

Group Study – Forms of Scripture

This week's study touches on the topic of hermeneutics. The word hermeneutics comes from a Greek verb meaning "to express, translate, interpret". In short, hermeneutics is the practice of making sense of things. Biblical hermeneutics seeks to understand the meaning of scripture. While we might first look for the meaning *in the text*, we realize that the words of a text, divinely inspired or not, are merely symbols or signs that *point us to meaning*.

The author of the text pointed those words in a certain direction, and the reader then seeks to understand the direction in which the words point. Meaning, then, lies in the space between author (human and divine, in the case of scripture), the text, and the reader. Hermeneutics is the exploration of that space in between. That exploration is a back-and-forth movement between author, text, and reader, between the parts and the whole of scripture, between our context and the ancient context, and between questions and answers.

Genre is just one aspect of hermeneutical study of scripture, and as exploration is an applied activity, so is hermeneutics. Applying the theory of genre is where the value – and the fun – of exploration comes into play.

Below are several scriptures, categorized by genre, so you can try your hand at asking some of the suggested questions in this week's Bible study.

What do you notice? Are the questions easy or difficult to answer? What new questions arise from your study? What additional information do you want to know now?

Welcome to the world of hermeneutics!

Narrative: Gen. 27:1-45; Jonah 3; Mark 5:21-43; Acts 12:6-19

Poetry: Psalm 1; Amos 5:18-24 Phil. 2:5-11

Prophecy: Jer. 7:1-15; Ezekiel 1 (this one is not for the faint of heart!); Isaiah 1:1, 10-17

Epistles: Philemon, 2 John, Romans 6:1-14

Apocalypse: Daniel 8; Revelation 18:1-8

Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast
Transcript

Good Faith Bible Study

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"The Forms of Scripture"

Interpretive Questions – Genre, Cultural Context, and Social Location

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I used to watch “Sesame Street” as a small child. If you have already read through this week’s lesson, you have noticed that, as the “Sesame Street” narrator used to say, “One of these things is not like the other!”

One of the goals of this series of Bible Studies is to add interpretive tools to your toolbox – and not just to the toolbox of the Bible study’s leaders, but to every person in the Bible study community.

So, this week, there isn’t one passage of scripture in focus, although I hope that your group might choose a text to study together this week. Instead, I hope that your group will begin to explore some questions that are really important to how we study and apply scripture.

Basic communication theory teaches us that there are three elements to communication: the sender, the message, and the recipient, and to understand the communication most fully, we must study all three. Usually, people have a favorite way to approach scripture. What’s your favorite? Some enjoy digging into the details of the ancient world, understanding the geography, culture, politics, economics, and faith expressions of ancient peoples who composed the biblical text. Others love to study the text itself – paying attention to the way that the words are put together, how the sections are structured, and the many connections between them. And I know that still others have the gift of seeing clearly those who receive scripture today – the beauty and complexity of modern psychology, social systems, power structures, and artistic expression. And while we might prefer one stage in the communication cycle, we need all of them – and we need each other – as we study scripture.

I’d like to propose that this week, your Bible study community might look a little more like a laboratory. Depending on what you usually do, I would encourage you to try something new! Here are a couple suggestions.

First, you could engage in some scriptural archeology. As much as we'd like to head to an ancient tell in Southern Israel, let's transform your group's study table into a dig site. What resources do you have for studying the ancient context of the Bible? Choose a passage of scripture together to study, and then gather some study materials for your group's meeting. You may find biblical commentaries in your church's library, or even in the public library. And if you promise to return them in good shape, even your pastor's library might be a good place to look! If you can, gather some commentaries that cover large sections of the Bible, or maybe a whole testament, and also prioritize commentaries that treat just one book of the Bible – you'll find a lot more detail there. Study Bibles are also great sources of information. Gather study Bibles built around different translations. The study notes themselves are great – and don't forget that most will also have introductory essays before each book of the Bible, and many will have topical essays toward the back. The maps in Study Bibles are also excellent resources. Online resources can be a great help, too – but remember that there's not a lot of quality control online. I usually recommend that you read the author's biography sketch first, or see if the website is maintained by a reputable group.

Once you've gathered your tools, start digging! Read through the passage together, slowly, once or twice depending on the length of the passage. Each person should take note of any questions that they have about the text.

Next, work through the passage together. Give people a chance to voice their questions. What does this phrase mean? Why do our translations have different English words in this verse? Where is that location, anyway? Who in the world is Sennacherib? When you run into a question, you've run into a chance to explore. Have everyone grab a resource and see what you can find. Compare notes. Discuss your findings. Does the information you discovered help you understand the passage better? How? Does it lead you to even more questions? That's great – keep digging!

Now on the other hand, your group might be one that already thrives on searching out new information about ancient contexts. If digging around in commentaries sounds similar to what you do each week, then it might be helpful for your group to try a different approach. Communication theorists teach us the importance of the identity of the person or persons receiving the message. Instead of digging into an ancient culture, this approach turns the examination inward. How does your identity – your social

location – shape how you experience the Bible? How are your habits of reading and understanding similar to others in your group, and how are they different?

Social location is important, because the position from which we read scripture naturally leads to some presuppositions.

I would suggest a few categories for examination here, as well as a few questions to provide food for thought – and hopefully food for discussion as well. I'm borrowing some here from an assignment developed some time ago by Davina Lopez at Eckerd College and from an activity that was developed by a professor [F. V. Greifenhagen] who taught at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada.

The first category, culture or ethnicity. Are you a member of the dominant culture in your context? Is this an advantage or a disadvantage? Are you bicultural? Is this an advantage or disadvantage? What is your preferred culture?

Next, race. Are you a member of a dominant race in your context? A marginalized race? An oppressed race? Is your racial identity an advantage or disadvantage?

Next, a person's class is also important. What economic class were you born into? Has that changed throughout your life? Have you ever belonged to an "invisible" class – for instance, displaced peoples, or un- or under-employed peoples, or persons with a disability, or people who are unhoused? Has your education improved your class standing over the course of your life? Is your class location an advantage or disadvantage? And how?

Next, gender. How do persons of your gender identification function with the dominant culture in your context? Is your gender identification problematic within your culture? Is your gender location an advantage or disadvantage?

And now, we turn to some questions about religion. Were you raised in a religious tradition? What did that tradition teach you about interpreting the Bible? Are you currently a member of a dominant religious group? Are you or have you ever been a part of a religious minority? Is your religious location an advantage or disadvantage, do you think?

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What was your first experience with the Bible? How did and how do you feel about that first experience? Do you feel included or excluded by what you know about and what you read about in the Bible? What biblical genres do you enjoy the most? What portions of the Bible are the most difficult for you to understand or to apply to your life? And why?

As you think through these questions, honesty is paramount. Take time to think through your own social location. And then reflect on how your social location shapes the assumptions that you make about Scripture, what questions you ask, what question you don't ask. How does it impact how you experience the Bible?

In your group, share only what you are comfortable with, of course, but I hope you will share some of your insights with your Bible study group. In some groups, you'll have known each other for years – maybe even decades – but there is always something new to learn. Knowing who I am helps me to be a better student of the Bible, and even more so, knowing who “we” are as a group, helps “us” to read, interpret, and apply the Bible more faithfully in our communities.

Now don't worry – next week we will be back to studying a biblical passage that is in this quarter's series on Creation and the Word of God. And I hope that some of the tools highlighted in this week's discussion – whichever direction you choose to take – will continue to reverberate in your group as you continue to study together.