

3 Quick-and-Easy Ways to Abuse Scripture

(and how to avoid them)



LESSON TWO

To Read the Bible As If It Were Written to Us

QUICK REVIEW

The Abuse of Scripture

As the inspired Word of God, Christians look to the Bible as authoritative, or rather as the primary means by which God’s authority is exercised over his church. At the same time, properly interpreting and applying the Bible today is a complex and formidable challenge, so without the careful and humble use of the Scriptures, its “authority” can be used in abusive ways. The purpose of this study, then, is (1) to identify the primary ways Christians abuse Scripture so that (2) corrective principles of interpretation can be explored and applied more effectively.

1. **To Treat the Bible Like Something It’s Not.** This will be a *macro-level view* of Scripture, exploring how we read the Bible *as a whole*.
2. **To Read the Bible As If It Were Written to Us.** This will be a *mid-level view* of Scripture, exploring how we read the Bible *book by book*.
3. **To Take a Passage or Two Out of Context.** This will be a *micro-level view* of Scripture, exploring how we read the Bible’s *individual passages*.

Lesson One: The Bible Is Primarily a Story

One quick-and-easy way to abuse Scripture is to treat it like something it’s not. When the Bible is primarily viewed as a rulebook, theology book, or devotional guide, among other things, the Bible is treated in ways never intended, often leading to abuse. As a whole, however, the Bible presents itself as a story—the true story of God working to reestablish his kingdom over creation. How then should the church treat it as such?

- **As a Worldview.** Some stories have the ability to shape one’s understanding of reality and one’s place within it. This kind of story is called a *worldview*. As the true story of God and his world, the Bible operates this way for the church—as its worldview—by offering answers to the fundamental questions of life.
- **As an Unfinished Script.** The biblical story has yet to come to completion, which means that it serves the church today as an unfinished script, providing a trajectory to move along as well as constraints to improvise within. In this sense, Christians are actors and actresses called to carry God’s story forward in ways that are faithful to its past and yet anticipate its conclusion.

TO WHOM IS THE BIBLE WRITTEN?

How God Gave Us Scripture

The default of many Christians is to read the Bible as if it were written directly to them so as to address their situations, context, and questions. However, such a simplistic approach is not only fraught with problems, but it also ignores the way in which God chose to communicate to his church through the Scriptures. The way the Bible is read and interpreted must honor the way in which God gave it.

- **The Bible Is God's Word in the Words of Human Authors.** Recall that Christians affirm the doctrine of inspiration, the belief that God directed human authors to write Scripture in a way that incorporated their different abilities, experiences, styles, and cultural situations. To read the Bible properly is to take seriously its human aspect as much as its divine aspect.
- **The Bible Consists of Sixty-Six Different Books.** Though an obvious point to make, it's important to recognize that God did not give his church one book per se, but sixty-six separate books written by different authors, at different times, to different audiences, and for different reasons. To read the Bible as such is to pay careful attention to the historical and cultural details of each particular book.

The Bible Is Written to Ancient Audiences

The Bible is not written to modern-day audiences, but to ancient ones. This does not mean the Bible is not *for* the church of every age; it rather means that the church of every age must take seriously the historical nature of the Bible. The distinction is significant and affects how one reads the Bible. Each passage of Scripture was God's Word *to* other people before it become God's Word *for* us. Such a realization brings up a number of ramifications for reading the Bible today.

- **All of the Bible Is Historical.** It has become popular for Bible interpreters today to set out to determine which parts of the Bible are historical and which are timeless. Such an approach fails to recognize that the entirety of Scripture is, in fact, historically and culturally embedded and conditioned.
- **The Original Meaning Is Our Starting Point.** The Bible can never mean what it never meant. For one's interpretation of any biblical text to be valid, it must be consistent with the historical-cultural context of that text. If one's interpretation would not have made sense back then, one is on the wrong track.
- **Meaning Is Determined by the Author's Intent.** The meaning of the biblical text is not created by the reader, but placed there by the author. The question is not: What does this mean to me? But rather: What did the author mean? The goal, then, of biblical interpretation is to discover what the author intended to communicate to his or her original audience.

HOW DO YOU READ THE BIBLE AS ANCIENT?

The Search for Authorial Intent

To discover the author's meaning of a particular text, the interpreter must seek to share the author's world as much as possible. In a real sense, to read and to interpret the Bible well is to do history well. The modern-day interpreter can be compared to an investigative journalist, searching for clues that might help shed light on an ancient world and an unfamiliar situation. Certain types of questions, then, must be pursued in order to more closely arrive at what the author intended to mean.

- **Who Is the Author of this Book?** Since the meaning of a text is connected to the author's intent, the more we know about the author of a book the better—background, vocation, time in history, ethnicity, etc. Even though some authors are unable to be specifically identified, many of these features can be found.
- **To Whom Is the Author Writing?** Knowing about the author's audience is just as important as knowing about the author. Does the audience need instruction, encouragement, or rebuke? Where are they? What is their situation? What is their relationship and history with the author?
- **For What Purpose Is the Author Writing?** What was going on that called forth such a document? What is the author trying to accomplish? How does the author want the audience to respond?
- **What Kind of Literature Is the Author Writing?** Each book of the Bible is written in a particular literary genre, and each genre comes with a different set of rules for interpretation. Paying attention to these rules will keep readers from making interpretive mistakes. Here are a few examples of genres in Scripture.
 - **Narrative.** The majority of the Bible consists of narrative, and should be read by paying attention to entire episodes rather than snippets while exploring things like setting, plot, narrator, character development, etc.
 - **Poetry.** Found throughout Scripture, but especially in the Psalms and the OT Prophets, poetry should be read by paying attention to things like structure, parallelisms, figurative language, emotive language, etc.
 - **Prophecy.** While the majority of the OT Prophets is written in poetry and should be read as such, as prophecy they should also be read by paying attention to covenant stipulations, the prophet's hoped for response, etc.
 - **Letters.** Much of the NT consists of letters written by apostles to certain churches or individuals, and should be read by paying attention to the original situation, how certain arguments are being made, etc.
 - **Proverbs.** A proverb is a type of wisdom literature that presents the norms of life in short, pithy statements. A proverb should not be read as a guaranteed promise, but rather as a general truth about life.

- **What Is the Historical and Cultural Setting?** Each biblical book presents itself with certain historical-cultural factors that must also be considered to better understand the meaning of a passage. Some of these include geography, social customs and taboos, political dynamics, economic issues, religious beliefs, etc.

Interpretation and Application

Discovering the original meaning of a particular biblical text and applying the text today are two very different kinds of actions. Before exploring the process of application, it is vital to learn how to distinguish between what the Bible says, what the Bible means, and how the Bible might be applied.

- **What Does the Text Say?** This is a question solely about observation—what words are being used, what is the subject of the sentence, what is the main verb, and so forth? Never do anything just because the Bible *says*. This is only the first step. The Bible *says* it—that doesn't settle it!
- **What Does the Text Mean?** This is a question about authorial intent as described above—based on what the text says, what then do these words mean? The Bible does not mean what it *says*; it means what it *means*. Furthermore, a text only has one meaning, and it is a meaning that can be more or less validated.
- **How Might the Text Be Applied?** This is a question about living out the biblical story in today's context based on the text's meaning in an ancient context. While a text only has one meaning, the application of that meaning can be numerous since it reflects the reader's unique situation, background, and personality.

Recommended Resources

Every reader of the Bible learning how to better discover its original meaning should consider owning the following tools.

- **A Study Bible.** Recommended: ESV, NIV, HCSB, or New Interpreter's
- **A Bible Dictionary.** Recommended: Holman, Zondervan, Nelson's, Eerdmans, or HarperCollins
- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, 2003, 288 pages.
- *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, by Tremper Longman III and Raymond Dillard, 2006, 528 pages.
- *An Introduction to the New Testament*, by D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, 2005, 784 pages.