

WEEK 1: STUDY UNIT 3

A MODEL FOR READING, INTERPRETING, AND USING THE BIBLE

1 OVERVIEW

1.1 WHAT'S THIS STUDY UNIT ALL ABOUT?

At Ridley we have a common model that we use across all subjects and courses for reading, interpreting, and using the Bible. We will be using this model throughout the two introductory Old Testament units, particularly in seminars. In this Study Unit I will introduce the model and explain what part of it we will be using. Next week I will give you an example of the use of the model.

1.2 WHAT SHOULD I BE ABLE TO DO BY THE END OF THIS STUDY UNIT?

By the end of this study unit you should be able to...

- Draw the diagram that is used for our model for reading, interpreting, and using the Bible and be able to explain the main parts of it and how they relate to each other.
- Define what 'exegesis' is and outline its main elements.

1.3 WHAT COULD I READ THAT WOULD HELP ME LEARN MORE?

The readings in these sections are graded according to their level of difficulty using icons (★ indicates a basic book on the topic; * medium level, * advanced level, and ◇ indicates that this is regarded by many as one of the classical or seminal works on a topic). The books this week are general books on biblical interpretation, along with some specialised books on Old Testament interpretation. If you are unfamiliar with this area then it would be a good idea to gradually read through one of the more basic books.

- * Broyles, Craig C. *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2001.
- ★ Fee, G. D., and D. Stuart. *How to read the Bible for all it's worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- * Klein, W. W., C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004.
- * Osborne, G. R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991.
- ★ Reid, A. *Postcard From Palestine*. Kingsford: Matthias Media, 1997.
- * Stuart, D. *Old Testament exegesis*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001.

2 A MODEL FOR READING, INTERPRETING AND USING THE BIBLE

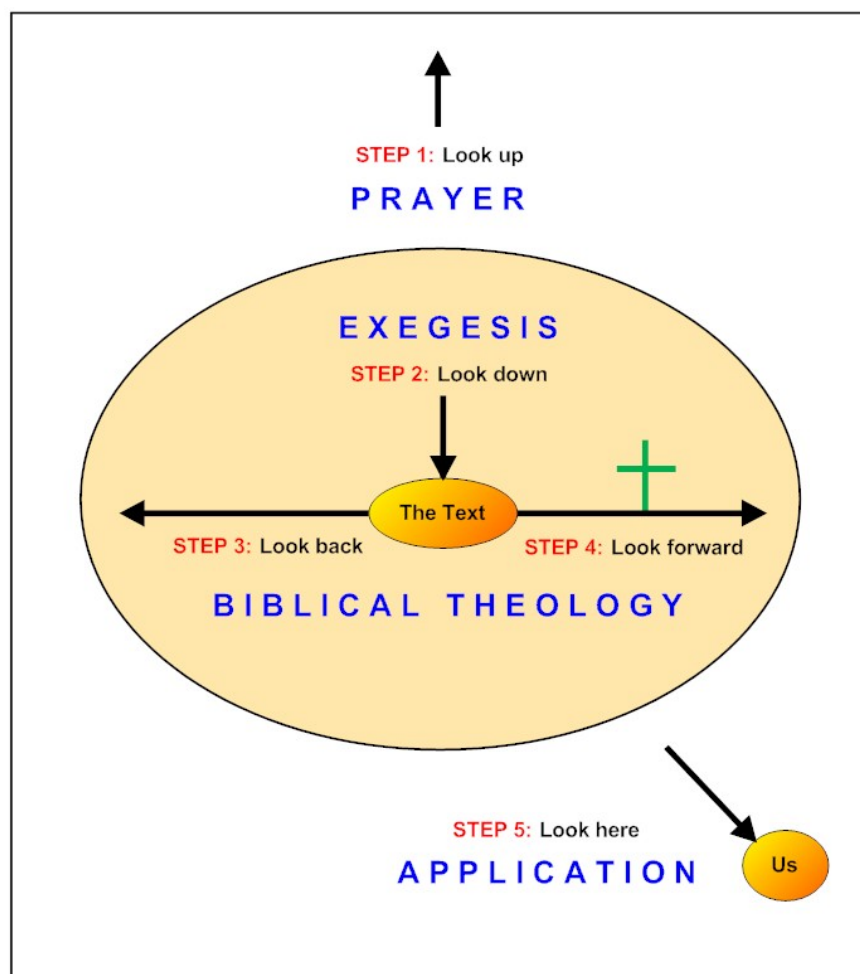
At Ridley we have adopted a common hermeneutical model for use across all disciplines even though certain disciplines will emphasise different aspects at different times and the depth of analysis will differ according to the level at which the student is studying (e.g. using the English text or original languages).

We do this because we believe that it is fundamentally important that all Christians, and particularly those how are engaged in Christian ministry, should be equipped to handle the scriptures well and to be their own biblical interpreters. We think that through this the church of God will be strengthened and equipped.

In relation to this course we will be concentrating on the element called ‘exegesis’. It is expected that you will become familiar with all the elements of exegesis outlined here and employ them in the exegetical exercises that are set for seminars. At times we will also look at the element that is labelled ‘biblical theology’.

2.1 INTRODUCING THE MODEL

The model is presented in the diagram below and is based around the analogy of looking. There are five steps in the process—look up, look down, look backward, look forward, and look here.



2.1.1 A SHORT OVERVIEW

STEP 1: Look up!

Step 1 in the process is to 'look up'. This reflects the fact that ultimately the Bible is God's word. It comes from him and we need his help if we are to understand it. For this reason we turn to him in **PRAYER** and dependence for enlightenment. In humble dependence, we ask him to be at work in helping us interpret his word.

STEP 2: Look down!

Step 2 in the process is to 'look down'. This refers to looking down at the text as it appears in its context. We are asking what the text means. This is the task of **EXEGESIS** and it involves using a variety of tools that are explained later.

STEP 3: Look backward!

Step 3 is about beginning to grasp what place this passage has in the whole of the Bible. Here we ask ourselves how this passage of the Bible fits into how God has already revealed himself. We examine how passage fits *theologically* into God's revelation that has been given previously.

STEP 4: Look forward!

In Step 4 we seek to look forward. This is the place where we recognise that this passage of the Bible is part of God's great purposes in Jesus Christ and ask how this particular passage fits into God's Christ-shaped purposes for the world?

Steps 3 and 4 are all about the task of **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**.

STEP 5: Look here!

Step 5 is all about **APPLICATION** or **CONTEXTUALISATION** and is indicated by the words 'us' in the circle in the diagram. Having understood the passage in its original context and its larger Biblical context, we now turn to our own context and how it impacts upon us in a situation that is somewhat distant from the original readers or hearers.

2.1.2 IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER IN USING THE MODEL

In using the model it is important to recognise some key points.

- Although the model is pictured and explained in quite a linear fashion (that is, it appears as though you systematically work through each of the points consecutively), the reality is that biblical interpretation is a dynamic process. In this process each of the elements are constantly interacting with the text and the other elements and combining to adjust our total understanding of the passage we are studying.
- Not every part of the model will apply to all passages. For example, when we are engaged in the exegesis of a passage there may be no historical or geographical elements that are significant for understanding the passage.

- Biblical interpretation is not simply an academic exercise. It is a spiritual exercise and therefore needs the constant guidance and help of God through his Spirit. We will therefore be constantly asking him to be at work as we engage in this task.

2.2 FURTHER EXPLANATION

Some of the steps above require further explanation and definition, particularly those involving exegesis and Biblical Theology.

2.2.1 EXEGESIS

As we approach the task of exegesis the assumption is that a particular pericope has been chosen for closer examination for use in preparation for an exegetical essay, sermon, or Bible study.

Getting started

Read through the whole of the book in which the pericope is found. If possible, determine who the author is, the addressees, the main theological interests and arguments of the book as a whole. Also note the genre of the whole work.

Read the pericope in the original language if possible, parsing all the words and consulting lexicons where necessary. Evaluate textual variants.

Background

Literary context

Place the passage in its larger literary context (that is, in the surrounding argument or narrative). What comes before? What comes afterward? Why is this passage important? How does it fit into the book as a whole?

Genre

Determine the genre or subgenre of the pericope.

Historical and geographical

Pursue the following four sorts of information if applicable.

- The general historical situation and its importance within the history of God's people.
- Any specific historical events referred to or alluded to within the pericope.
- General details about the author and any special information about them disclosed within the pericope.
- General details about the recipients and any special information about them disclosed within the pericope.
- Any geographical references or allusions that bear upon the meaning of the passage.

Socio-cultural, political and ideological

Are there any social or cultural customs involved?

Are there any important political institutions, concepts, or people that bear upon the meaning of the passage?

Are there any important ideological or worldview matters that are important to recognise?

Content

In this section there should be intensive, verse-by-verse analysis of the detail of the pericope using only concordances, lexicons, and grammars.

Grammatical analysis

Often the grammatical structure of a passage needs careful attention. This means showing the structure of the passage and the flow of thought or action. The aim here is to show how the main ideas and themes are related to each other. If studying in the original languages, unusual or difficult constructions should be examined. Diagram the logical structure, guided by the grammar and syntax (in the original language, if possible).

Key words and phrases

Often in a passage there will be key words or phrases that need clarification. There are generally three sorts of words that we need to clarify:

- Words which are completely new to us (e.g. 'propitiation', 'gleanings', 'behemoth', etc.).
- Words which we have encountered before and which already have some meaning because of our prior knowledge (e.g. 'grace', 'judgment', 'love', 'peace', etc.).
- Words which appear to be significant to the author in this passage.

Intertextual links

Are there any quotations from or allusions to earlier Biblical works? What are they? Why are they important?

Summing up

As much as possible you should try and do your own work in analysing the text, even though you may have to rely on secondary works at various places. However, after you have done your verse-by-verse analysis, it is appropriate and wise to consult with commentaries to check your findings and see what others think about this passage.

Central theological concepts

After having completed this, you should ask if there are central theological concepts that are being raised or dealt with here. The sorts of questions we ask here are:

- What theological ideas are repeated in the passage?
- Is there a major statement of a theological principle here?
- Is there a major reworking of earlier theological concepts?

- Are there new theological ideas raised?

What's this all about?

In the end, the ultimate question that we have been working toward in exegesis is 'What is this passage all about?' or 'What is the main point of this passage?'

Up until this point we have been gathering and assimilating a lot of data. Now we are trying to describe what we think is at the heart of the passage, what is its essential point or key theme. Another way of saying this is to ask what the significance of this passage is for its hearers or readers. What would they walk away having learnt?

The key questions here are these:

The sorts of questions that we would ask here would be:

- What is this passage really about?
- What is the main point?
- Why is this passage here?
- What would be lost if this passage were not in the Bible?
- What is significant about this passage?
- What is its purpose?
- How should the original readers or hearers respond?

There are two things we can do in order to help us with this task.

The *first* is to see if we can summarise the central idea in a one sentence exegetical summary statement that conveys the main point of the pericope.

The *second* is to see if we can summarise what the original readers should do in response to the things that are taught here.

2.2.2 BIBLICAL THEOLOGY (LOOK BACK! LOOK FORWARD!)

In the last part of exegesis we began to think *theologically* about the passage. We then went on to ask ourselves what the central point of the passage was. In this section we take those theological ideas and that central point and we engage in 'Biblical Theology', that is, we ask where those ideas and that central point fit into the larger theological context of the Bible. This comes from a belief that the Bible is ultimately a unity and that the theological ideas of this passage are part of God's larger progressive revelation of himself. Our goal here is to find out what this passage contributes to the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

The sorts of tools that may prove useful here are commentaries, theological dictionaries, and Old/New Testament theologies.

Look back!

The first questions that we ask here are questions that look back. We ask things like:

- In God's previous dealings with his people, have similar theological ideas or concepts been raised before.
- Does this passage pick up key ideas or allusions from other parts of the Bible that come before it?
- Does this passage add to those ideas?
- What new things do we learn about God's purposes from this passage?
- What things are confirmed about God and his purposes from this passage?
- Are there fulfilled here?
- Are earlier threats carried out here?

Look forward!

The Bible tells a story that is 'going somewhere'. In other words, it tells us that God has a goal for his creation, an end in mind. Moreover, God's goal or 'end' finds its centre and guarantee in Jesus Christ. The end to which the Bible story is heading is integrally related to who Jesus is and to what Jesus has done. In the words of Paul in Ephesians 1:9-10, God's purpose in his world is to unite all things in Christ.

This point has implications for our reading the Bible. When we read it, we should read it in the light of God's purpose in Christ and as a book that will reach its goal or end in God's purposes in Christ.

The practical outworking of this in our study of the Bible is that we should not just 'look back' to see how this passage of the Bible builds on what we already know of God's purpose. We should also 'look forward' to how it will be fulfilled or find its climax in God's purpose in Christ. Not every passage will have clear links in this way. Nevertheless, we should constantly be on the lookout for how the theological ideas or concepts we read about in our particular passage fits into God's ongoing purposes in Jesus Christ.

The sorts of questions we ask here are:

- How do the ideas in this passage fit into God's wider plans that find their centre in Christ?
- Is this passage or key ideas within it picked up by later parts of the Bible? How are these ideas used?
- What promises are made in this passage and where are they fulfilled in the Bible?
- Are there threats made here? If so, are they picked up later in the Bible?

2.2.3 APPLICATION/CONTEXTUALISATION (LOOK HERE!)

The first thing that we need to do is to ask what sort of response the original passage might have required. In other words, what do you think that the original readers or hearers were being asked by God to do in response to his word to them? Our answer to this needs to take into account all the work that we have done in exegesis.

The second thing that we need to do is to ask what sort of response we should make to this word from God and what sort of response should we urge God's people to make to God's word. This response will take into account the things that we did after exegesis, such as what we found out about how this passage fits into God's purposes in Christ. It will also take into account the differences in our cultural and historical context. We live in a different age and situation to the original readers or hearers. In the case of an Old Testament passage, we need to take account that our situation is quite different from the original readers or hearers because of the coming of Christ.

The tools that might prove helpful here are systematic and historical theologies, books on ethics and commentaries.

3 SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE AND ITS INTERPRETATION

The model that has been outlined above is dependent upon some hermeneutical assumptions which are outlined below. It is not important that you understand or absorb this at this stage but it has been included here so that those of you who wish to see some of the underlying convictions may do so.

There is no such thing as a presuppositionless reader. All readers inevitably approach texts with presuppositions. As Christians, we approach the text acknowledging our presupposition of faith in Jesus Christ (i.e. against Derrida and with Peter Stuhmacher, we approach with a hermeneutic of consent rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion) and our dependence upon God for enlightenment.

- We acknowledge the dual authorship of scripture. God is the divine initiator and origin of all scripture and we meet him through it. However, scripture comes to us via a human author who lives in an historical, social, linguistic, and cultural context that may be somewhat different to our own.
- The primary meaning of a text is to be found in the meaning for its original readers. This literal meaning is to be found in its historical, cultural, and literary context.
- The divine authorship and intention of scripture may mean that there are meanings other than those understood by the original readers. If these exist, they will arise out of text itself or subsequent biblical revelation.
- Scripture comes to us in two Testaments. These Testaments have their origin in God and we expect his authorship to give the Bible as a whole a unity, coherence, and wholeness. Our faith in Jesus leads us to accept from him that this unity and wholeness can ultimately be found in the witness of scripture to himself (John 5:39-40).
- Although we might seek to recognise the place of the author, the reader, and the world behind the text, our primary focus is on the text. It is where meaning is concentrated and therefore where our interpretative efforts are to be concentrated. Moreover, we must allow the text to address us and to modify and reshape us and our presuppositions. The text has priority over the interpreter.
- All parts of the Bible should be read in the light of the whole and in such a way as to not deny the progress of biblical revelation through the canon (i.e. the Old Testament should not

be read in the light of the New even though it may point to things explained in the New; the New Testament may need to be read in the light of the Old Testament background or even as a commentary on the Old). This makes the interpretative task a *theological* as well as grammatical, linguistic and historical task.

- The Bible is not simply written to an ancient audience but also to us. We therefore expect that when we interpret the Bible, we should expect the text to speak to our contemporary situation.
- Scripture alone is sufficient and authoritative for all matters of faith and conduct. However, most of the literature of the Bible is addressed to communities and our reading will be enhanced by interacting with other believers (ancient or modern), even though their interpretation is not determinative of the meaning or significance of a passage.
- One of the most important elements to recognise and take account of in understanding the Bible is genre. Genre is a critical indicator of what kind of point is being made in a text. It is a key communicative strategy that is employed by an author to convey meaning, engage readers, and render reality.

When we outline things as we have done above, it becomes evident that we want to affirm two things about the reader.

- The reader is not a passive observer of the text. He or she actively participates in understanding the text.
- However, the reader does not determine or create the meaning of the text. There are enough indicators both within the text and its various contexts to direct us to an objective interpretation.

4 REVIEW

Either using a dictionary or an internet search find the source of the word 'exegesis' and write down a definition.

Review the diagram and memorise it. At some time in the next week ask a friend if you can draw it for them and explain it to them.

Memorise the main headings under exegesis and make sure that you understand what they mean.