What factors should be considered in determining how to approach a passage of scripture?

"The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive."
— *C.S Lewis*[1]

The Basics

Applying a method of interpretation to scripture passages can be a daunting task. C.S. Lewis advises us to, “Look. Listen. Receive.”[2] Reading and understanding the Bible is a process of discovery that goes beyond a hasty read-through. One must carefully study and seek to interpret the author’s intended meaning without projecting meaning onto the text. In order to read scripture in a meaningful and accurate way, it is logical to use what the Rev. Ernest Lucas calls the “standard methods of biblical interpretation that have been well established since the time of Augustine and the early church fathers.”[3] Lucas, who has doctorates in both biochemistry and

theology, explains that these standard methods involve asking the following five questions: What kind of language is being used? What kind of literature is it? What is the expected audience? What is the purpose of the text? What relevant extra-textual knowledge is there?[4]

What Kind of Language is Being Used?

When looking at any piece of literature, it is necessary to determine the kind of language being used. In the context of biblical interpretation, the reader must discern whether a passage is written in a figurative, symbolic, scientific or straightforward manner. The reader must also keep in mind that we tend to develop patterns of interpretation based on the predominant type of text we read. For instance, if we commonly read texts that are written in a straightforward manner, we may have a bias toward interpreting Bible passages in this way as well. When reading scripture, understanding the language of a passage may not always be intuitive and at times may require additional research of scholarly works.

For example, consider the following statement of Jesus:

> "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." [5]

Here, Jesus characteristically uses parabolic language, which is likely hyperbolic, or intentional exaggeration. Though this metaphor could be taken to mean that it is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven, Jesus shortly thereafter states:

> "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." [6]

Thus, it seems more likely that Jesus's first statement is meant to be taken as hyperbolic, not literal.

However, the surrounding verses are not always so helpful in revealing the type language that is being used. Even in the case above, it is often still argued that the camel and the eye of the needle refer literally to a gate in Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle. However biblical scholars have also shown that there is no historical evidence to support this claim.[7] Others have suggested that the verse was not so extreme and that there was a confusion in translation between the words for camel and rope. However, a close look at early manuscripts finds the correct word for camel, not rope. Only the more recent translations read rope, the original text still seems to have been meant for a hyperbolic understanding.[8]

As this example shows, seeking scholarly insight can bring about a fuller appreciation of a passage

by understanding the type of language with which it was written. Simple cues of language and research of the biblical scholars' understanding can reveal the proper interpretation of the text.

What Kind of Literature is it?

Literary genres are another important factor in scriptural interpretation. The passage will inevitably provide clues as to the type of literature being read. Much like discerning the type of language, we must ask whether the content of the text as a whole was written to be figurative, historic, scientific or theological. Is this a song, poetry, letter, or first person narrative? The literary genres in the Bible can be described as historical narrative (e.g., Kings, Acts), dramatic epic (e.g., Job), law (e.g., Deuteronomy), poetry (e.g., Psalms), wise sayings (e.g., Proverbs), gospel accounts (e.g., Luke), and apocalyptic writings (e.g., Daniel, Revelation).[9] Each genre has specific principles for interpretation, making it essential to acknowledge the form of literature. It may be helpful to approach the Bible as the Rev.John Polkinghorne suggests, viewing it as a library with many different types of writings by many different authors rather than a single book.[10]

Though the Bible is a compilation of writings, it still maintains a single, overarching story of authority and divine inspiration.

What is the Expected Audience?

When reading scripture, one should also be aware of the intended audience. Cultural norms, symbolism and the audience's familiarity with scripture may all contribute to the way in which scripture has been written and understood. For example, Lucas points out that the ages of the patriarchs in the Old Testament likely had greater symbolic significance to the ancient Hebrews than we currently understand.[11] The ages are all multiples of five with seven or fourteen added occasionally, suggesting a symbolic meaning.

An example of cultural significance in the New Testament is found in the story of the prodigal son as described in Luke 15. A straightforward reading of the parable — disregarding the context — teaches us about the love and forgiveness of a father toward his son, and consequently about God's love toward his children. However, when the story is considered in its cultural framework, the reading is much more profound. According to Kenneth Bailey, the Jewish son not only acted disgracefully by asking for his inheritance, but he further debased himself by squandering it. The son's behavior warranted a *Kezazah*, or cutting off ceremony, upon his return.[12] This ceremony would have included rejection by the village and an angry confrontation by his father. Furthermore the son would have had to beg for permission to train for a job in the next village. Instead of this

harsh and inhospitable reception, a loving and merciful homecoming awaited the son. As soon as the father saw his son returning, he raced to see him. This is also a significant detail since men of the father's age and distinction in the Middle Eastern culture always walked in a slow, dignified manner. By running, the father took on the shame and humiliation due his prodigal son. He then kissed his son, gave him his best robe and called to have the fatted calf slaughtered for a feast. When Jesus originally told this story to a Middle Eastern audience, it is likely that they would have understood the father's love in a more nuanced and deep way than modern-day readers would derive from a quick read-through. As this example shows, filtering a scripture passage through an awareness of the original audience and its culture can greatly expand one's understanding of the passage.

What is the Purpose of the Text?

By examining the literary genre, the kind of language used and the expected audience, one gains clues to the purpose of the text. Is the text written to teach a new lesson or an old lesson in a new light? Does it state the genealogy of a family? Does it describe the love between a man and a woman through poetry? Does it aim to shake up the complacency of an audience or attempt to set commonly held misperceptions straight? While a text can have more than one purpose, understanding the language, genre and audience expectations can help readers determine how best to interpret it.

Most contemporary biblical scholars understand the opening chapters of Genesis as containing a polemic element that contrasts Israel's God with the polytheistic creation and flood stories of the ancient Mesopotamian world in which Hebrews lived. By understanding something of this context, one can begin to see why these portions of Genesis take the shape they do. For example, it is probably not accidental that the term "lights" was chosen to describe the sun and the moon as opposed to the Semitic words for sun and moon, which were also the names of pagan gods (Genesis 1:16-18). The text was written in a way that would show stark contrast to the established belief systems that surrounded the Hebrews.

This was not the only reason Genesis was written, as it teaches much about God, creation, worship and other elements of faith and life. However, understanding this polemic purpose enriches the proper interpretation of Genesis, and will help prevent misjudging the genre of these passages. Knowing the reasons why Genesis was written can help prevent the expectation that this ancient text can address modern questions of science.

What Relevant Extrabiblical Knowledge is There?

The polemic purpose of Genesis touches on another very important issue, namely the importance of extrabiblical knowledge for helping us discern what we are to expect of Genesis. For example, awareness that Paul was writing from jail in some of his New Testament letters helps put them in a proper context. Lucas quotes professor Donald MacKay regarding the general use of extrabiblical knowledge in understanding the Bible:

> "Obviously a surface meaning of many passages could be tested, for example, against archaeological discoveries, and the meaning of others can be enriched by scientific and historical knowledge. But I want to suggest that the primary function of scientific enquiry in such fields is neither to verify nor to add to the inspired picture, but to help us in eliminating improper ways of reading it. To pursue the metaphor, I think the scientific data God gives us can sometimes serve as his way of warning us when we are standing too close to the picture, or at the wrong angle, or with the wrong expectations, to be able to see the inspired pattern he means it to convey to us." [13]

Extrabiblical knowledge can enhance one's understanding of a text and help to interpret texts in light of relevant discoveries. This does not mean that it is always necessary or sensible to attempt to scientifically prove the accuracy of particular scripture passages. Nor does it mean that one cannot understand the Bible apart from being familiar with extrabiblical knowledge. These types of discoveries can enhance our understanding; they are not the crux of our faith.

An Example: The Two Creation Stories in Genesis

The language of the Genesis creation story has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. The contemporary literalist reading of Genesis 1 and 2 is quite different than the interpretation of early church writers including Origen of Alexandria, St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas. Christian theologians have been open to the idea of an allegorical interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 since long before evolutionary theory existed.

The two different creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 set the precedent for readers to be openminded to truths that run deeper than historical accounts and to be wary of interpreting every word in a scientifically literal way. In Genesis 1, God creates the plants, marine animals, birds, land animals and then man and woman together (Genesis 1:1-2:3). In Genesis 2, however, God creates man first and then plants, land animals and birds and finally woman from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:4-2:25). Clearly, the order of the creation differs in these two accounts.

Discrepancies like this suggest that these passages are not to be interpreted historically or scientifically, but rather through a figurative, allegorical, and/or theological lens. Also, the fact that

these two creation stories each clearly have numerous concepts in common with the extrabiblical texts of the ancient Near Eastern world, indicates that a simple historical and literal reading will miss how these stories functioned in the ancient world.

It is by appreciating Genesis 1 and 2 from an ancient perspective that one can see more fully the rich theology these texts communicate. Studying the context of Genesis 1 and 2 truly *helps* us understand the foundational theology of Genesis rather than detract us. These passages lay the foundation of biblical understanding which tells us who God is, what the world is and what it means to be human. Through these passages we know that God is outside of the world and has total control; the universe was not created through a cosmic battle as other creation myths of the day claim. God is not an abstract concept but a personal being; his spirit hovers over the waters. He is also the consummate artist that brings beauty from ugliness and order from disorder.

The literature on the book of Genesis is endless, and this example only scratches the surface in the exploration of this subject. See the Further Reading sources for a more indepth study of this topic.

Viewing the Bible as Divinely Inspired

Finally, because the Old and New Testament scriptures are considered by many people to be divinely inspired, biblical interpretation falls short without an understanding of this divine inspiration. The Bible is not simply a work of literature, but for faithful readers it is a means by which one can learn more about God and communicate with God in a personal way. Many believe it is important to pray before reading passages of the Bible, in order to prepare oneself to receive the words with the proper state of mind and spirit. It is also important, even while listening closely to advances in knowledge in our own time, to consider the generally accepted interpretations of Christians in the past.

Consulted Experts:
The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of Pete Enns and Alister McGrath in drafting this response.

Notes

1. *C.S Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 19.*
2. *Lewis, An Experiment, 19.*
3. *Ernest Lucas, "Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century," Faraday Papers, no. 11 (2007).*

4. *Lucas, "Interpreting Genesis," 2.*
5. *Matthew 19:24 (NASB); Mark 10:25 (NASB); Luke 18:25 (NASB).*
6. *Matthew 19:26 (NASB); Mark 10:27 (NASB); Luke 18: 27 (NASB).*
7. *Abraham Mitrie Rihbany, The Syrian Christ (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 131-132.*
8. *Rory C. Foster, Studies in the Life of Christ: Introduction, the Early Period, the Middle Period, the Final Week (College Press, 1995), 1387.*
9. *Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics, 3rd edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 11.*
10. *J.C. Polkinghorne, Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 44.*
11. *Lucas, "Interpreting Genesis," 3.*
12. *Kenneth E. Bailey, The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 Through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 66-74.*
13. *Lucas, "Interpreting Genesis," 2. The quoted passage is from D.M. MacKay, The Open Mind (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 151-152.*
14. *Lucas, "Interpreting Genesis," 1.*

Further Reading

Articles

- *Lucas, Ernest. "Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century (PDF)." Faraday Papers.*
- *Marlowe, Michael. "Bibliography of Biblical Interpretation." The Bible Researcher.*

Books

- *Falk, Darrel R. Coming to Peace with Science: Bridging the Worlds Between Faith and Biology. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004*
- *Lucas, Ernest. Can We Believe Genesis Today? The Bible and the Questions of Science. 3rd ed. Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2005.*
- *McMullin, Ernan, ed. Evolution and Creation. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.*
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