**Table of Contents**

I. Basic Interpretive Techniques ................................................................. 1

II. Important Interpretive Presuppositions (from John Sailhamer’s *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*) ................................................................. 3

III. Important Interpretive Questions (from Robert Plummer’s *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*) ................................................................. 5

IV. How to Read Old Testament Stories .................................................................. 7

V. How to Read Old Testament Legal Material/Laws ............................................. 9

VI. How to Read the Ten Commandments .......................................................... 11

VII. How to Read Old Testament Poetry ............................................................. 13

VIII. How to Read New Testament Stories .......................................................... 15

IX. How to Read Revelation .................................................................................... 17

Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 21
I. Basic Interpretive Techniques

A. Approach the Bible in Prayer (Psalm 119)
B. Read the Bible
C. Meditate on the Bible
D. Approach the Bible in Faith and Obedience
E. Read the Bible in Community
F. Read the Bible as a book that points to Jesus
   1. John 5:39-40
   2. Luke 24
G. Let Scripture Interpret Scripture
H. Find the author’s intent
   1. Which author? Divine-Human Authorship
   2. Determine by context, purpose, and genre
I. Know the genre
   1. Narrative
      a. Story
      b. Characters, plot
   2. Poetry
      a. Poems/Psalms (Ex. Gen. 3:14-19; Psalm 1)
      b. Proverbs (Proverbs 3:5-8)
   3. Prophecy (Ex. Prophetic books; Isaiah 53)
      a. Narrative
      b. Poetry
   4. Apocalyptic (Ex. Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation; Rev. 21:1-8)
      a. Narrative framework
      b. Poetry
   5. Epistle (Ex. Paul’s letters; general epistles; Eph. 2:1-10)
   6. Law/legal material (Exodus, Leviticus)
      a. Narrative framework
      b. Commands
J. Know the historical context/background
K. Know the literary context
L. Know the literary style and purpose of the author
   1. Pay attention to quotations
      a. Who is speaking?
      b. Who is the audience?
      c. What is the role of the quotation in the narrative?
   2. Imagery/symbolism
      a. What is the Image?
   3. Use of other biblical texts
      a. Does the passage quote or echo another biblical text?
      b. What might be the purpose for which the author referenced this other text?
II. Important Interpretive Presuppositions (from John Sailhamer’s *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*)

A. Text or Event
   1. Where is the inspired meaning found?

B. Criticism or Canon
   1. Do we read the final form or earlier, reconstructed forms?

C. Descriptive or Confessional
   1. Is the Bible like any other book when it comes to interpretation?
III. Important Interpretive Questions (from Robert Plummer’s *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*)

A. How has the Bible been interpreted throughout church history? (ch. 9)

B. How do we identify literary genre—and why does it matter? (ch. 21)

C. How do we interpret exaggerated or hyperbolic language? (ch. 26)

D. How do we interpret figures of speech? (ch. 27)
E. What is biblical criticism? (ch. 37)

F. What is “speech act theory”? (ch. 38)

G. What is “theological interpretation of Scripture”? (ch. 39)

H. What are some other recent trends in biblical interpretation? (ch. 40)
IV. How to Read Old Testament Stories

A. Where does the story fit in the larger narrative of Scripture?
B. Where does the story fit in the context of the book?
C. What is the structure of the story?
   1. Inclusio
   2. Chiasm
   3. Repetition
D. How is the story told?
   1. Narrator
   2. Dialogue
   3. Poetic interlude
E. Who are the main characters of the story?
F. What role do the main characters play in the story?
   1. Propel the action
   2. Passive recipients of the action
   3. Dialogue
G. Are there any points of emphasis in the story?
   1. Breaks from a common pattern
   2. Statements that are repeated or emphasized in some other way
   3. Highlighted by structure (such as middle of chiasm)
   4. Key words
H. Are there other clues to understanding the text?
   1. Do the characters (or the narrator) allude to or quote other biblical texts?
      a. If yes, ask why? What does this quotation add that would not be clear otherwise?
   2. Does this story reflect on or imitate previous stories?
      a. If yes, ask why? Could it be that the author intentionally crafted his story like another biblical story so that the reader/listener would consider the latter in light of the former?
I. In light of one’s answers to these questions, what can one conclude about the meaning and purpose of the passage? Also, what does this passage tell us about God and our appropriate response?

Quick Reference Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pay attention to quotations</th>
<th>Pay attention to structure and design of story</th>
<th>Use of other biblical texts/stories</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Who is speaking? To whom are they speaking</td>
<td>*Does the structure emphasize certain points of the story?</td>
<td>*Does the text allude to or quote other texts?</td>
<td>*Where does this story fit in biblical story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Why does the author include the dialogue?</td>
<td>*Does the author use poetry and dialogue to emphasize points in the story?</td>
<td>*Does the story reflect an earlier narrative?</td>
<td>*How does this story fit into the message of the book?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. How to Read Old Testament Legal Material/Laws

A. What is the narrative context?
   1. The chart on the back of this page shows one attempt to understand how the laws fit into the narrative framework of the Pentateuch.
      a. The sin of the Golden Calf is a recognition of Aaron’s poor leadership. The resulting stipulations are thus related to the role of the priest, since it was the priest, Aaron, who failed.
      b. There is a further example of this failure in Lev 10 with Nadab and Abihu giving unauthorized fire before the LORD, which leads to their death. What follows is a continuation of the Priestly Code, but it is also interesting to note how many of the stipulations here match aspects of the narrative of Genesis 1-11, especially the Noah and Babel narratives.
      c. Finally, in Lev 17 the people are sacrificing to goat idols. Thus, it is not the priests who are at fault, but the people, so the Holiness Code ensues which is focused on the people and their responsibilities.

   1. What did the text mean to the original audience?
   2. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
   3. What is the theological principle in this text?
      a. What is the principle underlying the law?
         i. The principle should be reflected in the text
         ii. The principle should be timeless
         iii. The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture
         iv. The principle should not be culturally tied
         v. The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and contemporary audiences (e.g. God is holy, distinctions between clean/unclean, etc.)
      b. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible? Does the NT teaching modify or qualify this principle, and if so, how?
      c. How should individual Christians today live out this modified theological principle?

C. Important reminders
   1. We are not under the OT law. As much as things like the 10 Commandments are helpful guides for life, they are not LAW for us.
   2. The OT laws were never the means of “salvation”. Relationship with God was always dependent on faith. See details on back of this sheet.
   3. We must pay attention to the narrative context in order to understand why these laws were included in the biblical text.
Covenant

Faith versus Works of the Law in the Pentateuch

In the New Testament, Paul speaks often about how we are no longer under the law but that we are in relationship with Christ through faith. The law, he says, served as the means of making us aware of sin (Rom 7:7-25). He also calls the law our guardian (Gal 3:24) and says that it was added because of transgressions (Gal 3:19). Such seems to be the view outlined above. As the people sinned against the LORD by breaking the stipulations of the covenant, God added laws to restrain sin, acting as a guardian that pointed to faith. It was not the law that saved, but it acted as a guardian that accentuated the need for faith, the kind of faith that Abraham had that God would provide him with a son. Indeed, the same Abraham that “believed the LORD and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6), is also the one who was said to keep the charge, commandments, statutes, and laws of the LORD (Gen 26:5). These are the same words used of the Mosaic covenant and its stipulations in Deuteronomy 11:1. How could Abraham keep the Mosaic covenant before there was a Mosaic covenant? Because it was always about faith. Abraham kept the “law” because he had faith; Moses, on the other hand, failed under the law and died in the wilderness because of unbelief (cf. Num 20:12). Similarly, the people are said to believe when they heard that the LORD had visited them in their affliction (Ex 4:31) and when they saw the great power that He had used against the Egyptians (Ex 14:31). After the covenant at Sinai, however, the people do not believe (Num 14:11; Deut 1:32; Deut 9:23). There seems to be an intentional emphasis in the Pentateuch itself to point to faith in God’s promise of a coming King and not in keeping the law. Why, then, would we place ourselves back under the curse of the law (Gal 3:10-14) by trying to keep it?
VI. How to Read the Ten Commandments

A. Introductory Questions—Yes/No
   1. The Ten Commandments are from God.
   2. The Ten Commandments are significant for the church.
   3. The Ten Commandments are law for us.
   4. The Ten Commandments are good guidelines for us.
   5. The Ten Commandments should be posted in schools and/or courthouses.
   6. I can write the Ten Commandments in order.

B. Ten Commandments
   1. You shall have no other gods before me.
   2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
   3. You shall not use the name of the Lord your God in vain.
   4. You shall observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.
   5. You shall honor your father and mother.
   6. You shall not murder.
   7. You shall not commit adultery.
   8. You shall not steal.
   9. You shall not bear false testimony.
   10. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, wife, or possessions.

   1. What did the text mean to the original audience?
   2. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
   3. What is the theological principle in this text?
      i. What is the principle underlying the law?
      ii. The principle should be reflected in the text
      iii. The principle should be timeless
      iv. The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of Scripture
      v. The principle should not be culturally tied
      vi. The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and contemporary audiences (e.g. God is holy, distinctions between clean/unclean, etc.)
   4. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible? Does the NT teaching modify or qualify this principle, and if so, how?
   5. How should individual Christians today live out this modified theological principle?

*Potential danger is that we move too quickly to application of principle and miss meaning in the text.

D. Exposition of text
   ❖ Exodus 20
     ➢ 19:5  Conditional covenant: if you obey...
20:2 I am YHWH your God...—gives reason why they should obey
20:5-6 reason for no idols is because YHWH is a jealous God and visits iniquity to the third and fourth generation but also shows steadfast love (foreshadows the revelation of His character in Ex 34:6-7)
20:8-11 Sabbath is defended on the basis that YHWH worked six days and rested on the seventh
20:12 Honor your father and mother that your days may be long (promise—Eph 6:2)
20:20 Fear of God is so that they may not sin.
Emphasis on fear and love of God \( \rightarrow \) Covenant code that follows is love of others

Deuteronomy 5

5:3 Covenant is not with Fathers, but with people in the wilderness who came out of Egypt
5:5 Moses as mediator because people were afraid
5:6 I am YHWH (parallels Ex 20:2) \( \rightarrow \) reason
5:15 Sabbath is defended on basis that they were slaves in Egypt
5:29 Fear so that it might go well with them and their descendants
With so much similarity between the passages, why do these last two change?

Parallels with Chapter 4
- 4:33//5:26 Heard voice and lived?
- 4:34//5:15 mighty hand/outstretched arm
- 4:37//5:15 out of Egypt
- 4:39//5:7 no other
- 4:40//5:29 that it might go well

Parallel with Chapter 6
- 5:1//6:4 Hear, O Israel...
- In chapter 5 they are to learn them (5:1), so that in chapter 6 they may teach them (6:7)

Emphasis on love of God, while rest of Deuteronomy focuses on love of others
VII. How to Read Old Testament Poetry

A. General Poetry
   1. Recognize when poetry is employed
   2. Know and note the assumptions underlying poetry
      a. Used to make things more memorable
      b. Used to express and/or evoke strong emotions (affective)
      c. Makes use of figurative language and is often not “literal”
   3. Know common poetic forms
      a. Parallelism: Combination of two lines that share some close relationship
         i. Synonymous parallelism: two poetic lines are closely related, if not identical, in meaning
         ii. Antithetical parallelism: two poetic lines in which the second line contrasts the first by asserting an opposing (antithetical) truth
         iii. Synthetic parallelism: two poetic lines in which the second line adds information or emphasis to the first
      b. “X, X+1” formula: A common form of poetry, especially in the OT, in which a list of two or more items is emphasized through this formula
         i. Proverbs 30:18-19
         ii. Amos 1
         iii. Proverbs 6:16-19
      c. Alphabetic Acrostic: Each successive line or grouping of lines begins with the subsequent letter of the alphabet
         i. Psalm 119
         ii. Lamentations

B. Psalms
   1. Introductory Questions Regarding the Book of Psalms:
      a. Should Psalms be read as one book?
         i. Compiler/editor as author
         ii. Five books of Psalms
         iii. Doxologies at end of each book
         iv. Psalms 1-2 as introduction to the Psalms
      b. What is the message of the Psalms as a book?
   2. Questions Relating to Individual Psalms:
      a. What is the context of this psalm in the book? In relation to previous and subsequent psalm?
      b. What type of psalm is it?
      c. What are the symbols/images and what do they signify?
      d. What is seemingly the best interpretation of the psalm on its own?
      e. What is the best understanding of this psalm in light of its use and position in the whole book of Psalms?
      f. Do the NT authors use this psalm? If so, how?
   3. Tips for Reading the Book of Psalms:
      a. Read several psalms at one time.
b. Pay attention to the “seams.”
c. Look for key words and how they are used in other psalms.

4. Questions Relating to Application:
   a. What does this psalm teach about God? Does the meaning of this psalm challenge any of my understandings about God?
   b. Does the meaning of this psalm call me to action? If so, how?
   c. How can I sing and/or pray this psalm?

C. Proverbs
   1. What is a proverb?
   2. Ask questions of the proverb?
      a. Does it use synonymous or antithetical parallelism, or some other poetic form?
      b. Does it make unconditional or conditional promises?
      c. Does it use imagery or symbolism? If so, what is the image and what does it signify?
      d. How is the proverb meant to be practiced (e.g. all the time, in certain circumstances, applied with discernment, etc.)?
   3. What is the context of the proverb?
   4. Key is to keep the focus not on the action but on God. True wisdom is not in blind application of these principles, but in acting upon these principles with a proper understanding of and relationship with God and His Son (Proverbs 30).
VIII. How to Read New Testament Stories

A. Reading NT Stories
   1. Where does the story fit in the larger narrative of Scripture?
   2. What is the main emphasis or key features of the book?
      a. Matthew: Matthew 4
      b. Mark: Mark 1
      c. Luke: Writes an orderly account so that Theophilus may have certainty about that which he has been taught
      d. John: Written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name
      e. Acts: Acts 1:8
   3. Where does the story fit in the context of the book?
   4. What is the structure of the story?
      a. Inclusio
      b. Chiasm
      c. Repetition
   5. How is the story told?
      a. Narrator
      b. Dialogue
      c. Poetic interlude
   6. Who are the main characters of the story?
   7. What role do the main characters play in the story?
      a. Propel the action
      b. Passive recipients of the action
      c. Dialogue
   8. Are there any points of emphasis in the story?
      a. Breaks from a common pattern
      b. With respect to Gospels, the story differs in detail or emphasis from its presentation in other Gospels
      c. Statements that are repeated or emphasized in some other way
      d. Highlighted by structure (such as middle of chiasm)
      e. Key words
   9. Are there other clues to understanding the text?
      a. Do the characters (or the narrator) allude to or quote other biblical texts?
         i. If yes, ask why? What does this quotation add that would not be clear otherwise?
      b. Does this story reflect on or imitate previous stories?
         i. If yes, ask why? Could it be that the author intentionally crafted his story like another biblical story so that the reader/listener would consider the latter in light of the former?
   10. In light of one’s answers to these questions, what can one conclude about the meaning and purpose of the passage? Also, what does this passage tell us about God and our appropriate response?
B. Example: Matthew

1. What is the purpose of the genealogies?
   - To show that Jesus is the offspring and king who was promised to Abraham and to David

2. What is the purpose of Matthew’s fulfillment statements in chapters 1-4?
   - Jesus is seen as the recapitulation of Israel, its faithful remnant, who lives Israel’s history without the disobedience that Israel demonstrated
     - Immanuel—Is 7:14
     - Shepherd from Bethlehem—Micah 5:2
     - Out of Egypt—Num 23-24
     - death of children in Bethlehem and surrounding regions // horrors of exile (Jer 31:15)
     - Nazarene // netzer “branch” of the stump of Jesse (Is 11)
     - Prepare the way of the Lord // Is 40:3
     - Baptism // crossing the Red Sea
     - Temptation in wilderness // wilderness wanderings

3. What is the role of Matthew 4:23-25?
   - Serves as a summary statement of Jesus’ ministry and also a hint to the structure of Matthew’s work—Teaching discourses are followed by miracles

4. Five discourses
   - Matthew 5-7= Sermon on the Mount; What are Jesus’ disciples supposed to look like? Emphasis on kingdom
   - Matthew 10:1-42=
   - Matthew 13:1-53= Parables about the kingdom
   - Matthew 18-20= Life of the kingdom community
   - Matthew 24-25= Olivet Discourse; Return and Judgment of Messiah

5. Crucifixion
   - Events presented along the same lines as Psalm 22
   - Purpose: to show how God poured out his wrath on the Son

6. Resurrection & Commission
   - Great commission describes the work that Jesus’ disciples will continue to do after he departs—work that they are to do for the kingdom until the king returns to establish his kingdom fully on earth
IX. How to Read Revelation

A. What is the genre?

The book itself tells us it is both apocalypse (1:1) and prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). We can also see how it begins with letters to the seven churches and seems meant to be distributed to these churches in the manner of the other NT epistles. Apocalypse means revelation, disclosure, or unveiling, which seems to suggest the purpose of making a point more clear. On the other hand, we recently studied parables, which were meant to be obscure and hard to understand in order to keep outsiders out. We typically treat these the opposite way, thinking parables are easy and apocalypse is hard. I think the main reason for this is that we do not read enough apocalyptic literature. John’s audience would have been better suited to understand the genre than we are, a point which I will revisit in a moment.

Apocalypse and prophecy, while similar in their use of symbolism and imagery, have several differences. First, whereas prophecy was primarily oral and only secondarily written down, apocalyptic literature was a crafted literary piece from the beginning. Second, while prophecy comforted the faithful and called the unfaithful to repent, apocalyptic literature tended to divide humanity into two camps. One camp was the holy remnant awaiting God’s deliverance, while the other camp seemed destined for wrath and beyond the reach of redemption. Third, while prophecy looked into the future, it also focused on God’s present involvement. Apocalyptic literature, on the other hand, tended to see the present as so corrupt that God could not effect a saving work until the final day. Finally, while both prophecy and apocalyptic use imagery and symbols to convey their message, apocalyptic used cataclysmic images like the darkening of the sun, the moon turning to blood, and stars falling from the sky, while prophecy used more common, everyday symbols and images. What makes John so unique, then, is that his work is both prophetic and apocalyptic, meaning that “he brings a balanced message of comfort, warning, and rebuke.”1

B. What is the context?

As we have discussed in previous chapters, there are various levels of context. There could be literary, historical, cultural, and theological. All of these are at play in the book of Revelation. Most important, however, seems to be the literary context, which can be understood in four ways.

First, the literary context includes a comparison of Revelation with other apocalyptic literature, and there is a great deal of material to which to compare it. Such is the case because apocalyptic literature flourished during the inter-testamental period, “perhaps in part to help the oppressed people of God find purpose in their sufferings and hope for their future in the absence of genuine prophetic words from God.”2 The apocalyptic

---


2 Ibid., 135.
genre helped the Jews express through symbolism God’s end-time intervention and reversal of present injustices. Thus, it is helpful to read and/or become familiar with the genre of apocalypse from other sources.

Second, the literary context includes John’s other writing. Though some argue against Johannine authorship of the epistles, most Christians accept that the John of the Apocalypse is the same John who wrote the gospel and 1-3 John. These writings, then, may help us understand structure, vocabulary, and purpose.

Third, the literary context, even more so than the epistles, depends on a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. Though the numbers vary, some have argued that there are as many as 1000 allusions in Revelation to the Old Testament, and most counts are over 500. There are three main categories of allusions:

1. Clear allusion: the wording is almost identical to the OT source, shares some common core meaning, and could not likely have come from anywhere else.
2. Probable allusion: though the wording is not as close, it still contains an idea or wording that is uniquely traceable to the OT text or exhibits a structure of ideas uniquely traceable to the OT passage.
3. Possible allusion: the language is only generally similar to the purported source, echoing either its wording or concepts.

In each case, a reasonable explanation of authorial motive should be given if a proposed OT allusion is to be accepted as clear or probable. John alludes to a wide range of OT books from the Law, Prophets, and Writings, but the four most common (in order) are Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Psalms. One also should pay close attention to Zechariah, which along with Ezekiel and the second half of Daniel are OT examples of apocalyptic literature.

Fourth, the literary context includes the immediate context in the book of Revelation itself. The reader must understand how the passage fits into the whole book. This is best ascertained when one understands the purpose of the book.

C. What is the purpose of the book?

- Revelation 1:1—“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.” Repeated almost exactly in Revelation 22:6.
- Revelation 1:19—“Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.”

D. What is the image? What is its purpose or function in the passage? What does it signify?

An image or symbol is meant to point to something else, not to itself. The difficulty many face in understanding Revelation is discerning what is literal and what is symbolic. One step that helps us identify when something is symbolic is if it is an OT allusion. In cases

---

when the text is alluding to the OT, we may have help in the OT context understanding whether it is meant to be literal or symbolic. In questionable cases, we ought to take into consideration that the genre is primarily apocalyptic, so if it is questionable, it is probably a safer bet to take it symbolically rather than literally.

Once we have established that we have a symbol or image, the next step is to understand its purpose or function in the passage. We can accomplish this task if we take into account the context of the book and how the image or symbol might aid the development of the main purpose of the book. Is it part of a judgment passage, deliverance, New Jerusalem, throne room of God?

Finally, some symbols leave us to discern that which it signifies. In other cases, the text gives us answers. For example, Revelation 1:12-20 speaks of John’s vision of seven golden lampstands and seven stars. John is told that the seven stars are seven angels of the churches, and the seven lampstands are the churches. We have further evidence of the identity of these seven churches in the immediate context, since 1:4 tells us that John is writing to the seven churches in Asia, which he names in verse 11: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Those passages that give us interpretations can be helpful in understanding other passages that are not explained. In two weeks, I will consider how this may help us understand the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3.
Bibliography


