

What helps us understand the original meaning of Bible texts?

Why do Christians have different understandings of what the Bible means?

It is impossible for us to read anything without interpreting it. Two things stand in our way when we seek to have a perfect understanding of any text:

We all have **incomplete knowledge** of the background and intention behind the original words or story.

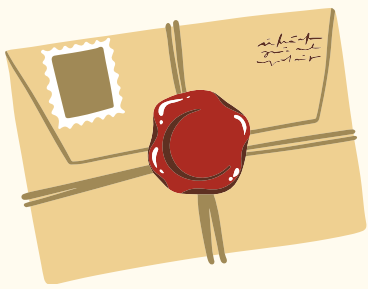
We all wear the “glasses” of **own perspectives**, shaped by our experiences, which no one else shares. (Sometimes these perspectives may help us discover new insights, but sometimes they may get in the way).

To read the Bible well it is therefore important that we seek to understand the **original meaning** as best we can.

We want to be sure we are trying to draw out the original meaning as much as possible (known as **exegesis**) as opposed to having our own ideas and trying to use the Bible to justify them (**eisegesis**).

Some of these questions may help us to understand the original purpose and meaning:

01 *How can I read this prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to guide me?*



02 *Who wrote it and to whom?*

(Was it intended for all people in all times i.e. the record of Jesus written by eyewitnesses or for a particular situation i.e. food laws in Leviticus?)

03 *Why did they write it and what did they intend it to do?*

(What kind of writing is it? i.e. does the fact that Genesis 1 is structured like a poem for worship help us understand its purpose better?)



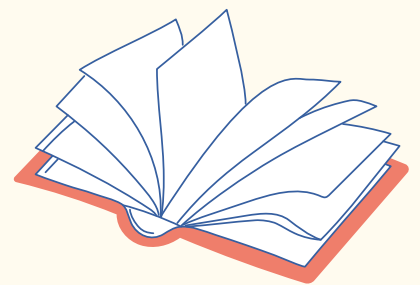
04 *How does the particular passage relate to what is written before and after it?*

(i.e. sometimes paying attention to how a parable is introduced can help us focus on its main meaning: “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” (Luke 18:1))



05 *How does this passage work alongside other passages?*

(i.e. How might we harmonize Luke 14:26, which tells us we must hate our parents, spouses, children and even ourselves if we are to be Christ’s disciple and Ephesians 6:2, which tells us to honour our parents?)



06 *How does the whole Bible story help us to understand this passage?*

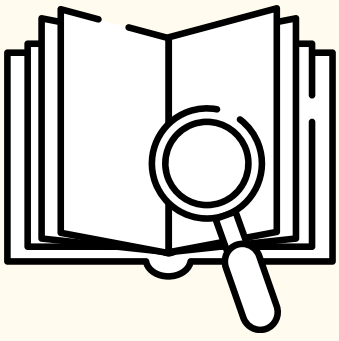
(i.e. how does our understanding of Abraham help us to interpret the writing about covenant in the New Testament?)



07 *How might we see the meaning of this passage through Jesus?*

(i.e. how do we make sure we read the accounts of warfare in the Old Testament in the light of His self-sacrificial love?)





08 *What was going on at the time that is relevant?*

(What historical events or cultural background might help us understand it better? What does archaeology reveal about the place involved?)

For example, at the time Genesis 1 was written, while the Israelites were in Babylon, people worshipped many gods, including the sun and moon. Genesis emphasises that there is one God, and calls the sun and moon “lesser lights” (1:16), in other words, not to be worshipped.

During this period a Babylonian myth called the Enuma Elish portrayed creation as the fallout of a battle between two gods, and human beings, who are created from the blood of a slain god, as the slaves of the gods. We can understand Genesis 1 better when we see it in contrast to this – rather than the world being created from a battle, it is created as “good”. Rather than humans being slaves, they are “under-kings”, made in God’s image.

The people who originally read this would have been slaves in Babylon – to read that God has ordered the world, and made them to be free and in His image would have inspired hope in the face of despair. Genesis 1 is a liberating story.

09 *Are there meanings of particular words we need to pay attention to?*

Sometimes the way we understand a single word can make a huge difference.

In 1967, a professor named Lynn White said that the real danger to the environment actually comes from the Christian faith and to the meaning of dominion or human rule in Genesis 1:28.

White said the Bible teaches that human beings are not really a part of nature, they are above it, so nature exists just kind of as a thing for people to use and exploit.

So understanding the intended meaning of the word dominion (or “rule over”) is crucial in reading the passage well.

But the writers of *The Drama of Scripture* say because of God’s good care over His creation, “It is impossible to read (dominion) as suggesting that humans are free to do what they like with God’s workmanship. ...

A better way of expressing the concept of “dominion” over creation may be to say that we are God’s royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God’s creation so that the whole of it may celebrate His glory.”



Practical starting points: What will help me discover the original intended meaning of a text?

There are many resources available seeking to help us find answers to the questions we might want to ask when trying to find the intended meaning of a text.

The Bible Project provides excellent overviews of key themes and each of the books of the Bible.

Study Bibles have useful maps and introductory material for each biblical book, as well as comments on individual verses.

Bible Commentaries are written to provide detailed background, summarize their key points, and help us to apply passages well. There are commentaries for each book or one volume books on the whole Bible.

The Lion Handbook to the Bible has proved popular and immensely helpful over several decades and the **short commentaries** on each book by Tom Wright, published by SPCK have proved very helpful.

A **Bible Dictionary** gives short articles on biblical themes arranged in alphabetical order. **Nave’s Topical Reference** offers a similar resource.

A **Concordance** cross-references individual words, showing where else the author used particular word, and the meaning of the original Hebrew or Greek.

Many of the tools listed above can be found on the Internet. www.biblegateway.com is a reliable resource.