

## **Step Five: Interpretation**

In the interpretation step, we try to answer the question, "what does this passage mean by what it says?" Interpretation is the applying of those hermeneutical principles we developed earlier (word meanings and relationships; context; historical setting).

Repeated attacks are now made on the data gathered by observation. Interpretive questions are formulated. If there is a crucial word used which must be understood, the usage of that term is explored so that we can answer the question, "what does it mean here?" If there is a pivotal phrase or conjunction, we relate it to its context: "what is it doing here?" If there is a custom alluded to, it must be investigated: "what are they doing?" and "why?"

We want to know everything we possibly can about the words, the context, and the historical setting of the passage we are studying.

### **Word Meanings**

What does that word mean in this context? This will involve the use of a concordance, as well as any other tools (dictionaries, word study books, translations) you have at your disposal.

### **Word Relationships**

A writer constructs a piece of writing in a way that will most effectively get his message across. If you can discover the basic structure of a piece of writing, you can find the main points the writer wants to communicate. There are two profitable ways to uncover the structure: (1) noting the laws of composition; and, (2) reconstructing the text schematically.

Repetition- The reiteration of the same terms (holy in Leviticus)

Continuity- The repeated use of similar words, phrases, ideas (in Philemon, notice the terms brother, partner, fellow-worker, etc.)

Contrast- The association of opposites (the blessed man and the wicked man in Psalm 1; look for "but," "yet," "however," "nevertheless")

Comparison- The association of like things which vary in some way (the parable in Mark 4 describes four kinds of soil; they are all soil, but they have varying degrees of productivity; the use of "like" or "as")

General to Particulars- The movement from a general idea or activity to particulars about that idea (the general statement of Psalm 23:1, The Lord is my Shepherd is "spelled out" in the many particulars that follow, such as He makes me lie down..He leads me etc.)

Particulars to General- The movement from a particular to a general idea or activity (In Mark 1:30, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law; in the following paragraph he heals many who were ill)

Cause to Effect- The progression from cause to effect (In Mark 1 the mighty acts of Jesus cause the crowds to flock to Him; look for "for," "because," "therefore")

Effect to Cause- The progression is from effect to cause (Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great (Matthew 5:12)

Explanation- The presentation of an idea or event followed by its explanation (in Matthew 13 Jesus presents parables and then explains them to his disciples)

Preparation or Introduction- The inclusion of the background or setting for events or ideas by which the reader is prepared to understand that which follows (Mark 1 quotes from Isaiah to prepare the reader for the appearance of John the Baptist; Mark 7:3,4 explains certain customs as backdrop for Jesus' remarks)

Climax- The arrangement of material in such a way as to progress from great to greater and then to the greatest, where the climax occurs (in Psalm 23 the Lord is depicted as meeting everyday needs (great), needs in times of crisis (greater), and then the needs of all the future, in this life and in eternity (greatest))

Means to End or Instrumentation- The setting forth of the means to an end as well as the end itself (but these have been written that you may believe, John 20:31; a planned cause and effect; often uses the words "that," "so that," "in order that")

Interrogation- The use of a question or problem followed by its answer (John 9:2 records the disciples; question of Jesus; 9:3 gives His answer).

### Textual Reconstruction

A textual reconstruction is a picture of word and sentence relationships. It restructures the text so that we can see how it is put together. It helps us to stop, look and think about what a passage is saying. It helps us to "see" what is there so that we can better interpret what is being said.

A good textual reconstruction will:

- highlight the basic flow of thought
- distinguish the major from the minor points
- visualize the relationships between words and between clauses
- enable us to see the function each word and phrase in the text is fulfilling

The best method of reconstructing the text is the one that works for you! You may want to use an English diagramming approach or you may develop your own style. The following steps are suggested:

1. read and reread the passage to capture the flow of thought
2. work phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph
3. 3) locate all the connecting words (conjunctions); these will indicate changes in thought and help you discover the relationships between phrases and clauses
4. find the main idea (usually indicated by the main verb)
5. 5) begin rewriting the passage, mechanically laying it out "in pieces"; start at the beginning and arrange the clauses and phrases according to importance; keep main ideas to the left margin; minor ideas should be indented to the right; make sure parallel ideas are equally indented; your reconstruction will look something like this:

Main idea

--minor idea

--minor idea

Main idea

--minor idea

--minor idea

6. be as detailed as you need to be; try to follow the word order of the passage; if a subordinate phrase precedes a clause in the text, indent it and place it above the line on which you write the clause; if the subordinate phrase follows, position it below the clause;

7) place modifying words and phrases (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, etc.) so that it is apparent what they qualify

The more you do this, the better you'll become at it. It is an especially helpful tool in studying passages that contain many ideas, that are doctrinally full, or that include directives and exhortations.

### Context

Why does this occur here? How does this relate to the preceding paragraph? the following paragraph? the argument of the book? Are there any parallel passages (especially in other writings by the same author) that may shed light on the meaning here?

### Setting

Locate the writing in space (geographically) and time (chronologically). Use an atlas. Learn all you can about the locations mentioned. Read up on the culture. Explore any particular cultural patterns that are present in the text. Refine your earlier findings concerning the author, the readers and the writing itself.

Seek to draw out the implications of the statements in the text. What is significant about the Who, When, Where, What, and How? Why are these here? Why is this happening? Posing and answering interpretive questions is the key to unfolding the meaning of the Scriptures.

Interpretation is adequately completed when you are able to explain what the author meant by what he wrote. A good way to test whether or not you have accomplished this is to paraphrase the passage. Or, write a succinct synopsis of the passage. Or, state the theme and then relate each part of the text to that theme. Or, write a commentary on the passage!