

RICHARD ALAN FUHR, JR.  
ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER

# INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

OBSERVATION, INTERPRETATION, AND APPLICATION  
*through the Lenses of*  
HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THEOLOGY

“The sheer number of books on interpreting the Bible has become numbing. *Inductive Bible Study* cuts through the complexity. I know of no other book that covers such a wide range of issues with such user-friendly expertise and wise simplicity. Read it to (re)kindle excitement about mining Scripture’s inexhaustible riches!”

—**Robert W. Yarbrough**, professor of New Testament,  
Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO

“Here we have a hermeneutics text that enriches the traditional inductive Bible study method by integrating historical, literary, and theological sensibilities into the interpretive process. [It] will help you understand the importance of words and grammatical structures while also helping you interpret the parts in light of the whole. This volume will edify and encourage you to deepen your understanding of Scripture and of the triune God who reveals himself in it.”

—**Edgar Aponte**, instructor of theology and director of Hispanic leadership development, The Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary,  
Wake Forest, NC

“For anyone looking for a thorough guide to the study of the Bible, this splendid new volume is a great place to start. These seasoned authors have given us a thoughtful, well-designed, and practical, step-by-step approach to the serious study of Holy Scripture. This carefully written and readable book provides helpful instruction for those who are just beginning to study the Bible on a regular basis as well as insightful ideas for more experienced students of Scripture. Heartily recommended!”

—**David S. Dockery**, president,  
Trinity International University, Deerfield, IL

“While there are countless Christian books, too few of them help Christians interpret and apply the most important book. That’s why this wonderful new volume by Fuhr and Köstenberger is a breath of fresh air. It turns our attention back to where it belongs, namely, to God’s Word. It will be a great blessing to every believer eager to understand the Scriptures better.”

—**Michael J. Kruger**, president and professor of New Testament,  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

“Fuhr and Köstenberger set out to produce a textbook on how to interpret the Bible that is both academically sound and practically manageable. They have

accomplished their goal. This book is simple yet profound and is chock-full of practical examples and illustrations. Interpreting the Bible correctly is not just the task of pastors or Bible teachers. It is the responsibility of every Christian, and *Inductive Bible Study* provides the basic tools needed to make that possible.”

—**Benjamin L. Merkle**, professor of New Testament and Greek,  
The Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC

“It is impossible to study the Word of God too deeply or too well. These eternal truths deserve the best we have to offer. It is exciting to see this work that blends the inductive method with the historical disciplines. To observe well on our part and to dig well into the background behind the text has inestimable worth. Our deep thanks for this invaluable resource for quality Bible study.”

—**Grant R. Osborne**, professor emeritus,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL

“Fuhr and Köstenberger’s new book will help a new generation of students discover the joy of studying the Bible for themselves. Here you will find a hermeneutically sound and accessible guide to studying the Bible inductively.”

—**Robert L. Plummer**, professor of New Testament interpretation,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, and host  
of [www.DailyDoseOfGreek.com](http://www.DailyDoseOfGreek.com)

“For many, engaging in Bible study can be overwhelming and complicated. Fuhr and Köstenberger have written a work that equips anyone to engage, investigate, and live out the promises and truths of Scripture. If you are a small-group leader, this book will equip your small group to dig deeper into the Scriptures and ignite a passion to become lifelong students of God’s Word.”

—**Matt Purdom**, Kairos discipleship minister,  
Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, TN

“Köstenberger and Fuhr combine earlier work on the hermeneutical triad—the historical, literary, and theological context of a passage—with the traditional methods of inductive Bible study. The result is not only a sound academic approach to Scripture, but practical handles for observing, interpreting, and applying the Scriptures. This book is a tremendous gift to the serious student of the Bible. Highly recommended!”

—**Roger Severino**, adult minister of leadership,  
Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, TN



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ACADEMIC

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

*Inductive Bible Study*

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## *Dedication*

AL:

*For Alex and Max*

To foster your love for the Bible  
To equip you to read it well  
And to train you up in the ways of our Lord

^ ^ ^

ANDREAS:

*To my precious wife, Margaret Elizabeth*  
With gratitude for your godly wisdom  
Your passion for studying God's Word  
And twenty-five unforgettable years of marriage



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## Authors' Preface

Why another book on inductive Bible study? Since the 1952 work *Methodical Bible Study* by Robert A. Traina, dozens of books, ranging from popular-level works to academic textbooks, have presented a methodical, inductive approach to the study of the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> Another book is needed for the following two reasons. First, as evangelical scholarship of the Bible continues to bring greater insight to the field of hermeneutics, there's an ever-present need to incorporate those advances into a usable, applied guide for the study of the Bible. Second, as practitioners in teaching the next generation of students, we understand that there's always room for improvement in developing an academically sound yet practically manageable presentation for learning how to do Bible study. This text assimilates a hermeneutically viable model into a step-by-step methodical approach to Bible study. We trust that the next generation of students, pastors, and all who desire to know God's Word will be enriched by its insights and practical layout.

With the 2011 publication of *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*, I (Al) began incorporating the figure of the hermeneutical triad into my inductive Bible study courses.<sup>2</sup> By laying a foundation for what the Bible is as history, literature, and theology, I discovered that the traditional model of inductive study was not only compatible with the hermeneutical

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1. Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (1952; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

2. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).

triad but was enhanced by it.<sup>3</sup> This textbook is the product of the vision to assimilate the hermeneutical-triad concept with a step-by-step, inductive methodology for the study of the Bible. It is borne out of the collaborative efforts between two individuals who have taught in the field of hermeneutics and inductive Bible study for a combined forty years. I (Andreas) have greatly appreciated my co-author's congenial partnership on this project. Having written a previous hermeneutics text, I was excited about the vision of incorporating the hermeneutical triad into the tried-and-true inductive Bible study method. I believe I can speak for both of us in saying that blending the two approaches has worked out even better than either of us could have imagined.

In *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology*, the hermeneutical triad is the foundation upon which the inductive method is based. Building upward from the premise that the Bible is historical, literary, and theological and should be studied in terms of these three dimensions, the inductive method builds a framework for methodical, step-by-step study that embraces all facets of the hermeneutical triad. Following the framework of step-by-step progression, you might visualize the steps of the inductive method as moving upward from the historically grounded text to arrive at the pinnacle of theology, the natural result of an inductive study of Scripture. Our approach is to present individual, specific steps for applied study through the primary steps of observation, interpretation, and application. Within this framework, there are specific and unique steps of observation, interpretation, and application, all of which contribute to the development of biblical theology. Following the model of working upward from the triad base, each inductive step reflects an awareness of the Bible's historical, literary, and theological traits.

Our textbook is divided into four units. The first unit introduces inductive study with an overview of the challenges set before the modern reader. Tasked with the study of an ancient book, the modern reader is on a quest to discover its relevance for his or her life today. Through an

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3. The hermeneutical triad approach proposes that the Bible should be studied in terms of its historical, literary, and theological dimensions.

awareness of basic hermeneutical principles and equipped with a step-by-step method for Bible study, we lay the foundation for a confident reception of God's Word in the twenty-first century.

The second unit of the textbook presents five steps of observation. These steps equip you to read the Bible as a book but to do so carefully, observing intently and asking proper questions of what lies before them through the written word. In the unit on observation, we explore the value of comparing translations as tools for observation (chapter 3), learning to ask the right questions of the text as an active listener (chapter 4), and reading with discernment (chapter 5). In addition, as further steps of observation, we explore miscellaneous features in prose and poetic literature (chapter 6) and learn to determine literary units through basic discourse analysis (chapter 7).

Our third unit involves the reader in exploring the second primary step of the inductive method: interpretation. Here we begin to analyze and interpret the data by considering historical, literary, and theological kinds of context (chapter 8), by performing interpretive correlation (chapter 9), and by focusing these efforts on examining the meaning of individual words and phrases within literary units (chapter 10). Beyond the expository study of the text, we also explore the case for topical study within an inductive framework (chapter 11) and cap this off with an overview of the role of consultation and research within the inductive method (chapter 12).

In the fourth and final unit, we unpack the various steps and concerns involved with applying the ancient biblical text as the relevant Word of God for today. This involves important hermeneutical considerations in the practice of establishing relevance and legitimacy in applying an ancient text in the modern world (chapter 13). Our concerns, however, don't end with the theoretical. We also examine practical ways in which the biblical text may appropriately speak to us in our own individual circumstances (chapter 14). Finally, we close our unit on application by exploring the place of theology as the natural outflow of inductive study, the culmination of a step-by-step process of drawing the whole meaning

of Scripture upward from the observation, interpretation, and application of Scripture's many individual parts (chapter 15).

We trust that our hermeneutically sensitive, step-by-step approach to inductive Bible study will bring insight and practical benefit to many who endeavor to know God through the depths and riches of his Word, the Bible. In this we offer our gratitude and acknowledgments to those who have contributed to this volume. Included among these are hundreds of students who have shaped and developed our thinking through their questions, interaction, and feedback. We also thank those graduate assistants and student workers, most notably Alex Kocman, Wesley Walker, and Josh Alley, who have assisted with this volume and the courses associated with its development. And most of all, we thank our families, who have allowed us extended hours in writing so that we might share our love for studying God's Word with you.

# UNIT I

## *INTRODUCTION*

### Sizing Up the Task



# The Task of Bible Interpretation

## *Bridging the Gaps*

Studying the Bible is extremely, even eternally, rewarding. Those who devote their lives to the study of this one book—which, unlike any other work, is the divinely inspired Word of God with the power to transform our hearts and lives—will never be the same. God’s Word is living and active (Heb 4:12), and while written centuries ago, Scripture has the ability still to speak to us today, because ultimately God himself is the author through the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). In fact, Scripture is indispensable for equipping us to do God’s work: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). Truly, like the man who found a priceless pearl and sold everything he had so he could buy it, we are right to focus all our attention on God’s great love letter to humanity.

And yet, the Bible is not an easy book to study. In its pages we are confronted with a history that is not our own, cultural norms that are often different from contemporary practices, literature that communicates through a complex array of genres and subgenres, and theology that defies simplistic categorization. And while it’s proper to speak of the Bible as a unified work, we nonetheless find ourselves challenged by a collection of sixty-six books, each reflecting its own unique history,



literature, and theology.<sup>1</sup> If the Bible were just any collection of books from antiquity, its study most likely would be the exclusive domain of scholars, its mysteries researched and unraveled for a select community in the halls of academia. Yet the Bible is anything but exclusive in reach, its pages open to all who seek to know the truth in faith.

Paradoxically, the Bible is a deep well whose waters lie close to the surface. There is profound irony in the fact that students earn PhDs writing learned tomes on narrow areas of biblical research (for no one person could possibly master all the fields related to the study of Scripture), while a five-year-old can understand the basic message of the gospel and be saved. A plethora of volumes have been published surrounding the study of the Bible, from children's Bibles to scholarly monographs and treatises. The Scriptures have been translated into countless languages and dialects, all to make possible the comprehension of God's Word. Year after year, the Bible and the tools that aid in its study are the best-selling books on the market. People want to dig into that deep well of God's Word, even though they begin at the surface.

As mentioned, the challenges to understanding the particulars of any given portion of Scripture are formidable. And yet, timeless truths await in the pages of Scripture, intended by God to be appropriated by all those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ and what he's done for them on the cross. This is the challenge of Bible study: its particulars are often complex but never vexing; its message is simple but not simplistic; the study of Scripture requires hard work—in fact, it entails a lifelong journey—and yet along that pathway of discovery you'll find enrichment and growth from day one. God uses his Word wherever you and I may be in our journey of biblical literacy, often in spite of our ignorance and limitations. At the same time, Scripture encourages us to move to maturity in many different realms of spiritual experience, not

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1. In the remainder of this book, we'll refer to history, literature, and theology as the "hermeneutical triad," the three dimensions of the biblical text requiring careful study. See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: The Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011); abridged as *For the Love of God's Word: An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015).

the least of which involves developing greater skills in handling God's Word (Heb 5:11–14; 2 Tim 2:15).

To a large degree, the challenges involved in studying the Bible stem from the fact that it is an ancient, human book rooted in events far removed from contemporary experience. Its antiquity notwithstanding, Scripture is read by believers as eternally relevant, the Word of God written to them and meant to be applied directly to their everyday lives.<sup>2</sup> Rather than dictating a set of laws and propositions unclouded by the tapestry of human history, God chose to reveal his Word in and through human affairs. He did this by inspiring the work of authors where they lived in the timeline of history, reflecting their experiences, displaying their distinctive style and vocabulary, and writing to an audience as far removed from the twenty-first century as the authors were themselves.

In this chapter we'll embark on our journey of discovery by introducing you to several gaps to understanding the Bible. Yet we don't want you to be unduly concerned or even discouraged. While those barriers are real and should be squarely faced, we can surmount each of them with the right approach and attitude. It's like building a shed in your backyard. The most important thing is to count the cost before you start. Then you need to get the right tools and buy the proper supplies. Finally, you need to follow the instructions of someone who's done it before. While the process of building your shed may involve a certain amount of trial and error, if you persist in your effort you'll eventually succeed. When it comes to Bible interpretation, believers have the Holy Spirit guiding and equipping them every step of the way. So as we introduce you to a series of challenges to Bible study, remain undaunted: you can get the job done!

## Bridging the Gaps: Facing the Challenges to Understanding

Did you know that in the ancient world girls often got married and had children in their early teens? The same cycle repeated in the lives of

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2. On the phrase "eternal relevance" and its tension with historical particularity, see Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 25.

their children (even though many infants and their mothers died during childbirth). This meant that many women became grandmothers in their early thirties! While this may happen on rare occasions today, it's certainly uncommon. This is just one of many illustrations we could give of a gap between contemporary culture and Bible times. In fact, when interpreting the Bible, we encounter significant challenges, or gaps, in understanding.<sup>3</sup> These gaps create distance we can bridge only through hard work and study, but they can be bridged.<sup>4</sup>

What's more, these gaps aren't limited to the Bible's human dimension. That Scripture is inspired by God creates a challenging dynamic unique to the study of the Bible, one that includes theological demands placed on the interpreter. Recognizing these challenges to the study of Scripture, both human and divine, is an essential first step to bridging the gaps that cause distance in understanding the Word of God. Although variations exist within each of the following categories, there are several historical, literary, and theological gaps that exist between the ancient text of Scripture and the modern reader seeking to understand it.

**Table 1.1 — Historical Challenges to Understanding the Bible**

Gap	Meaning
The Time Gap	The events depicted in Scripture occurred in a historical context far removed from the twenty-first century.
The Geographical Gap	The events recorded in the Bible took place in lands far removed from that of most Bible students.
The Cultural Gap	The cultures reflected in the Bible are drastically different than our own.

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3. On the presentation of gaps that cause distance in understanding, see Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1991), 15–18.

4. We recognize that we may not be able to bridge the historical gaps perfectly (we cannot step back in time), but we maintain that we can bridge them satisfactorily.

## Gaps Related to History

### *The Time Gap*

Truth is, we're far removed historically from the events taking place in the pages of the Bible. The history reflected in Scripture ranges from creation to the first decades following the birth of Christ, a vast range of material at a considerable distance from our own experience. The narratives in Scripture reflect a complex socio-political matrix of events, movements, and figures that for many of us may seem rather daunting. In addition, students of the Bible must also study the circumstances that gave rise to the writing of these documents.

The time gap can be illustrated through examples in more recent history. For instance, if you were to pick up a newspaper from London, England, dated to the fall of 1940, certain key names and events would invariably populate the front page. You should expect to read about Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, the *Luftwaffe*, and the RAF (Royal Air Force). What was taking place on the British Isles in the summer and fall of 1940? The Battle of Britain, one of the key events of World War II.

For the Londoner living under the constant threat of aerial raids and impending invasion, the Battle of Britain was very real, and most would be familiar with the key persons and events. However, fast-forwarding to the twenty-first century, you'd find that an increasingly large number picking up that newspaper won't grasp the details due to historical distance. While some will still recognize names such as Churchill, the details of the Battle of Britain would be lost on many if not most.

What's the point of this illustration? For the Londoner living in the fall of 1940, there'd be no time gap to speak of when picking up that same newspaper. The American living in the twenty-first century, however, faces greater challenges to understanding the details. Applying this illustration to Scripture, how many today are familiar with Sennacherib or Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus or Herod? The distance is palpable. Yet these and many other characters play key roles in the unfolding of God's historical program revealed in the pages of the Bible.

If you could step into a time machine and travel back in time, experiencing for yourself the events recorded in Scripture, the perspective you'd bring to reading the text would change dramatically. This is true for all the books of the Bible, but especially for the Old Testament prophets whose message was often tied to the socio-political events of their day. Certainly you'll be able to grasp the meaning of the Old Testament narratives more readily if you're conversant with ancient Near Eastern history, just as you'll understand the Gospels and Acts with greater precision if you know something about Roman history.

This, it's worth pointing out, isn't merely a matter of cognitive understanding; it affects our ability to relate emotionally as well. The words of Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations certainly had greater emotional impact on those who experienced the traumatic siege and captivity of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar than on those of us who read about these incidents today, at a time far removed from the actual events.

If we could step into a time machine and walk alongside Moses, Jeremiah, or Paul, doubtless the pages of Scripture would come alive in a manner beyond our wildest imaginations. While we can't do this literally, as we open the pages of Scripture we are in fact invited to walk alongside these figures, to step into their shoes and experience the challenges they faced with them, with historical imagination and emotional empathy. To make those shoes fit, and to bridge the time gap, we must study the multifaceted history of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Geographical Gap*

We are far removed geographically from the places of the Bible. The events transpiring in the pages of Scripture take place in a myriad of locations throughout the Middle East, Persia, Egypt, and the Mediterranean, but the primary focus is on the land of Israel. For those living in various parts of the world today, the lands of the Bible may seem rather foreign. The geographical awareness assumed by the writers of Scripture is often

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5. See on this especially chapter 2, "History," in Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, where you can find helpful charts on Old Testament and Second Temple history and on the chronologies of Jesus and Paul.

unwarranted in the case of modern readers who need a map to locate the various sites. Thus we're called to bridge the geographical gap that opens up between us and a particular biblical text, especially if theological significance is attached to a given geographical location, but also to give us a sense of perspective in terms of distance, topography, or general geography.





Examples include nations large and small, the locations of thousands of cities and villages throughout the Bible, and the challenges involved in travel between those places. For instance, many a Coloradan would be shocked to discover that the grade and elevation change between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is more severe than that between Denver and the Summit Country ski resorts, even though the hills of Jerusalem do not compare visually to the Rocky Mountains. And many a Californian would be surprised to find out that the Sea of Galilee is lower in elevation than Death Valley.<sup>6</sup> In a very practical way, an awareness of such features will impact the way we follow the travels of Old Testament patriarchs, kings and armies, or the movement of Jesus and his followers as depicted in the Gospels.

In fact, when I (Andreas) first studied the Gospel of John more seriously, I spent several hours going through the entire Gospel, carefully noting any movement by Jesus and his followers. Then, on a map of the Holy Land, I traced their movement from Galilee to Judea, or Samaria, and back to Galilee, and so on in order to get a sense of proportion when it comes to geographical movement and location. This helped me to appreciate the distance Jesus and his followers traveled. Taking some time to study biblical geography proved to be a valuable aid in bridging the geographical gap that every interpreter of Scripture must strive to overcome.

Just a century ago, North American and European believers had very limited opportunity to bridge the geographical gap. Today, Bible students enjoy full-color atlases, computer software, and internet sources that bring the geographical outlay of Scripture to all corners of the globe. Moreover, the opportunities for travel to the lands of the Bible have never been greater, and as any pilgrim will testify, a trip to the Holy Land will bring the black-and-white pages of the Bible into full living color.

But to have a map in hand is a poor substitute for local knowledge, and a walk through modern Israel, Turkey, or Greece will not replicate the setting of ancient boundaries, walls, and villages. Modern cities have been built over ancient sites, and geographical characteristics change

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6. Death Valley, the lowest point in North America, bottoms out at 282 feet below sea level, but the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where so much of the Gospel narratives take place, is 686 feet below sea level.

over time. Regions once forested now lie barren, and coastal harbors, through centuries of siltation, are now fields harvested for crops.<sup>7</sup> Like the time gap, the geographical gap is impossible to bridge completely, but with careful study, some imagination, and the proper resources, it is possible to “see” what we read in the pages of the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Cultural Gap*

Though the cultural gap in many ways derives from the time and historical gaps, the distinctions between them are sufficiently clear. The impact of cultural distance on the modern reader demands that special recognition be given to this challenge to the accurate interpretation and application of Scripture. The cultures reflected in various parts of the Bible are rather different than our own, and the danger of misinterpretation due to cultural distance is very real.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of examples throughout the Bible where we’re confronted with cultural norms whose significance is anything but self-evident today. Sifting through the pages of Scripture, there’s a temptation to read too much into cultural particulars while at other times it’s quite easy to miss the point altogether when confronted with a unique cultural feature. Even when we understand how a particular cultural practice might have functioned in the ancient world, transferring that practice to today presents a whole new set of challenges.

For example, five times the New Testament letters conclude with the admonition to “greet one another with a holy kiss.”<sup>9</sup> From our perspective it’s hard to know what such a kiss entailed, how and to whom it would have been properly given, and what meaning would have been conveyed through the practice. What’s more, even if this could be determined with a high degree of confidence, it’d be yet another thing for

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7. A great example of a silted harbor is the ancient city of Ephesus, which in the day of Paul was a harbor city. However, once the city was abandoned and dredging operations ceased, the ancient harbor filled in and is today dry land. The Aegean coast is now six miles from the site of ancient Ephesus, a city in and out of which the apostle Paul once sailed.

8. There are several excellent Bible atlases available, among them John D. Currid, *The Crossway ESV Bible Atlas* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), not to mention maps at the end of most Study Bibles. See further chapter 12.

9. Rom 16:16; see also 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14.

us to discern how to apply it in our own setting, where “greeting one another with a kiss” may land you in jail, divorce court, or the unemployment line!

Can we bridge the cultural gap? Yes, but only with some effort. After all, even in a modern setting, moving from one culture to another is hardly ever easy and free from potential misunderstanding. How can we expect to understand the many cultures represented in the pages of Scripture through the mere study of books? Experts will admit that literature and archeology can only bring us so close to understanding ancient cultures. With a healthy dose of humility, we can nonetheless attain a better understanding of the cultural dimension of Scripture as we immerse ourselves in the study of the customs and practices encountered in the Bible.

Table 1.2 — Literary Challenges to Understanding the Bible	
Gap	Meaning
The Language Gap	The languages of the Bible are far different than English. The Old Testament was primarily written in Hebrew with small segments in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in <i>Koine</i> (common) Greek.
The Literary Gap	There are many genres and subgenres utilized by the biblical authors. To properly handle the text, we have to learn to navigate the diverse literary genres represented in Scripture.

## Gaps Related to Literature<sup>10</sup>

### *The Language Gap*

Language is human convention, and in the case of the Bible—a millennia-old book—ancient languages are the means by which the

10. Köstenberger and Patterson, in *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, do not merely distinguish between the triad of history, literature, and theology but further distinguish in the literary realm between canon, genre, and language, and in the linguistic realm also between syntax (word relationships), semantics (word meanings), and figurative language. Gaps are present in each of these realms that must be overcome by getting acquainted with the linguistic and literary features of Scripture.

message is communicated. For the Old Testament, the primary language is Hebrew, with small segments written in Aramaic, a language quite similar to Hebrew. For the New Testament, it is *Koine* (pronounced *coy-nay*) Greek, the language commonly spoken in the first century. While it is the premise of this book that quality Bible study can be performed through modern translations, it's nonetheless important to understand that some facets of meaning or subtle nuances may at times be lost when students of Scripture don't engage with the original languages of the Bible.

Language is a very complex phenomenon that cannot be defined by alphabet, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax alone. It's intricately tied to culture and the people who speak a given idiom. Linguistic conventions are dynamic, ever developing along with those who use them, or, conversely, dying when people cease to do so. Words can be translated from one language into another, but often only imperfectly, for no two languages can fully convey all aspects of meaning tied to its particulars. This reality poses the challenge of studying a book written in languages that most of us don't understand. There's a language gap between the text of the Bible and the modern reader of that text. For this reason, almost all believers today depend on translations for their Bible reading. Even those trained in the original languages will often read the Bible in translation, for it's only natural to be most comfortable reading in your native language. And yet you must recognize that translations, while bridging the language gap, do so imperfectly. In short, the original languages of the Bible should rightly take precedence over any given translation.

In the twenty-first century, American readers are blessed to have available many high-quality English translations; the breadth and quality of translations in other modern languages continues to expand as well. You'll be able to bridge the language gap as you read and compare translations, engage in original-language word study through the use of various reference tools, and follow exegetical conversations in the better commentaries. Some will take this a step further, studying the original languages, eventually reading and translating biblical passages on their own. But most will never achieve a level of aptitude and confidence in

the original languages at which they cease to use translations. This is understandable, and to read Scripture in translation is certainly acceptable. Later we'll discuss how to bridge the language gap through the use of various study tools and how to use translations themselves in our study of Scripture.

### *The Literary Gap*

The literary gap stems from the fact that the Bible is an ancient human book written by dozens of authors in a variety of literary genres. As such, we should expect the text of Scripture to have been written in styles unique to ancient literary culture and language. What places the Bible in a class of its own, however, is the variety of literary techniques found in Scripture. Because the Bible was written by so many authors over such a long period of time reflecting such variety in purpose and origin, the outcome is a text representing a dozen or so primary genres and many more subgenres. God could have revealed to his people a list of laws, a procedural manual on how to do church, a theology textbook, or an apologetics guide answering difficult questions. To some extent, we find a bit of each of these features in the pages of Scripture. However, the Bible is so much more, a multifaceted masterpiece of unparalleled quality and diversity. God could have chosen to reveal a less complex Word, but he didn't. And while this presents us with certain challenges, these pale in comparison with the rich benefits conveyed through the variegated literature of the Bible.

The literary gap recognizes that most readers will not inherently know the rules of engagement appropriate to the respective literary genre at hand. Yet knowing these rules is absolutely essential in gaining a more informed and accurate interpretation of a given portion of Scripture. Just as you shouldn't read an opinion page the same way you read actual news, so different rules apply to the interpretation of law code, historical narrative, prophetic oracle, proverbial wisdom, epistolary discourse, and apocalyptic vision. The mention of rules of interpretation for different types of literature may sound daunting, but as we grow in biblical literacy, the genres and subgenres in the Bible become less foreign and the

literary gap closes more and more. With training in the special skills required for the study of biblical literature, we'll be well on our way to traversing the distance that arises from the literary diversity of Scripture.

Table 1.3 — Theological Challenges to Understanding the Bible	
Gap	Meaning
The Supernatural Gap	The Bible presents supernatural realities and miraculous events, things not normally experienced in the natural world.
The Theological Gap	The Bible is God's self-revelation in his Word and must be read with the expectation that it communicates truth to humankind.
The Appropriation Gap	Even once we bridge the gaps to interpretation, we still must transfer the message from interpretation to application. This is often a greater challenge than interpretation, but absolutely necessary.

### Gaps Related to Theology

It may sound paradoxical, but properly understood, the Bible is a divine, contemporary book. By “divine” we mean that the Bible is inspired by God and reflects the perspective of divine authorship. By “contemporary” we mean that the Bible is eternally relevant for every generation of God’s people, even as a given generation is far removed from the time at which the events of Scripture originally transpired. This feature of dual authorship is the basis for additional gaps in understanding that are truly unique to the Bible. The collection of books comprising Holy Scripture is in fact the Word of God, revealed by God to all of humanity. As a message from God, it’s meant to be applied; without the appropriation of its message, the Bible ceases to function as the eternally relevant Word of God. What’s more, the Bible reveals supernatural realities unlike any merely human book; in the pages of Scripture we peer into the realm of God’s dealings with humanity. It’s this divine engagement that permeates the text of Scripture and binds the sixty-six books of the Bible



together historically and thematically. In fact, many of the challenges we face when reading Scripture aren't historical or literary but theological.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Supernatural Gap*

In a book about God, we should expect to find supernatural truths. The Bible nowhere defends the existence of God; it assumes it. Likewise, God's interaction with humankind pervades Scripture from beginning to end. For modern readers who are steeped in naturalistic thinking, a supernatural gap opens up when they discover that they can't replicate the miracles of the Bible in a modern, scientific setting. Miracles can't be repeated in a test tube, nor should we expect them to be. The very point of a miracle is that God is intervening in human history in a supernatural way that is non-normative and non-recurring. Conversely, others expect that God will act today in exactly the same way as he has done in the past. This, too, can be misleading and result in frustration and disappointment.

For the ancient recipients of Scripture, the expectation of supernatural activity was quite different from that of most modern readers. In the world of the Bible, God's immanence was assumed, and the question was not *whether* God would intervene in the affairs of human history, but *how*. In our modern world, bridging the supernatural gap is ultimately a matter of faith, and believers certainly should approach the Bible with certain expectations that are different from those of unbelievers.<sup>12</sup> However, it's also important to realize that the Bible won't defend itself against misguided modern expectations and that the goal of interpretation is not to sift through the Bible in order to distinguish between fact and fiction. Modern critical approaches to the study of Scripture are doomed to frustration, for they inadequately fail to recognize that the Bible is a spiritual book revealing supernatural realities and thus must be approached through a lens of corresponding expectations.

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11. See Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, who break down the interpretive task into studying the historical background, literary context, and theological message of a given passage in each respective genre.

12. On viewing certain presuppositions in a positive, foundational light, see J. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall, *Grasping God's Word*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 146.

### *The Theological Gap*

Ultimately, the Bible is God's revelation about himself. Yet in Scripture we find that God reveals himself in the context of human history. To some extent, the theological gap is tied to the supernatural gap, but it implies more. To bridge the supernatural gap, we must read with the expectation of divine activity, accepting that God is immanent in human *history*. The theological gap, however, is based on the premise of God's self-revelation in his *Word*. It is one thing to expect the miraculous in the Bible, but it's another to read Scripture with an eye trained to discern the self-revelation of God through the history, literature, and theological message of the Bible. It's not that God is merely active in the pages of the Bible. Through Scripture, he is actually revealing to us truths about himself and his relation to creation, whether explicit or implicit, propositional or circumstantial.

Reading the Bible is unlike reading any other book. In this collection of sixty-six books, from Genesis to Revelation, we detect an unparalleled continuity of story, thought, and message. The theological truths expressed in Scripture progressively unfold through its pages but never in such a way that they contradict each other. At times there may be a certain amount of tension in the way in which the Bible communicates complex supernatural truths, yet the fundamental teachings embedded in Scripture are consistent and clear.

While you can find nuggets of truth in the smallest portions of text, your study of Scripture pays the richest theological dividends when you're able to correlate a given truth throughout Scripture from beginning to end. This requires a certain amount of biblical literacy, a mind trained to "connect the dots," and, of course, time. Reading the Bible theologically is a lifelong pursuit. At the same time, students of the Bible will begin building upon their knowledge of God from the very first day that they open the pages of Scripture.

And so we find that the reader faces a set of challenges related to this most important dimension of Scripture. Although we read the Bible in a quest for God, we don't attain to a comprehensive understanding of God's revelation of himself all at once. Rather, the multifaceted nature

of God is revealed in Scripture, and in this sense a gap exists between the reader who seeks after God daily through studying the parts and God who reveals himself through the whole canon of Scripture over the course of time.

How do we come to discover God in a book that requires such a breadth of expertise and experience? Again, we return to the premise that the Bible is a deep well whose waters lie close to the surface. A new believer can pick up the Bible and God will use it mightily, but our knowledge of God derived from our reading of Scripture is only partial. At every stage in our spiritual journey, as we study portions of the Bible, like Pilgrim in John Bunyan's famous work *Pilgrim's Progress*, we're gradually progressing in our knowledge of God. Even those who devote a lifetime to the study of Scripture will never be able to "master" God or his Word (despite the fact that we call a theological degree a "master of divinity"). Although God reveals himself through Scripture, there will always be a gap between the human and the divine. Similar to the other gaps we've discussed, we can bridge this theological gap increasingly, but never completely.

In these various ways, we face formidable challenges in our study of Scripture because we're not merely trying to interpret the meaning of a given text but seeking to discern spiritual truth. This, in turn, is predicated upon the new birth that results from genuine repentance and conversion to Christ and trust in his finished work on the cross for us. Even as Spirit-born and Spirit-filled believers, however, interpreting Scripture isn't always easy; much less do we arrive at an accurate interpretation automatically! In spite of the various challenges to understanding God's Word, however, the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to "teach, rebuke, correct, and train [us] in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).<sup>13</sup> Through his Word, God convicts the heart of the unbeliever, trains the mind of the believer, and encourages those who are discouraged with words of comfort, peace, and reassurance.

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13. See further the discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation in chapter 14.

### *The Appropriation Gap*

So now you know about the gaps related to the Bible's nature as history, literature, and theology. One more gap remains for us to overcome as we strive to apply the biblical teaching: the appropriation gap. Although Christians generally understand that the Bible is a book to be applied, Scripture doesn't always specify exactly *how* something should be applied, or even *whether* it should be applied at all. Thus one of the primary challenges facing us today is not correct interpretation but appropriate application. Even once we bridge historical, cultural, linguistic, and literary gaps in the interpretation of the text, we're still faced with transferring the message from the "then and there" to the "here and now."<sup>14</sup>

How do you apply culturally relative commandments such as the earlier-cited "greet one another with a holy kiss" example? Does Jeremiah 29:11 ("For I know the plans I have for you . . . to give you a future and a hope") apply to today's high school or college graduating class, and if so, how? Should we seek to emulate all characters in biblical narrative, and are all instructions in Scripture normative? As you contemplate the absurdity of always doing exactly what the original recipient of a past portion of Scripture did, the answer becomes an obvious "no," but working through examples case by case still poses a considerable challenge. Some commandments, exhortations, examples, and instructions in Scripture are directly transferable, while others are historically or theologically constrained and don't apply to us directly. Between these options, many degrees of application are possible, including finding cultural equivalents and drawing principles from the text, both practical and spiritual. But this is a nuanced art that requires not only interpretive skill but also spiritual seasoning and maturity.

Additionally, we shouldn't overlook the fact that interpreting and applying Scripture to our lives as sinful men and women presents a challenge all its own. The Holy Spirit is certainly instrumental in bridging this aspect of the appropriation gap, and it's our firm conviction that the Bible will mean something different to the believer than it does to the unbeliever. In fact, the Holy Spirit will use God's Word in the life

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14. See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 27–35.

of the Spirit-filled believer in spite of his or her misunderstanding and even misinterpretation. Yet as students of the Bible we always ought to approach the text with reverence and humility, recognizing that we're seeking to interpret and apply the revealed Word of God with sinful, finite minds. Hard work and study alone will never bridge the appropriation gap. Only the Spirit of God working effectively in the life of the believer will transfer the message of the text from the mind to the heart.<sup>15</sup>

## An Invitation

God is more intent on revealing himself to you than you are to get to know him. For this reason you can be confident that you can come to know God in and through his Word and that you can grow in your understanding of his character and his will for your life. You can also learn to understand your place in the story of God's plan of salvation in history and how you can be part of his mission in this world.<sup>16</sup> While interpreting the Bible may be challenging at times, the rewards are literally out of this world. Not only are we convinced that the Bible *can* be understood, we can say with confidence that it was *meant* to be understood. Bridging the gaps mentioned in this chapter requires a certain amount of effort, but by following proper interpretive principles and a methodology that applies these principles practically, everyone who desires to understand the Word of God can come to know its meaning and significance for his or her life. The aim of this book is to provide you with the capacity to approach the Scriptures with humble confidence and to give you the tools you need for a lifetime of fruitful Bible study.

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15. On application, see chapters 13, 14, and 15 in Unit IV: Application: Acting on the Text.

16. See on this Andreas Köstenberger, "What Is Life's Purpose? Why Are We Here?" *Biblical Foundations* (blog), <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/what-is-lifes-purpose-why-are-we-here>, accessed September 15, 2015.

# 2

## Inductive Bible Study

### *A Step-by-Step Approach*

**H**ermeneutics, in its most basic form, is the science and art of Bible interpretation. Obviously we could give more sophisticated descriptions. Nevertheless, on the basis of this simple definition, two essential aspects of Bible interpretation are clear. First, as a *science*, hermeneutics provides the interpreter of Scripture with sensible principles to guide and direct his or her thinking with regard to interpreting the Bible. These principles are sometimes virtually self-evident while at other times they may require a little more conscious thought and effort. Some principles are rooted in the fact that the Bible is an ancient book, following certain cultural conventions of written communication, while others are based on the unique quality of the Bible as the divinely revealed and inspired Word of God.

Second, as an *art* or *skill*, hermeneutics provides the interpreter of Scripture with a methodical process that, with practice, may be applied to the biblical text and result in an accurate understanding of the Bible. While hermeneutical principles may help in guiding the reader of Scripture, most students find it necessary to follow a methodical process in pursuing the task of Bible study. The procedure presented in this book is the *inductive method*, a task-oriented, step-by-step process that has been widely accepted in Bible-believing circles as the most popular and most effective approach to the study of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> We trust that our

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1. The classic treatment is Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (1952; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). The sequel by David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), is not as accessible as one might like.



presentation of the inductive method will be sufficiently thorough while remaining simple and clear so that it will inspire and equip you to a lifetime of fruitful Bible study.

The term “hermeneutics” can mean different things to different people (yes, there is some irony in this). Many works have appeared in recent years covering different aspects of interpretation. Some books have focused on the philosophical side of hermeneutics, where conversations can become quite dense, while others have dealt with the hands-on dimension pertaining to the process of “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15 KJV). For those who treasure the Word of God and seek to interpret it accurately, both aspects are essential. With that said, this book is concerned primarily with method and is unapologetically practical in orientation. Our goal is to equip you with a method that will help you interpret Scripture accurately. This goal, however, requires guiding principles. Thus we begin by presenting the basic hermeneutical principles behind our method of Bible study.

<b>Table 2.1 — Seven Sensible Principles for Thinking through Scripture</b>		
	<b>Principle</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
1.	The Literal Principle	Take the words of the Bible at face value. Avoid reading into the text what is not there.
2.	The Contextual Principle	Always strive to understand the text within the confines of its historical, literary, and theological context.
3.	The One-Meaning Principle	There will normally only be one correct interpretation of a text, although there may be multiple applications.
4.	The Exegetical Principle	The meaning of any biblical text must be drawn from the text rather than be ascribed to the text.

Table 2.1 — Continued		
	Principle	Meaning
5.	The Linguistic Principle	The original languages of the Bible always take precedence over any given translation.
6.	The Progressive Principle	Later revelation may clarify, complete, or supersede earlier revelation.
7.	The Harmony Principle	Any given portion of the Bible can have only that meaning which harmonizes with the doctrine of the Bible as a whole. There will be continuity between books of the Bible.

Seven Sensible Principles  
to Guide Our Thinking through Scripture

Any method used for the study of Scripture must be based on sound hermeneutical principles. While most of the following principles are universal and pertain to all forms of written communication, some are in force only in view of the Bible’s unique character as the inspired, inerrant Word of God. On the basis of the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture, following these principles will provide a sure hermeneutical foundation that will guide our thinking throughout the practice of inductive Bible study.

#1 *The Literal Principle*

The literal principle acknowledges that the Bible should normally be understood in a literal fashion, with the words of the text being taken at face value. This means that the Bible interpreter shouldn’t allegorize the text or look for hidden meanings, nor should he or she assume that the Bible must be decoded in order to be understood. This principle doesn’t negate the intentional use of rhetorical devices and literary imagery but acknowledges that, as with other forms of written communication, the

Bible was written in ordinary languages and was meant to be understood. The literal principle acknowledges the legitimate feature of figurative language found throughout the Bible, and clearly figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, and anthropomorphism are found literally (pun intended) thousands of times throughout the Bible.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the literal principle acknowledges the legitimate use of symbolism and typology as reflected in the intentions of the human authors and the divine author.

Though all sorts of literary devices are evident, readers of Scripture ought to exercise restraint. It is notoriously easy to read symbolism into the text of Scripture where there's little justification for its presence. Intentional symbolism is present in the Bible, but it isn't as widespread as some might expect. What is more, whenever figures of speech are recognized in the Bible, you should always look for the literal intent behind the non-literal terminology. For instance, if on a hot and humid day we say that it's "soupy" outside, our intended audience should understand that we're referring to the oppressive humidity in the air, and we as communicators expect that *intended* response. We'd be quite surprised if people thought we were referring to clam chowder or chicken noodles floating around the atmosphere, and we certainly wouldn't want to be accused of being misleading through the use of our non-literal terminology! Likewise, the authors of the Bible frequently use non-literal terminology to convey literal intention, and in most cases this intended meaning is quite obvious. So the literal principle acknowledges rhetorical imagery and figurative language but understands that these are based in literal intent.

It should also be noted that the literal principle assumes the pre-eminence of authorial intent in the interpretation and application of any given text of Scripture. As to interpretation, this suggests that *the meaning of the text must be the meaning intended by the original human author by the words he used to communicate to his original recipients*. As to application, this means that *the text cannot mean today what was never intended by the original author*. Obviously, the issue of meaning is much

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2. A sampling of various kinds of figures of speech will be covered in chapter 5.

more complicated than we can discuss here.<sup>3</sup> It's worth noting, though, that when we speak of an author's intention in the unique case of the Bible, we're dealing with the dynamic of dual authorship between a human and the divine author, a dynamic that shouldn't be ignored in discussions of the intended meaning of Scripture.

## *#2 The Contextual Principle*

Concerning accurate interpretation, perhaps the most important principle to remember is the contextual principle. The contextual principle simply affirms that the text of any portion of Scripture must always be understood within the confines of its historical-cultural, literary, and theological-canonical context.

*The Historical-Cultural Context.* The historical-cultural context of any given portion of Scripture relates directly to its position as a historical document rooted within the drama of human history. Some may refer to this kind of context as "background context," but this terminology is unnecessarily vague. We find that it's better to specify the two primary aspects in view here: the historical and the cultural background of the text, noting, of course, that these often function in tandem.

Because the Bible was written by real human authors in the context of history, most of the Bible is set within the context of historical events. This may involve the chronological context of events described in narrative or the socio-political context in which the prophets spoke their oracles from God. In many cases, specific books of the Bible can be labeled as "occasional documents," meaning that their composition was required by an event or situation set in history.<sup>4</sup> Of particular importance is the fact that the purpose for which an author wrote was usually dictated by

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3. For a thorough treatment, see Appendices 1 and 2 in Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).

4. Fee and Stuart label the New Testament epistles as "occasional documents," although to varying degrees this "occasional" nature can be seen in the origin and composition of virtually all the books of the Bible. See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 60.

events set in the context of history, and grasping this purpose involves the interpreter in the discovery of essential historical facts.

Historical context functions on two levels: the events described in Scripture and the origin of the text itself, including author and audience. This two-level dynamic with regard to historical context can be tricky for those new to reading the Bible, but it's an important aspect of understanding the Bible contextually.<sup>5</sup>

Culture is influenced by many variables, not the least of which is historical timeframe, which is why we combine cultural with historical context. That said, cultural context is a distinct aspect of background and presents some of the more egregious opportunities for misinterpreting Scripture. As noted in chapter 1, the events portrayed in the Bible represent cultural contexts far removed from our own. The reader of Scripture is exposed to a broad array of ancient cultures, and cultural mores and expressions vary throughout the Bible. Nevertheless, in spite of the challenge of cultural particularities, accurate interpretation and appropriate application can ensue when we immerse ourselves in the study of the culture of the biblical text.

*The Literary Context.* There are two primary facets of literary context, both involving the form and function of written communication. The first facet of literary context has been variously described as “surrounding context,” “grammatical/syntactical context,” or “co-text.” Whatever term you use, this facet of literary context deals with the meaning of words and phrases and is what most people think of when they hear the word “context.” Simply put, words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs may have multiple meanings, and these are almost always determined by what precedes and follows. *The ideas that precede and follow any given portion of Scripture constitute the context of that unit.* Because thoughts are typically expressed in association rather than isolation, the context of a passage always determines the meaning of a given word. Practically speaking, when studying the meaning of a particular word in the Bible, *contextual* meaning (i.e., what a word means

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5. The significance of this insight, along with other features pertaining to historical context, will be addressed in greater detail in chapter 8, “Considering the Context.”

in conjunction with adjacent words and phrases) will always take precedence over *lexical* meaning (i.e., a mere dictionary definition of a word apart from a specific context).<sup>6</sup>

The second facet of literary context pertains to the *literary genre* or *subgenre* of any given portion of Scripture. The Bible is a rather complex book, not only in its content but also with regard to the form in which its contents are conveyed. God chose to inspire his Word as a literary masterpiece containing a great variety of literary styles. In order to interpret and apply the Bible accurately, we must learn to recognize the various forms of literature in the Bible and become conversant with the genre-specific interpretive principles related to each. As a sampling, in the Old Testament we encounter narrative discourse, law code, poetic stanzas, proverbs and sayings, prophetic oracles, and apocalyptic visions. In the New Testament we find gospel narratives, personal and corporate letters (epistles), and the apocalypse of Revelation.<sup>7</sup>

To further heighten the challenge of reading the Bible contextually, each literary genre (macro-level) contains several subgenres (micro-level). For instance, in a prophetic book you might encounter apocalyptic visions, autobiographical narrative, historical narrative, prophetic drama, hymns, allegory, judgment speeches, woe speeches, salvation oracles, lamentation, or instructional discourse. In the New Testament Gospels you might find narrative discourse, commentary, genealogies, hymns, parables, sermons, woe speeches, or allegory. Virtually every book of the Bible exhibits a diverse array of literary subgenres, and reading contextually requires an ability to discern the form and features distinguishing each literary unit while appreciating the unique message distinct literary subgenres may convey.

*The Theological-Canonical Context.* A form of context that is often misunderstood, or simply ignored, by readers of the Bible is the theological-canonical context of a given portion of Scripture. Again, we're

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6. An understanding of this principle applied to word studies is absolutely essential and will govern our treatment of word studies in chapter 10.

7. For detailed discussions of the interpretation of various subgenres in Scripture, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).

combining two distinct but related aspects of context, the theological and the canonical context of Scripture. *Theological* context tends to emphasize the covenant relationship that God has with his people and the representation of that relationship in the progression of salvation history. Of primary concern are the expectations and requirements presented in Scripture as distinguished by various covenants, including the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants. We should expect that activities, commandments, and prophetic promises in Scripture are aligned with the covenant to which they are related.

To provide but one example, reading the Mosaic law code you should recognize that the law functioned quite differently for the ancient Israelite than it does for the New Testament Christian and that this is based not simply on ethnic, cultural, and chronological distinctions but, more importantly, on distinctions between the respective covenant. Simply put, it's not just that we aren't ancient Israelites living in an ancient Near Eastern context. More significantly, we live under a different *covenant*, complete with expectations and promises that are different from theirs. For this reason, as those who interpret and apply Scripture, we must always be mindful of the underlying covenant anchors that form the theological context of a given portion of Scripture.

*Canonical* context concerns not just the place in the timetable of revelation in which a biblical writer lived or wrote but also the way in which individual books of the Bible function together to form one comprehensive book. The cohesion of Scripture is a matter that we'll address particularly in chapters 11 and 15, as well as the implications of reading the sixty-six books of the Bible as a single book. For now, suffice it to say that surrounding context is not limited to words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. In a different sense, in a way that is unique to the Bible, we must *consider the context of a book of Scripture within the entire scope of God's revelation*, that is, its canonical context.

The contextual principle is obviously complex yet utterly essential. As we learn to observe, interpret, apply, and systematize the teaching of Scripture, we'll refer to the various kinds of context again and again. We'll provide many examples in the chapters to come as we seek to

implement this principle in the steps of the inductive method. For now, let's continue with our survey of guiding principles.

### *#3 The One-Meaning Principle*

The one-meaning principle is a general guideline teaching that any given portion of Scripture in any given context can have only one correct interpretation, although it may have multiple (yet not unlimited) applications. In other words, if faced with a choice between potential interpretations of a specific text, the one-meaning principle would suggest that multiple options, especially if mutually exclusive, cannot all be correct. For instance, regarding the interpretation of the “perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:10, there are three or four common approaches. Some suggest that Paul was referring to the completion of the New Testament or the recognition of the completed canon. Others (especially those with a postmillennial perspective) conclude that Paul had in mind the second coming of Christ or the perfection of the church leading up to that point. Still others believe that “perfect” refers to the culmination of human history in the new heavens and new earth. The one-meaning principle suggests that Paul couldn't have meant *all* of these things when anticipating the coming of the “perfect.” Either *one* of these options is *correct*, and the *others* are *wrong*, or they're *all incorrect*, but they *can't all be correct at the same time*. Paul could have nuanced intentions, especially given his use of a rather vague term in this case, but he most likely had one event, or one future reality, in mind. Thus the one-meaning principle is predicated upon a certain amount of evidence-orientation in interpretation. You can't simply “will” the Bible to mean whatever you want it to mean, and interpretations can, and often will, be incorrect.

The one-meaning principle, like many others, has its basis in authorial intent.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that because of the dual nature of inspired authorship (human and divine), there may be exceptions to this rule. Some texts, especially those of a prophetic nature, are pregnant

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8. See here especially the classic work by E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967). Hirsch rightly argues that apart from authorial intent validity in interpretation proves elusive.



with meaning, and many scholars recognize the phenomenon of *sensus plenior*, or “fuller sense,” in prophetic fulfillment.<sup>9</sup> In fact, as Old Testament prophecy is cited as “fulfilled” by New Testament writers, the fulfillment often seems quite distant from the Old Testament context of the prophecy. In the realm of hermeneutics, one of the most challenging subjects for modern interpreters is the role of apostolic exegesis as the biblical writers quoted the Old Testament in the New Testament Gospels and Epistles.<sup>10</sup> What we’re stressing at this point is one potential shortcoming of the one-meaning principle. Again, this is a general rule, not an irrefutable law.

A second potential shortcoming of the one-meaning principle comes as the byproduct of the inherent flexibility of metaphor. In this case, a human author can intend to convey multiple, often overlapping concepts through the use of metaphor.<sup>11</sup> For instance, when the psalmist describes God as a “rock,” we understand that the intention is not to describe God as a literal rock or geological structure of any kind but to highlight some aspect of God’s character that is “rock-like.” Thus the psalmist may highlight God as a strong and sure foundation, as a stable and everlasting entity.<sup>12</sup> But at the same time, you should exercise caution, as it’s quite unlikely that the psalmist intended to describe God as dense, heavy, or abrasive. Metaphor is a complex aspect of human language that has the capacity to communicate multiple strains of thought. This capacity is evidenced throughout Scripture, and in some cases an

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9. For a sensible assessment, see Douglas J. Moo, “The Problem of Sensus Plenior,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 175–211.

10. To examine this topic adequately would require a volume of its own; we’ll briefly discuss this topic in chapter 6 and cite resources for further study there. The standard reference work is G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

11. On the inherent, intentional flexibility of metaphor to communicate multiple ideas with singular concision, see D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

12. See also the conundrum of 1 Cor 10:4, where Paul depicts Jesus as the rock in the wilderness during Israel’s exodus wanderings.

appreciation of such nuances is critical to accurate interpretation.<sup>13</sup> That said, it's nonetheless wise to embrace the guidance of the one-meaning principle while remaining open to possible exceptions such as those just described.

#### *#4 The Exegetical Principle*

The exegetical principle teaches that the meaning of any biblical text must be drawn *from* the text rather than be ascribed *to* the text. In other words, the reader is responsible to discover the intent of the author *in* the text rather than imposing her understanding *onto* the text. Often readers approach the Bible with an agenda, using it to support various doctrines (whether orthodox or heretical), proof texting along the way. Others will use the Bible as a springboard for various points of interest, focusing on an aspect of the text without asking what the author was really trying to say in the original context. The exegetical principle suggests that a better way to read Scripture is to approach it on its own terms and to allow it to speak for itself. It's this exegetical principle that provides the proper foundation for the inductive method of Bible study.

The reader of the Bible will always bring a certain prior understanding (also called “preunderstanding”) and set of presuppositions to the text. While this is inevitable, the interpreter of Scripture must constantly be on guard against allowing preunderstanding to dictate her understanding of the text. Preunderstanding refers to “all of our preconceived notions and understandings that we bring to the text, which have been formulated, both consciously and subconsciously, before we actually

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13. An example of intentional multivalence is the use of the key Hebrew word *hevel* in the book of Ecclesiastes. This word occurs some 38 times and is critical in understanding the problem, and ultimately the message, of the book. The word literally means “mist” or “vapor” but is used metaphorically throughout the book to describe various aspects of life experienced in a fallen world. Translations will often use a single English gloss to translate the word throughout the book, but this approach fails to recognize the breadth of meaning conveyed through this symbol. The NET Bible does an admirable job in translating the word through a variety of associated glosses that best capture the aspect of meaning that is highlighted passage by passage throughout the book. For more on this example, and multivalence in general, see Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); and Richard Alan Fuhr Jr., *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs within the Book of Qohelet*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 151 (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 29–63.

study the text in detail.”<sup>14</sup> Preunderstanding won’t always lead you astray, but it certainly has the potential to skew your understanding of the text and can at times lead to grievous examples of misinterpretation. Following the exegetical principle doesn’t demand the elimination of all preunderstanding but encourages *awareness* of preunderstanding to help ensure that it doesn’t unduly influence our interpretation of the biblical text.

Presuppositions, as distinguished from preunderstanding, relate to our view of the Bible as a whole. In other words, presuppositions such as the inerrancy, infallibility, and authority of Scripture provide a needed foundation for the whole process of Bible study and thus are a positive influence on our understanding of the text. Obviously, all of us will approach the Bible with certain presuppositions, whether faith-based or critical. We’d encourage you toward a faith-based approach; in fact, this is the approach we take in this text. We believe in the integrity of the biblical text and approach it as the Word of God. Faith-based presuppositions do not need to be suppressed in your study of Scripture. Rather, we suggest you embrace them.

### *#5 The Linguistic Principle*

The linguistic principle teaches that the original languages of the Bible must take precedence over any given translation. While today’s English translations are both accurate and readable, some facets are nonetheless difficult to capture and retain in the translation process. No two languages are alike in terms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, and thus the most precise exegetical interpretation of any given text will be drawn from the text in its original language. For example, the phrase “husband of one wife” in 1 Timothy 3:2 means most likely “faithful husband,” that is, “one-woman-kind-of-man.” This is an example where

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14. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 139. We’re using the terminology adopted by Duvall and Hays in distinguishing between preunderstanding and presuppositions.

a given idiom in the original Greek cannot be brought over into the English language in a formally equivalent way.

What is more, all translations will inevitably demonstrate exegetical decision making as part of the translation process. This is not a matter of bias but of necessity. Translation invariably crosses into interpretation as translators are faced again and again with decisions regarding what the original language meant as they seek to convey equivalent meaning into the receptor language (in our case, English). Many incorrectly assume that this can be resolved by sticking to a literal theory of translation, but even a literal or word-for-word approach to translation will by necessity face interpretive decisions, as no two languages align precisely in terms of vocabulary, grammar, or syntax.

The interpretive nature of translation will be thoroughly illustrated in the next chapter, where we will set forth guidelines that will help you discern exegetical decision making in the translations you use. At this point, we're simply stressing the fact that translations may at times be unable to convey certain nuances found in the original languages. You should therefore be aware that when you read the Bible in translation some aspect of meaning may be lost or potentially distorted over against the original wording.

## *#6 The Progressive Principle*

This principle deals with the progressive nature of revelation.<sup>15</sup> God didn't reveal his Word to humanity all at once, nor has he set forth the same conditions for humankind throughout history. Therefore, some of his later revelation may supersede former stipulations, as later information may complete or clarify what was given earlier. It should be noted, however, that a change or progression in Scripture doesn't imply that a contradiction is present. Rather, as you examine the audience, circumstances, and covenantal context of two allegedly contradictory

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15. By using the term "progressive," we are not intending to convey linear, progressive trajectory culminating in an ideal conclusion. God's revelatory interaction with humankind is often characterized by cyclical movement, as demonstrated by recurring yet unique dietary restrictions in the example relating to food laws.

commandments or statements in Scripture, you'll find that God isn't obligated to work in static fashion as he engages with humanity through an ever-changing set of circumstances.

Examples of the progressive principle are abundant in Scripture, especially between the Testaments but sometimes within the same Testament. For instance, relating to food laws, in Genesis 1:29 it appears that mankind was created vegetarian. Then, after Noah's flood, humanity is given "every living creature" as food to eat, in addition to "green plants" (Gen 9:3). With the institution of the Mosaic law, God gave ancient Israel stringent regulations forbidding them from eating certain foods (Leviticus 11), while Jesus rescinded these food laws for his followers (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:9–16). Some may claim that we aren't comparing apples with apples here and that the contexts are quite distinct, but that is exactly the point: the progressive nature of Scripture demands that we be aware of contextual movement in the pages of the Bible.

The progressive principle has clear similarities to theological and canonical context as described above. The difference is that here we're concerned not only with movement between different covenants (theological context) and individual books within a broader corpus (canonical context) but also with revelation history. The biblical text comes out of the interface of God and humanity, which took place over time. We shouldn't read Scripture as if it was revealed apart from the progression of history.

### *#7 The Harmony Principle*

The harmony principle teaches that any given portion of the Bible can have only that meaning which harmonizes with the doctrine of the Bible as a whole. This is a safeguard and thus presupposes that the Bible won't contradict itself. We wouldn't surmise that a single author would contradict himself in one and the same book. However, the harmony principle extends to the whole corpus of Scripture based on the premise that ultimately God is its single author. The harmony principle suggests that there will be continuity *between* individual books of the Bible, even

as these books may in some cases be quite distant in terms of origin, context, content, and genre.

This underlying notion of harmony or unity allows for a certain amount of diversity in the way in which the various authors of Scripture express themselves. The human side of Scripture displays the unique vocabulary, style, and perspective of a given biblical author. For example, while the four Evangelists (especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record many of the same events, how they tell a particular story may vary. Likewise, what Paul and James say about the role of works in the Christian life reveals a certain amount of diversity of outlook. At the same time, such diversity, as mentioned, should be understood against the backdrop of the Bible's underlying unity.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us to a second aspect of the harmony principle: the fact that the individual parts of the Bible can and should be understood in light of the whole. The harmony principle provides the philosophical basis for interpretive correlation, which we'll examine in greater detail in chapter 9. Comparing Scripture with Scripture is especially useful when conducted within the same book, but given divine authorship and the resulting unity of Scripture, you should expect continuity *between* books of the Bible, not just *within* them.<sup>17</sup> For this reason you can expect to gain insight as to the parts by comparing them to the whole, and in this way the Bible functions as its own best commentary.

While the seven principles stated above provide sure guidance for the reading of Scripture, there remains a need for a methodical approach to studying the Bible that those with varying levels of expertise and experience can embrace and utilize. This brings us to the place of examining method, which represents our core interest in this book. Rather than examining methods (in the plural) of Bible study, whether rhetorical,

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16. For an example of such underlying unity in the face of diversity, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Does the Bible Ever Get It Wrong? Facing Scripture's Difficult Passages," *Canon Fodder* (blog), September 15, 2014, <http://michaeljkruger.com/does-the-bible-ever-get-it-wrong-facing-scriptures-difficult-passages-4-andreas-kostenberger>. See also idem, "Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 200–23.

17. As we will examine in chapter 9, the benefits of interpretive correlation diminish with literary and canonical distance, but the general continuity of the inspired Word of God does help in maintaining the integrity of this practice throughout both Testaments.

critical, topical, or devotional, we're interested in examining and presenting a comprehensive method (in the singular) comprised of logical steps and linear progression toward the goal of understanding Scripture. This is the *inductive method* of Bible study.

## Induction v. Deduction

Without getting bogged down in the theoretical, it's important at this point to consider the merits of *inductive*, or evidence-based, study vis-à-vis *deductive*, or assumption-based, study. In so doing, it's vital to understand that we're weighing the merits of a system appropriate for Bible study, not other fields such as logic or mathematics. In other words, certain closed-system fields are appropriate to deductive reasoning because one begins with absolute premises and from these moves on to equally certain conclusions. However, in the study of the Bible, as with the study of history and literature, we're faced with open options for interpretation and appropriation.

As those who accept the Bible as communication authored by human intent under divine oversight, we make it our goal to discover what the *author intended* to say through the text we read. Deduction is not inferior or negative in and of itself, but for those who seek to discover what the Bible means, an assumption-oriented approach to the meaning of individual texts is counterproductive and impedes discovery. Induction, on the other hand, is more suitable to the study of the Bible because you compile the evidence and then, proceeding from your analysis of the evidence, reach probable, albeit at times tentative, conclusions.

With an *inductive* approach to Bible study, you explore the Bible and arrive at conclusions only once you've compiled all the evidence. The process of compiling evidence, ascertaining the significance of strains of evidence, and arriving at conclusions comprises the essence of the inductive method. Induction is discovery, and we believe that approaching the Bible with an attitude of seeking to discover the meaning of the text is most compatible with the Bible as intentional communication from God to us. Thus an attitude of discovery, coupled with a process for

implementing the discovery of meaning, drives us toward the inductive method for Bible study.

With a *deductive* approach to Bible study, on the other hand, you begin with certain assumptions or beliefs and allow the Bible only room to support those assumptions or beliefs. What’s more, for some taking a more active role in proof texting, a deductive approach facilitates turning to the Bible only to find support for their own belief system. This, in turn, leads to a tendency to read into the text affirmations never intended by the original author. A deductive approach often presupposes conclusions before the evidence is gathered and fails to ask the critical questions pertaining to what the author intended to say through the text being studied.

Table 2.2 — Understanding the Differences between Deduction and Induction	
Deduction	Induction
Assumption based	Evidence based
Moves from universals to particulars	Moves from particulars to universals
Begins with absolute premises and derives certain conclusions	Pieces the data together to derive meaning

Three additional considerations apply as we weigh the merits of induction over deduction and set out to assess the viability of the inductive method. First, as we pointed out in our discussion of the exegetical principle, all of us will invariably carry *preunderstanding* with us as we study the Bible.<sup>18</sup> The goal, however, is not to eliminate all preunderstanding, which would be impossible, and even if possible would ultimately be counterproductive. In fact, an inductive approach will benefit from prior study, utilizing biblical and theological literacy as an aid to enhance and inform current research. However, while benefiting from prior knowledge, an inductive approach doesn’t allow assumptions based

18. For a helpful treatment of preunderstanding, see “Chapter 5: The Interpreter” in William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).



on *prior* conclusions to dictate the results of *present and future* study. Induction, therefore, encourages awareness of the potential impact of preunderstanding but doesn't compel you to eliminate it altogether.

Second, realize that the conclusions reached through an inductive approach are by nature *probable* and not absolute. Even so, we believe that you can reach firm interpretive conclusions, and that you can approach the text with confidence, expecting to be able to understand its meaning. After all, as we affirmed in chapter 1, the Bible is *meant* to be understood. The Bible can be understood in reference to individual segments as well as regarding its message as a whole. Nevertheless, in an open-ended system of communication where authors can't be interviewed as to their actual intentions, we're of necessity dealing with probable, rather than proven, conclusions.

This principle of probability, however, shouldn't be cause for concern or discouragement.<sup>19</sup> Supported by sound principles of hermeneutics and a methodical approach for study, you'll be able to reach most interpretive conclusions with a *high degree* of certainty, and those findings that are more tentative tend to be the exception rather than the rule. We trust that practitioners of the inductive method will be able to approach Scripture with confidence, knowing that they've taken measures to study the text with informed guidance and a thorough process while at the same time remaining humble, knowing that induction by its very nature demands that we remain open to wherever the evidence may lead.

Finally, let's clarify (or perhaps confess) that while we believe that the inductive method is the best comprehensive approach for the study of the Bible, this is not to suggest that we're purists and never apply deductive reasoning to our study of Scripture. Certainly, as we develop and teach systematic theology, deduction is often evident in the presentation, if not the development, of our theological system. And as we trace our own personal histories of preaching, teaching, and writing, we're quite certain that there are cases where we, too, have not allowed the Bible to speak for itself, where we have imposed our own understanding upon the text before discovering its meaning through the process of inductive

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19. Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 26.

study. Nevertheless, we're convinced that induction, as a driving force in Bible study, is superior to deduction and can produce more accurate and reliable results.<sup>20</sup>

## What Does the Inductive Method Look Like?

Although the inductive method has taken on different forms and representations in recent years, we're presenting a traditional three-step framework: observation, interpretation, and application.<sup>21</sup> This basic framework is strikingly simple yet has the capacity to integrate very complex procedures for those more advanced in their studies. This is part of the beauty and utility of the inductive method. At its core, it is a very simple procedure that all interpreters can adopt. Even so, scholars will employ the same methodology to conduct the most advanced exegetical work. Our presentation aims somewhere in the middle, with enough solid food to keep advanced students fed while encouraging those new to inductive study with simple, step-by-step procedures that provide a workable platform for future development.

The inductive method begins with *observation*, transitions to *interpretation*, and concludes with *application*. Within each of these primary steps of induction are distinct activities (or steps within steps) that conduct the implementation and control the process of moving from observation through interpretation and finally onto application. There will inevitably be movement back and forth between these steps, but the general flow will be linear, moving from observation to interpretation and then on to application. Implicit in interpretation and application is *correlation*, the comparison of an interpreted text with other related texts. That's why we conclude our presentation of the inductive method by teaching students how to go about *doing theology*. Following is an outline of the three basic steps of the inductive method, along with

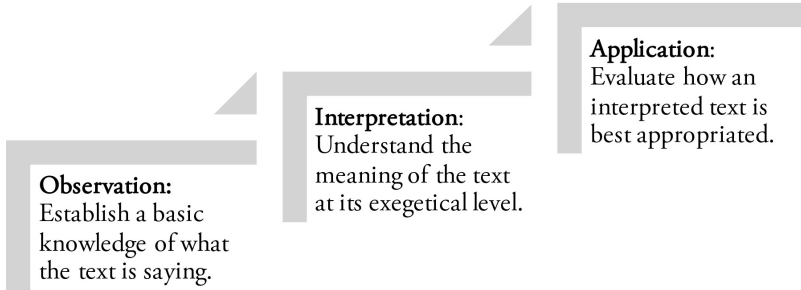
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20. Proof texting of this kind often lies behind the theology of groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, deductive proof texting has been used to support many strains of theology, both good and bad. Evangelicals should carefully consider examples of proof texting in their own circles, not just from those with whom they disagree.

21. Alternative approaches include that of the "interpretive journey" in Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*.

subcategories (or steps within steps) that we'll detail in the remaining chapters of this book.

**Figure 2.1: The Inductive Method**



### *Observation*

Observation seeks to establish a foundational knowledge of what the text is saying and to discern those issues that may warrant focused study. Good observation is by nature inquisitive and will result in the right questions being asked of the text. When performed thoroughly, observation will ensure that all the pieces of the text are laid out on the table before the reader. Observation may not put all the pieces together, but that is not the goal of observation. Simply put, good observation will ensure that all the pieces are available.

Observation includes methodical, step-by-step activities such as comparing translations (a helpful tool even for those capable of working with the original languages, chapter 3), distinguishing significant or nonroutine terms from self-evident or routine ones (identifying words and phrases that warrant word study, chapter 5), observing miscellaneous features in prose and poetic literature (chapter 6), and discerning special structural and literary relationships in the text (chapter 7). Permeating all steps of observation is an inquisitive agenda, extracting and developing those questions which form the basis for the interpretation of the text (chapter 4).

## *Interpretation*

Interpretation seeks to understand the meaning of the text at its exegetical level, that is, what the text was intended to convey by its original author to his original audience. Interpretation develops as interpretive questions are answered, and thus thorough interpretation is possible only once the process of observation is completed. Observation will doubtless contribute to interpretation, sometimes answering interpretive questions without need for further research. However, many interpretive questions do require additional research, sometimes in the text itself and sometimes through outside resources.

The steps of interpretation can be summarized by the three Cs of interpretation: considering the *context* (chapter 8), conducting interpretive and thematic *correlation* (chapters 9 and 11), and doing commentary *consultation* (chapter 12). In considering the *context*, multiple aspects are in play, including those presented earlier under the “contextual principle.” In our case, we’ll utilize the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology to establish aspects of context that reflect these three areas of biblical interpretation.

Interpretive *correlation* involves allowing the Bible to function as its own best commentary through linguistic, grammatical, literary, and topical parallels. Also, in reference to significant, nonroutine terms, word studies may be warranted as a further step of interpretation. Conducting word studies allows students to analyze and interpret specific word meaning through the assimilation of context and interpretive correlation (chapter 10). Finally, as an interpreter you’ll take advantage of prior scholarship and research by *consulting* Bible study tools and resources, including commentaries. However, in an inductive approach, we don’t simply rely on commentaries but rather engage with them to gain relevant insights and find answers to questions which would otherwise be left unanswered.

## *Application*

Application is a multifaceted step based on the idea that the Word of God is eternally relevant, speaking not just to an ancient audience but to a contemporary one as well. However, the contemporary audience is quite different from the original one and is itself quite varied. Thus application is more involved than simply putting knowledge into practice. Application must evaluate *how* an interpreted text is best appropriated, and sometimes the distance between interpretation in the “then and there” and application in the “here and now” requires careful nuancing and keen discernment.<sup>22</sup>

Application is not merely subjective, as valid application must have its basis in an accurate interpretation of the text. Nevertheless, some of the more significant challenges in Bible study pertain not to interpretation but rather to application. To use an earlier example, it’s one thing to figure out what Paul meant when he told the church at Corinth to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (1 Cor 16:20), but it’s quite another to determine how this should be applied today, and determining this relies significantly upon a good dose of “sanctified common sense.”<sup>23</sup>

Application begins by finding sensible parallels between interpretation and application, and thus interpretation must precede application. (This may seem obvious, but how often does the tail wag the dog and we start with application?) Usually we can frame sensible parallels around teaching points and from them apply Scripture. However, in the process of developing such teaching points, whether for personal or public presentation, application must be processed through two levels of reading Scripture as the Word of God for today.

First, we must determine what the text might mean to *us* today as the people of God. This form of application is critical, as theological distance may affect how we should apply the text today. At this stage

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22. Fee and Stuart have an excellent discussion on the distance between the “then and there” and the “here and now” in application. However, they apply their discussion to the New Testament epistles, and we would suggest that these challenges apply just as well to the rest of the Bible. See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 27, 74–90.

23. Fee and Stuart (*ibid.*, 75–76) refer to a “commonsense hermeneutics” and the role of “common sense” in the task of application. We would suggest a better term is “sanctified common sense,” considering the role of the Holy Spirit in the appropriation of God’s Word.

we must evaluate the text's relevance for application in the "here and now," considering issues of cultural relativity and normalcy, along with literary dimension and theological discontinuity. These matters are often ignored by purely devotional approaches to application, but are vitally important.

Second, as believers seeking to appropriate Scripture personally and individually, we must determine what the text means for *me* today, applying Scripture in an introspective, devotional way. It's at this point that the role of the Holy Spirit is seen in application, as the Word of God speaks directly to the heart of the individual (Heb 4:12).

Finally, correlation seeks to systematize the teachings of the Bible based on an accurate interpretation of the parts. This is essentially what it means to "do" theology, whether biblical or systematic.<sup>24</sup> Correlation also involves distilling themes and motifs for topical study, resulting in a practical theology for the church. Correlation is ultimately what helps us understand Scripture as part of a lifelong course of study.

## Five Reasons for Inductive Bible Study

We've provided a rationale for why induction is a more desirable approach to Bible study than deduction. We've also sought to describe, in summary form, the basic steps of the inductive method. However, we'd like to conclude this chapter by highlighting five reasons why the inductive method has inherent value and practical benefit for those who learn it and put it into practice.

First, the inductive method is a process for Bible study that finds its basis in principle, namely, the *exegetical principle*. While there's a pragmatic element to certain aspects of the inductive method, it is not devoid of principle. The inductive *method* begins with an inductive *attitude*, one driven to discover the intended meaning of the Word of God.<sup>25</sup> In principle, there's no higher calling in the world of communication. The inductive method is a process born out of principle.

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24. Although we will argue in chapter 15 that an inductive approach better supports biblical theology.

25. Bauer and Traina refer to this as the "inductive spirit" (*Inductive Bible Study*, 18).

Second, the inductive method is a process that benefits from *order* yet also encourages *flexibility* and recognizes the dynamic integration between steps. While the inductive method is typically presented in terms of sequential steps, these steps are integrated in a cyclical fashion as well as a linear one. In other words, while it's important to compile the evidence inductively through observation before moving to interpretation, one can't help but draw interpretive inferences during the process of observation. In addition, asking interpretive questions breeds an inquisitive spirit even before research ensues. Also, as we move through the various steps of interpretation, it's only natural to continue to observe the text, and application sometimes poses new questions that have a bearing on the interpretation of the text. Correlation, for its part, can be oriented toward the interpretation of individual texts, as Scripture functions as its own best commentary. At the same time, correlation can also develop out of the comparative analysis of interpreted parts. The balance between order and flexibility is helpful, providing direction and movement toward a goal while allowing for revision and refinement throughout the process.

Third, the inductive method is a *personal* approach that can be adapted to fit the student of Scripture wherever she is in her pursuit of biblical literacy. Whether she is completely new to the Bible or seasoned by decades of exposure, she can implement the inductive method at any stage in the journey. Some of you reading this book will find that you've been practicing aspects of the inductive method all along, while others may find that it's completely revolutionary to your reading of Scripture. Wherever you may fit into that equation, we're sure that the inductive method will take you to the next level in your personal Bible study.

Fourth, such an approach is *practical*, allowing shortcuts as time constraints may demand. The inductive method is more than just a set of principles guiding our thinking through Scripture; it's also a flexible and adaptable process. You'll be able to perform many of the steps described in the following chapters in abbreviated form, especially once you've grasped the essentials. So whether reading a devotion at the breakfast table or preparing next week's sermon at the office, you'll be able to

adapt the steps of the inductive method to fit your specific needs and time constraints.

Fifth, the inductive method is *beneficial* in that it encourages the development of your own Bible study skills. The inductive method truly prepares you to study the Bible on your own. But this is not to suggest that you abandon all forms of consultation in practicing the inductive method. In fact, the inductive method encourages consultation while also equipping you to be more discerning in how to use sources. It even prepares you to disagree with the conclusions of others when the evidence doesn't support those conclusions.

Evangelical Christianity touts the merits of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), and in fact, given the history of the church over the past 2,000 years, the opportunity for individual Christians to study the Bible for themselves and to arrive at their own conclusions is something we should never take for granted. However, while affirming the opportunity for self-directed study and individual conclusions, most evangelical churches haven't done particularly well in equipping God's people to study his Word. It's our hope and prayer that this text will find a welcome home with college students, seminarians, pastors, and laypeople alike who would like to learn to study the Bible for themselves.

Finally, while methodology, outlined in the principles in the previous pages, is very important, we're not just developing a *method*; we're developing a *person*. Bible study is more than simply following a series of steps; it involves growth on the part of the interpreter in developing certain interpretive habits, or virtues, such as historical-cultural awareness, canonical consciousness, linguistic and literary competence, sensitivity to genre, a growing grasp of biblical theology, and an ability to apply the insights gained from the inductive study of Scripture to one's own life and to share them with others.<sup>26</sup> If we master the essence of the inductive method and in so doing grow in our pursuit of these interpretive virtues, we'll be well on our way to hearing God's "Well done, good and faithful servant," with regard to our study of Scripture.

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26. See Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 80.