

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your new bride through a veil. —Haim Nachman Bialik

How to Read and Study the Old Testament, Part 2

INTRODUCTION: Bridging the Gaps

Studying the Old Testament can be exciting and greatly beneficial to the Christian. However, the *act* of reading and studying is not a magic formula that creates these benefits. Rather, studying is the road we take—albeit the winding, bumpy, sometimes seemingly un-navigable road—that leads to proper interpretation. Only when one understands the intended *meaning* of a passage and how it applies in their own life will these benefits be rewarded.

Standing in the middle of this road are five gaps that must be bridged so that we may reach a proper interpretation of an Old Testament text. These gaps are:

1. The Language Gap
2. The Geography Gap
3. The Cultural Gap
4. The Historical Gap
5. The Literary Gap

GAP # 1: The LANGUAGE Gap

Despite how our Bibles read, the Old Testament was not written in English! Rather, they were originally penned in two different languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. This creates a language gap we must cross:

- Hebrew and Aramaic *sound* different from English
- Hebrew and Aramaic *look* different from English
- Hebrew and Aramaic grammar *function* differently from English grammar
- Hebrew and Aramaic are virtually *unrelated* to English
- Hebrew and Aramaic are *ancient* in comparison to English

*****So what do you do if you don't know Hebrew?*****

The good news is that the Lord has provided people who have dedicated their lives to learning Hebrew and translating the Old Testament into your language. They have done the leg work!

But, that doesn't mean your work is done! You benefit from the fruit of their work, but you can still learn some of what they do so that you can be more independent in your study. The question becomes, How independent can you be?

- Read multiple Bible translations
- Listen to good sermons and preachers
- Read good commentaries
- Ask a pastor for clarification or help
- Pick up some introductory language tools (i.e., theological dictionary)
- Learn Hebrew!!!

However, for the sake of pulling back the curtain, the following discussion is a window into some of the decisions that Hebrew scholars, translators, and pastors make in order to come to an accurate understanding of the meaning of a passage.

Word Meaning and Context

Words are the smallest unit of language and they serve as building blocks. How they are arranged together into phrases, clauses, and sentences, and how the syntax and grammar of the language works, determines how these words interact with each other to communicate meaning.

Words have backgrounds. They had to start *somewhere*. Just like our English word “dynamite” originates from the Greek word *δύναμις* (*dynamis*, meaning “might” or “power”), so Hebrew words have an origin.

But we must be careful that we don't assume that any particular word carries the same meaning it did when it was first used. Meaning changes over time. So translators have to determine by the context how a particular word is being.

Words also can have a range of meanings. Our English word “trunk” is a clear example. How many different meanings does this word have? Moreover, how does one determine which meaning is intended?

Even though words are important, their meaning must be derived from the context, not from the word itself. Take this passage as an example:

1 Samuel 15:22–23 Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the

sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king.

We learn far more about obedience/disobedience or sacrifice and sin from the full statement of this passage than we do by simply studying individual words like “sacrifice,” “obey,” and “sin.” That’s because **context** ultimately determines meaning, not the words themselves.

Verbs and Grammar

Verbs are at the heart of every language. If you want to communicate well in English, you need to understand how to utilize verbs. If you want to understand the Old Testament, you need to learn a little bit about how verbs work in Hebrew.

Here we see the nuances of Hebrew surface. Hebrew verbs come in two forms, the **perfect** and the **imperfect**.

Perfect verbs focus on action in its totality

Imperfect verbs are concerned with the internal workings of the action

In the following passage, both forms appear, but they artfully and purposefully employed to enhance the drama of the event:

Judges 5:26 She reached out [*imperfect*] her hand for the tent peg, and her right hand for the workmen’s hammer. Then she struck [*perfect*] Sisera, she smashed [*perfect*] his head; and she shattered [*perfect*] and pierced [*perfect*] his temple.

The writer uses the **imperfect** verb takes us into the action step by step, showing us the progress of the action. Then, the writer switches to **perfect** verbs for the remainder of the scene to simply state the fact of their occurrence, without focusing on their actual process.

Consider a second passage:

Psalms 1:1-2 How blessed is the man who does not walk [*perfect*] in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand [*perfect*] in the path of sinners, nor sit [*perfect*] in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates [*imperfect*] day and night.

*****Why would the psalmist use perfects for the three verbs in verse 1 while employing the imperfect verb for verse 2?*****

Many preachers and commentators spend an inordinate amount of time talking about what it means to “walk,” “stand,” and “sit” with wicked, scoffing sinners. Many identify a progression in these verbs, starting with mere association (standing) to intimate fellowship (sitting).

However, making all three **perfect** verbs indicates that the psalmist intended all three verbs in verse 1 to direct the reader to view the situation as a totality without regard to any phases or stages of intimacy.

On the other hand, the **imperfect** in verse 2 draws the reader's attention to the internal nature of the action rather than looking at it from the outside as a whole.

Thus, the psalmist wants you to zero in on what the blessed man *does*; he habitually and continually meditates on Yahweh's Torah. That's the emphasis of the entire psalm.

Summary

Language impacts meaning greatly! The words used and the ways they are used in language all affect meaning. You don't have to be a language scholar to study the Bible, but you do need to understand a little about how language works.

Suggested Resources

Hendricks, Howard G., and William D. Hendricks. *Living by the Book*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.

Zuck, Roy B. *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*. Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1991.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary. 12 volumes. Edited by Frank E. Gæbelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979.

The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen. Nashville, TN: 1996.