. This is good! It means you are learning. The Bible is inspired; our interpretations are not. Therefore, allow yourself to change your mind. Our interpretations will change, but they will change, not because we changed our method, but because of our method.

What does it mean for us/me?—Land the Plane

Remember: The Bible can never mean what it did not mean to its original readers/hearers.

When we seek to apply a biblical passage to us and our world, several things are important to keep in mind:

- The biblical world centered on the community, the group, the collective. Our modern world tends to focus on the individual. We should keep this perspective in mind and make sure that as we apply the Bible to us and our world, we do not make our interpretations self-centered and egocentric.
- Our goal in interpreting our biblical passage (answering what it meant) is to identify the “plain meaning”—what it meant in its world. As we apply it to our lives, we should avoid overly spiritualizing it or trying to “extract” a hidden meaning and application from the passage. *Remember:* sometimes a rock is just a rock. Not everything in the Bible has a spiritual meaning. Apply it appropriately.
- As you grow in your ability to understand what the text meant, your interpretations and applications of the text may change. That’s ok. We need to approach our study of the Bible with humility, and apply the maxim Johann Albrecht Bengel, who lived in the 18th century, **“Apply yourself totally to the text; apply the text totally to yourself.”**

“You are not required to finish the work, but
you are not at liberty to desist from it”
—Rabbi Tarfon

