

Kajo-Keji Christian College, South Sudan
Understanding the Bible - Diploma Theology
Rev. Jacob Haasnoot - 1st semester, 2016

Objectives:

1. Students study & practice principles for biblical interpretation.
2. Students can apply this knowledge in their ministry.

Topics:

- * Why biblical interpretation? Exegesis method in 5 steps. Using Bible translations, concordance & commentaries.
- * Different types of Literature: OT Narrative, Law, Prophecy, Psalms, Wisdom, Gospels & Acts, Parables, Letters or Epistles, Apocalyptic literature.
- * Other issues

Course work & grading:

1. Assignments and tests (40%),
2. Final exam (50%),
3. Participation (10%).

Sources & for further study:

- Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, 2nd edition, 1994.
- Michael Kyomya, *A Guide to Interpreting Scripture*, HippoBooks, 2010.

1. Understanding the Bible: principles

A. Why interpretation?

1. Every time we read the Bible, we are interpreting. It is not a question of whether we interpret or not. It is a question of how good our interpretation is.
2. Interpreting is a skill (both an art and a science). It doesn't just come naturally but it can be learned.

What about the role of the Holy Spirit?

1. God has given us minds to study, and we are told to 'love the LORD our God with all our mind'.
2. Not everybody agrees on an interpretation, so God does not always miraculously reveal the meaning.
3. Prayer is a very important part of interpretation, as part of a life focussed on God. As in so many areas of the Christian life, prayer and work are *both* needed.

B. The goal of biblical interpretation:

- understand (& communicate) the message of a certain part of God's word,
- so that it is BOTH:
 1. **faithful** to the biblical text, AND
 2. **relevant** to hearers/readers today
- **Exegesis:** to find out what the text originally meant.
- **Hermeneutics:** to find out what it means for us now.

1. Start with Exegesis

Main question: What was the **meaning** of the **original text**? (What did the author mean? What would the first hearers have understood?)

2. Move to Hermeneutics

Main question: What is the **importance** of the text **today**? (What message can I bring from my exegesis to myself and to others?)

C. How do I do Exegesis? Five steps

I. Context (situation)

1. Historical/cultural: What is the historical, geographical and social background of the events? How does this affect the meaning of words and actions?

2. Literary:

- Which book does it come in? Does the book have a stated purpose?
- Where does it come in the book? What is its immediate context?
- What is the function of the passage in context?
- Who is the intended audience?

II. Genre (= a style or type of literature)

- What genre is the passage? (Narrative [story], Law, Prophecy, Psalm, Wisdom, Gospel, Letter, Apocalyptic)
- Within that genre is there a sub-genre? (e.g. type of Psalm; miracle story in gospels etc.)

III. Structure

What natural divisions are there in the passage? (What connecting words or phrases are used?)

IV. Words & phrases

What do the individual words or phrases mean?

V. Theology

- What is/are the key theological point(s)/theme(s) of the passage?
- How would this have been understood by the original hearers?
- How does this relate to the rest of Scripture?

Exercise: Apply these 5 steps to Jeremiah 1:1-10

What it meant (then)	What it means (now)
1. World of the text	1. World of the reader/hearer
2. Exegesis (understanding the text)	2. Application
3. Faithful to the text	3. Relevant to reader/hearer
4. Intended meaning of author	4. Meaning in different cultures and times

Genre 1: Narrative (Stories)

A. Genre

Genre is the name given to a type or category of literature (narrative; law; prophecy; psalms/poetry; wisdom; gospels; letters; apocalyptic)

B. Narrative

- Lots of stories in the Bible! (40% of OT).
- Probably the most read & known type of literature.

How do we interpret Old Testament narrative? Read the story as a story.

1. The story usually does *not directly* teach a doctrine. It can illustrate a doctrine.
2. Narratives just record what happened. What people do in stories is *not necessarily* a good example for us (e.g. Judges 11:32-40).
3. We are not always told at the end of the story whether what happened was good or bad.
4. Stories are not written to answer all our theological questions.
5. Stories may teach either *explicitly* (clearly stating something) or *implicitly* (implying something without stating it).

So: A story is **not**:

- an allegory where *every point* has a hidden meaning.
- some useful doctrinal truths, held together by a story thread that can be ignored.

Elements of a story to consider:

1. **The narrator** (= the person who is telling the story). What viewpoint does he take? What comments does he make? (e.g. 2 Sam. 11:27b 'the thing that David did was evil in the eyes of YHWH' or 1Sam 17:50; 'Pharaoh hardened his heart')
2. **The plot** (= main events in the story). All stories should have one! The movement of the story – an order of events building to a climax.
3. **The setting** (= the place). Where is it set? – historically, socially, geographically etc.
4. **The characters** (= a person in a story). How do characters change? What do we know about them – and what *don't* we know?
5. **The dialogue** (= conversation between people). Speeches at key moments can often make the key point (1Sam 17: 34-37 (mini climax); 45-47 (main climax); 1Kgs 18:36-37; Gen. 50:20 etc.)
6. **Repetition of words/phrases**. This can give a clue as to important points in the story (hardening of Pharaoh's heart; 'King X did evil/good in the eyes of YHWH').
7. **The reader**. Can we tell which reader was in mind when it was written?

Genre 2: Law

A. What is 'law'?

1. Where is it found? 4 major collections:

1. Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20-23).
2. Tabernacle laws (Ex. 25-31).
3. Leviticus – expansion on tabernacle laws (1-16) and Holiness code (17-26).
4. Deuteronomy – clarification of laws (1-11); book of the law (12-26)

2. How to categorise?

- Two types:
 - **Apodictic** (absolute; 'do...'/ 'do not ...' e.g. 10 Commandments)
 - **Case law** (= specific circumstances, if... then, e.g. Deut. 15:12-17)
- Purpose:
 - **Criminal law** [= punishment of offenders] (e.g. Ex. 21:18-19)
 - **Civil law** [= concerning relationships between members of a community] (e.g. Ex. 23:1-9)
 - **Cultic/Ceremonial law** [= relating to religious practices] (e.g. Ex. 25)

3. How did people see the law?

- Law as gift (= positive) - Ps 19:7-13 & Ps 119
- Law as covenant – Israel's response to God (Dt. 5:1-7)
- Law as way of relating to God (*clean/unclean laws* – presence of God with his people; *sacrificial laws* – having fellowship; saying thanks, and sorry; receiving forgiveness, and purification etc.)

B. What does the law mean for us as Christians?

1. The OT Law is still God's word for us, although not all of it may be God's direct command to us. Therefore it is still important for us. The question is *how* do we apply it?
2. The Law formed a fundamental part of Israel's covenant relationship with God in the OT. It is very much part of Israel's story.
3. We need to understand the law in order to understand the teaching of Jesus and Paul on how we should live.

4. In the new covenant in Christ there is both continuity (the same) and discontinuity (different) with the old. The NT:
 - a. specifically **approves** an OT law: do not lie (Col. 3:9)
 - b. **radicalises** (making it stronger) an OT law: adultery (Mt. 5:27ff)
 - c. indicates the **fulfilment** of OT laws in Christ: e.g. ritual laws relating to sacrifices and priests (Heb. 10:8ff)
5. Through exegesis we investigate the meaning and importance of specific laws to understand the *principles* that the law expresses.
6. We then consider how to appropriately apply the principles of specific laws, paying attention to any NT treatment of that law or principle.

Genre 3: Prophecy

"The prophetic books are among the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret or read with understanding." (Fee & Stuart)

A. What is prophecy?

1. Prophets are God's spokespersons for the covenant (blessing & curse). Not a new message.
2. The prophets' message was not their own, but God's.
3. Basic message: 1. Repent!, 2. If not, then judgement, 3. Even after judgement, hope/new beginning.

B. The form of the prophecy ('oracle') (3 examples)

1. The court case (Isaiah 3:13-26)
2. The 'woe' (Habakkuk 2:6-8)
3. The promise (Amos 9:11-15)

C. Steps to interpreting prophecy

1. Determine the type of prophecy (*e.g. judgement speech; salvation oracle; woe oracle; symbolic actions; legal oracle; poetry; wisdom; apocalyptic*).
2. Study the oracle in light of the whole prophecy.
3. Study the balance between historical (that time) and predictive (fulfilment at later time).
4. Determine the presence of literal meaning and/or symbols.
5. How can this prophecy be linked to the work of Christ?
6. Look for similar situations in the modern church (prophecy is still relevant!).

Some warnings:

- Don't immediately apply prophecies to NT events or today's events.
- Think about what it would have meant to the original hearers before applying it directly to us.

Genre 4: Psalms/Poetry

A. The Psalms – some basic facts

1. Five books of the Psalter
 - a. The first book comprises the first 41 Psalms.
 - b. The second book consists of the next 31 Psalms (42–72).
 - c. The third book contains seventeen Psalms (73–89)
 - d. The fourth book also contains seventeen Psalms (90–106)
 - e. The fifth book contains the remaining 44 Psalms.
2. Different types of Psalms: Laments (grieving; crying); Thanksgiving; Hymns of praise; Salvation history psalms; Celebration and affirmation psalms; Wisdom psalms; Songs of

trust.

3. Psalms might have been used for specific purposes at certain times (festivals, events, specific situations) in the life of Israel

4. Literary features of Psalms (and poetry) should be understood.
e.g. **parallelism** (saying the same thing twice)

The heavens declare the glory of God (A)
the skies proclaim the work of his hands (B) (Ps. 19:1)

When Israel came out of Egypt, (A1)
the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue (B1)
Judah became his sanctuary (A2)
Israel his dominion (B2) (Ps. 114:1-2)

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous (A)
but the way of the wicked will perish (B – contrast to A) (Ps. 1:6)

B. The Psalms – ways to interpret

What NOT to do

- Focus on an individual verse or image on its own (look at context!)
- Read too much in a psalm in order to get all the 'doctrine' out of it
- Take symbols & images literally
- Make big claims about life and experience based on one psalm

Some better ideas

- Consider type of Psalm. What is the possible original context?
- Consider the structure of the psalm.
- Note any literary effects e.g. parallelism.
- Consider the images that are used.
- What theological principles are expressed in the whole Psalm? How does this relate to wider Scripture?
- How is this significant for me/us?

C. 3 basic benefits of the Psalms (Fee & Stuart)

1. The Psalms can serve as a guide to worship (a formal way to express *our* thoughts).
2. The Psalms demonstrate to us how we can relate *honestly* to God.
3. The Psalms demonstrate the importance of reflection & meditation on things that God has done for us.

Genre 5: Wisdom

Wisdom in the OT: Proverbs; Job; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs; some Psalms: e.g. 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133.

A. Themes in Wisdom

1. *Advice or instruction rather than command (Law) or direct revelation (Prophets).*
e.g. adultery: Law - Ex. 20:14 <> Wisdom - Proverbs 5:1-4

THE PROPHETS	THE WISE
Direct revelation	General revelation and reason (thinking)
"Thus says the LORD..."	"Listen to my advice..."
Challenge to hear and decide	Invitation to learn and understand

Focus on redemption and judgement	Focus on creation and providence (= protective care of God)
Frequent use of history	No use of history
Addressed to specific situation	General and universal relevance
Intense and imperative style (Do/Don't do..)	Reflective style

2. *General revelation rather than direct revelation* ('observed' rather than 'revealed').
3. *Focus on creation rather than redemption and history.*
4. *Practical emphasis* – concerned with people making correct choices.

B. Types of Wisdom

1. Proverbs – basic approach to life

- a. Recognise that proverbs are generalisations, **not** divine promises. (e.g. Prov. 16:3)
- b. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not absolutely theologically precise (e.g. Prov. 15:19).
- c. What could the proverb's principle mean for us today?

2. Job – about righteous suffering

- a. Recognise that this is a discussion, i.e. several different 'authors' with their different and sometimes contradictory points of view.
- b. Job's claim of innocence is crucial to the story. God's view of the situation is decisive.

3. Ecclesiastes – doubt or positive example?

- a. Search for the overall message that will help to understand the parts.
- b. Consider how this view interacts with the rest of Scripture.

4. Song of Songs – celebration of love

- a. Read the book as what it is – a celebration of the joys of romantic love.
- b. Note the early Christian view: this is about Christ and the church. Why would they do this? What do we think of this?
- c. Observe through all the images the core values of marital love, faithfulness, exclusiveness, and the dangers of cheating.

Genre 6: Gospels and Acts

Gospels

1. We have 4 *gospels* for 4 communities:
 - a. **Matthew**: Jewish readers (Kingdom of Heaven, fulfilment of prophecies, genealogy).
 - b. **Mark**: short, lots of action, gentile readers (explains Jewish culture; e.g. 7:3).
 - c. **Luke**: longest, universal focus: for all men (Kingdom of God).
 - d. **John**: last gospel, mainly teaching, Jesus = Messiah (20:31), evangelistic focus.
2. *Parables* – stories within stories used by Jesus to teach. How do we understand these?
 1. There is normally just *one* point (lesson) in the story, sometimes more.
 2. Consider the context. What would the listeners then have understood?
 3. Place the parable in the overall teaching on Kingdom of heaven of Jesus.
 4. How can our hearers **now** experience the same joy/anger/shock as the original hearers of the story?

Acts

The question: is it **descriptive** (an example) or **prescriptive** (a model)?

Principles for understanding Acts

1. Acts is telling us about the history of early church. It includes many details which are *incidental* and which therefore are **not** normative.
2. The overall purpose of Luke in Acts is to show how the Holy Spirit empowered the Church to take the Gospel from Jerusalem to the whole world (1:8). It is not a doctrine manual.

Genre 7: Letters/Epistles

The letters of the NT were written to Christians to instruct, warn or encourage. Why is it sometimes difficult to understand the meaning?

1. Letters are letters! Read them as such:

- a) as **whole letters** rather than short verses. How does this section fit into the whole?
- b) as letters addressed to a **certain person or group** in a specific circumstance. What are the circumstances? Do we know? We only have one side of the conversation in the letter. What is the relationship between the writer and the reader(s)?
- c) as something with a **specific purpose**. Letters do teach doctrine but they are 'occasional' (i.e. responding to particular issues in a church then). Teaching is specific and limited.

2. How do we distinguish between what is 'cultural' and the 'moral/spiritual principle'?

- a) Look at the **specific context** in the letter.
- b) Also consider the wider context of Scripture. How is this issue/principle addressed there?

Genre 8: Apocalyptic literature

What is Apocalyptic literature?

Apocalyptic is not just about the end of the world. It is *revealing*, it reveals us who God is and how he acts.

- *eschaton* = end (*eschatology* = study of end times)
- *apokalypsis* = uncovering, revelation (*apocalyptic* - sometimes about end times)

Where do we find it?

OT – Dan (7-14), Zechariah, Ezekiel 37-39; (Isaiah 24-27)

NT – Mk. 13; 1Cor 15; 2 Thess 2; 2 Pet. 2-3; Jude, and of course *Revelation!*

Notes for understanding

- Apocalyptic speaks of what God will do *at the end of history*.
Purpose: To challenge readers and comfort them in their situation. To show that ultimately God is in control, the final victory of God in Christ is certain.
- Prophecy uses images from **our** world (oxen, wine, marriage, trees etc.) Apocalyptic also uses **mythical** images (dragons, beasts, stars etc.) which should probably not be taken literally.
- The images tend to be **puzzling** – without immediate explanation. Some are interpreted in the text (Revelation 1:13; 1:20; 12:9; 17:9, 18). These can help to interpret others.
- See the visions as a **whole** – as part of the overall purpose of the apocalypse.
- Focus on the **theological message**. Instead of looking for specific predictions about the future
- **Appreciate** the imagery – don't be too quick to make it into 'doctrine'. E.g. Rev 12:1-17. The woman and the dragon.

A. Assignment using a Concordance

1. Write down 1 Corinthians 15:23 in 3 translation: Revised Standard Version, New International Version and Good News Bible.
2. Underline the important differences in the three translations.
3. Look up the word firstfruit(s) in a concordance and explain what it means in the OT. [Bari concordance: page 35].
4. Now explain what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15:23 using the information from the OT.

B. Assignment using Commentaries

The big question in Hebrews 6:4-6 is whether a person can lose his faith or not. Give quotes or summaries from 3 (three) different commentaries with different perspectives on these verses. Give a full reference of the commentaries with page numbers.

C. Assignment – Reading a story

Read **Genesis 12:10-20** in the NIV translation and in the Good News Bible. If there are words that you don't understand, look them up in an English Dictionary.

1. Answer the following questions:
 - A. What are the main events (the big steps) in this story?
 - B. Where is the story happening? In which places?
 - C. Who are the characters in the story?
2. Also answer these questions about the content:
 - A. Why did Abram go to Egypt?
 - B. Why did Abram lie to the Pharaoh about Sarai?
 - C. How do we know that the Lord disapproved of what Abram did?
 - D. What is the message of this story? (short)

D. Assignment – Law

Read **Deuteronomy 13:1-5**. If there are words that you don't understand, look them up in an English Dictionary.

1. What type of law is this: apodictic or case law?
2. At what point (situation) in the history of Israel is Moses giving these laws written in the book Deuteronomy (see Deut. 1:5-8).
3. Why is God allowing the false prophet to speak to Israel according to verse 3?
4. Why should Israel not worship other gods, according to this passage?
5. What needs to happen with a false prophet?
6. Why must Israel 'purge the evil' from among them (verse 5)?
7. What is the message (lesson) of this passage for us as Christians?
8. Do we in the church have to treat false teachers in the same way as we read here? What does the NT say about that?

E. Assignment – Prophecy

Read **Jeremiah 23:1-8** and answer these questions (if you use a commentary, give references):

1. What does the word 'woe' tell us about what kind of prophecy this is (vs 1)?
2. Who is Jeremiah referring to with the word 'shepherds' (vs 1-2)?
3. What does 'remnant of my flock' (vs 3) refer to?
4. Why are the shepherds in verse 4 different from the ones in vs 1-2?
5. Who is the Righteous Branch & King in verse 5?
6. What is verse 8 referring to?
7. What is the relevance of this prophecy for us today?

F. Assignment – Psalms & Wisdom

I. Read **Psalms 25**. If there are words that you don't understand, look them up in an English Dictionary.

Questions:

1. Who wrote this psalm?
2. Give **two examples** of parallelisms (saying the same thing in different words) in this psalm.

Example: vs. 18

- | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| (a) look upon | my affliction and my distress |
| (b) take away | all my sins |

3. Give a topic for the following paragraphs:

Verses 1-3: *Trust in God; deliverance from enemies*

Verses 4-7:

Verses 8-15:

Verses 16-22:

II. Read Proverbs 1:1-7. Questions:

1. Who is the author of Proverbs?
2. What are these proverbs for (verses 2-3)? Summarize in your own words.
3. Who should especially listen to these words (verse 4)?
4. Who is wise according to verse 7?
5. Look up the phrase 'fear of the Lord' in a concordance and give 3 other passages in Proverbs with this phrase. What is the result of the Fear of the Lord according to these other verses?

G. Assignment – Gospel/Acts

Read Luke 14:15-24. Answer these questions:

1. Also read Matthew 22:1-14. Compare these 2 stories and list five differences between the two versions (give the verse numbers).
2. Why do Luke and Matthew have a different version? Why are they not exactly the same?
3. What is the point (message) of this parable in Luke 14? Give your answer in 2 sentences.

H. Assignment – Letters

Read 1 John 3. Answer these questions from the text:

1. To whom is John writing this letter? What do we know about him?
2. What do we learn about Diotrephes in this letter?
3. What do we know about Demetrius?
4. What is the message from this letter for the Church today? Give a short answer.

I. Assignment – Apocalyptic literature

Read Revelation 13:1-10. Answer these questions. Use a commentary or Study Bible. Reference your sources.

1. What could be the meaning of the 'beast coming out of the sea'?
2. Who is the dragon (also in chapter 12)?
3. Is this passage about the past, today's time or the future?
4. If you had to preach on this passage, what would be your main message? Give a short answer.