

CFBC Hermeneutics- Observation and Literary Genre

Practical Bible Study: Getting into Details

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You might not be familiar with the name Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but you are with his most popular literary creation—Sherlock Holmes. Soon after he first appeared on the printed page in 1887, Doyle’s fictional detective garnered fame for his investigative techniques. Most of all, he became known for his uncanny skill in observation...

“They say that genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains... It’s a very bad definition, but it does apply to detective work.”
Sherlock Holmes

Elsewhere, Holmes provides a poignant explanation for his dedication to the “pains” of observation:

“I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

We demand the same approach in many of life’s circumstances today. Whether it is the investigation of a serious crime, a mysterious illness, or a crashed passenger jet, we expect detectives, doctors, and engineers to embrace the pains of observation. We cry foul when they force the facts to suit their theories.

We must hold ourselves to no less of a standard when we approach the Word of God. The postmodern infatuation with subjectivity and relative truth cannot exist in the world of justice, medicine, and engineering—and it must not be allowed to exist in the realm of Bible study. An approach is needed that will keep at bay our propensity to make texts fit personal preferences, and which submits us wholly to the authority of God mediated through His Word. It is an approach that will require “pains” (see 2 Tim. 2:15).

Previously, we identified the starting point: **context**. No text appears in a vacuum. Therefore, before a reader begins to examine a text in detail, he must familiarize himself with the historical and literary fabric into which that text was woven. Once a satisfactory understanding of that context has been established, the reader is ready to begin examining the details of the text. He is now ready for stage two: **observation**.

Observation can be defined as “the art of awareness...When practicing observation, the student has two foundational objectives: (1) to become thoroughly conscious of the text’s details; and (2) to become thoroughly convinced of their need for explanation.

How is this accomplished?

1. Read the text repeatedly.

The goal of this step is to do more than merely see words on a page. Like Sherlock Holmes, the reader must take inventory of everything, and since God does not waste jots and tittles, the reader must take pains to become aware of even the smallest details. To do this, the student must read, read, read, and read again. As he does, he must guard against the illusion of mastery—the error of thinking that familiarity with a text equals mastery of its content.

This reading of the text must be done in an appropriate translation if the student is not fluent in the original language of the text. The observations made from a translated text will only be as good as that translation is faithful to the language of the original. Because of their desire to appeal to contemporary readers and cultures, paraphrases and dynamic equivalent translations will be less helpful during the stage of observation. On the other hand, literal or formal equivalent translations—like the New American Standard Bible—will be much more reliable because of their effort to reproduce as faithfully as possible both the form and the content of the author’s language.

2. Compare the best translations.

A helpful way to recognize the details of a text is to compare it as it is stated in your translation with how it is rendered by other standard translations. Wherever this comparison reveals a notable difference, you can assume that a significant interpretive issue stands behind it. These differences need to be recognized and recorded for further study in the next stage of the process: interpretation.

Based on contributions from David Varghese...

Compare Translations

1.E.g., James 5:11 in NASB and KJV

We count those blessed who endured. You have heard
of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the

Lord's dealings, that ***the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.*** NASB

Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that ***the Lord is very pitiful,*** and of tender mercy. KJV

Comparing translations helps to minimize bias and streamline the interpretive stage.

Distinctiveness of Observation Stage

Interpretation asks, "What does the text mean by what it says?"

Observation asks, "What does the text say?"

Goal...Absorb as many details in the text as possible (go word by word, phrase by phrase)

Read, read, read

Markers [What things should I look for?]

Repetition

1.E.g., Ecclesiastes 1:2 "***Vanity of vanities,***" says the Preacher, "***Vanity of vanities!*** All is ***vanity.***"

2.Again in 12:8 "***Vanity of vanities,***" says the Preacher, "all is ***vanity!***" This ringing statement forms a kind of inclusio (bookend) to Ecclesiastes---hinting at its major theme.

Repeated words or phrases

Genesis 5...***and he died*** (8x) 5:5,8,11,14,17,20,25,28 (but note Enoch in 5:21!)

Joshua 22:22...**21** Then the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh answered and spoke to the heads of the families of Israel. **22** "***The Mighty One, God, the Lord, the Mighty One, God, the Lord!*** He knows, and may Israel itself know. If *it was* in rebellion, or if in an unfaithful act against the Lord do not save us this day!

Psalms 136...repeated refrain...**His lovingkindness endures forever**

Ephesians 4:4-6 cf 4:3...**3** being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **4** *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Contrasts

1.E.g., Ecclesiastes 7:1 “A good name is **better than** precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.” [ESV]

2.Ecclesiastes 7:2a “It is **better** to go to the house of mourning **than** to go to the house of feasting.”

3.Ecclesiastes 7:3a “Sorrow is **better than** laughter.”

Comparisons

James 3:6 “And the tongue is a fire, the world of iniquity” (i.e., metaphor)

Lists

1.Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..”

2.Philippians 4:8 “Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, ponder these things.”

Cause-and-Effect...if, then

Proverbs 2:1-5 My son, **if** you will receive my words
And treasure my commandments within you,
2 Make your ear attentive to wisdom,
Incline your heart to understanding;
3 For **if** you cry for discernment,
[a]Lift your voice for understanding;
4 **If** you seek her as silver
And search for her as for hidden treasures;
5 **Then** you will discern the fear of the Lord
And discover the knowledge of God.

Jeremiah 17:27...**27** But **if** you do not listen to Me to keep the sabbath day holy by not carrying a load and coming in through the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day, **then** I will kindle a fire in its gates and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and not be quenched.

Jeremiah 42:10...**10** **If** you will indeed stay in this land, **then** I will build you up and not tear you down, and I will plant you and not uproot you; for I will relent concerning the calamity that I have inflicted on you.

Matthew 12:26...**26** **If** Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; **how then** will his kingdom stand?

In Order That...So That

Exodus 20:12...**12** Honor your father and your mother, **that** your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

2 Corinthians 1:4...**3** Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** who comforts us in all our affliction **so that** we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. **5** For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

For (explanatory)...

Exodus 20:5,7,11...**5** You shall not worship them or serve them; **for** I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, **6** but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

7 “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, **for** the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

8 “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. **9** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **10** but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. **11** **For** in six days the Lord made

the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

Romans 8:28,29...**28** And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. **29 For** those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

2 Timothy 4:2,3...**2** preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. **3 For** the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires

Therefore...

Joshua 22:4...**4** And now the Lord your God has given rest to your brothers, as He spoke to them; **therefore** turn now and go to your tents, to the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you beyond the Jordan.

Ephesians 4:1...**Therefore** I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

Romans 12:1...**Therefore** I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.

Figures of Speech (non-exhaustive)

Simile in Matt 28:3 “His countenance was **like** lightning, and his clothing as white **as** snow.”

Job 5:26...**26** “You will come to the grave in full vigor, **Like** the stacking of grain in its season.

Psalms 103:13...Just **as** a father has compassion on *his* children, **So** the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

Synecdoche (part is used for whole or vice-versa) Eph 6:12 “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood..”

Personification See Wisdom personified as a woman in Prov 1:20-23 and Prov 8.

Verbs

Note the 6 verbs used in Rom 8:30. Also note the sequential nature of the verse (“golden-chain of salvation”)

List of verbs

1 Thessalonians 5:14...**14** We urge you, brethren, **admonish** the unruly, **encourage** the fainthearted, **help** the weak, **be patient** with everyone.

Sequence

Col 1:9-10 (Paul prays for the Colossians that they would be “filled with the knowledge of His will....**so that** they may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” [so that = purpose clause])

Sequence (builds)

2 Peter 1:5...**5** Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, **and in your** moral excellence, knowledge, **6 and in your** knowledge, self-control, **and in your** self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness, **7 and in your** godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love. **8** For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pronouns

1. In Ezekiel 36:26ff., notice the preponderance of the 1st person personal pronoun where God is referent. The pronouns here help to emphasize God as the active agent.

2. Compare the Pharisees prayer in Luke 18 to the Publican’s prayer – one is full of “I” (signifying pride), the other is praying in the passive (signifying humility).

Inclusio (bookend)

Genesis 39 is not primarily about the seduction of Joseph. It is primarily about the sovereign and providential hand of God upon Joseph [see the literary inclusio in v.2,3 and 21,23

- Verse 2: “***The Lord was with Joseph***, so he became a ***prosperous*** man.”

Verse 3: “...***the Lord was with him...the LORD caused*** all that he did to ***prosper.***”

- Verse 21: “..***the LORD was with Joseph*** and extended his kindness to him....”

Verse 23: “...***the LORD was with him***; and whatever he did, ***the LORD made to prosper.***”

Psalms 8...Inclusio formed by verses 1,9

1 O Lord, our Lord,

How majestic is Your name in all the earth,

Who have [a]displayed Your splendor above the heavens!

² From the mouth of infants and nursing babes

You have established [b]strength
Because of Your adversaries,
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

³ When I [c]consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,

The moon and the stars, which You have [d]ordained;

⁴ What is man that You [e]take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?

⁵ Yet You have made him a little lower than [f]God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!

⁶ You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,

⁷ All sheep and oxen,
And also the [g]beasts of the field,

⁸ The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

9 O Lord, our Lord,

How majestic is Your name in all the earth

Example...Look at Psalm 1...

But (contrast)...Psalm 1:2,4

Repeated word...Psalm 1:1 (not, nor, nor)

Therefore...Psalm 1:5

For (explanatory)...Psalm 1:6

Example...Look at Matthew 5...

For (explanatory)...Matthew 5:3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10-12

But...Matthew 5:11

But I Say...Matthew 5:22,28,32,34,39,44

If...Then...Matthew 5:13

So That...Matthew 5:16

4. Ask the right questions.

It is not the goal at this point to form conclusions. That will come in the next stage. Rather, based on repeated reading, comparison of translations, and structural diagramming, the student must now make one more attempt to mine the data from the text. He must approach the text with the mind of a meticulous investigator, and this means refraining from interpretation and taking the time to ask the right questions instead.

The role that good questions play in the process of observation cannot be overestimated....Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?

If the student of Scripture desires to learn, he must put on the inquisitive mind of a child. Write the text out on a piece of paper, leaving ample space for underlining, circling, drawing arrows, and recording notes. Then ask questions, and on the basis of what is actually stated, see what the text yields in return. As Sherlock Holmes states, "There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact," so nothing can be taken for granted or left as a general impression. However, as you ask questions, keep in mind a word of caution. There are all sorts of questions that are not the right questions to ask at this point in the process.

These are questions which put the reader at the center of the investigation—questions like How does this text make me feel? or How does this sound in my culture? The postmodern world around us is constantly looking for ways to thrust self into the starring role, to use the process of observation as the process of self-promotion. This obsession has influenced many Christians today, and it results in an approach that replaces the voice of God with the voice of self—all under the banner of “Bible study.” Ultimately, for questions to be helpful, aim them at the original author and his purpose for writing. ***Application—the impact of the text’s information on my personal life—will come later, once the author’s intent has been satisfactorily understood.***

5. Summarize the results.

After an appropriate amount of time has been dedicated to the observation process, it is important to step back and sum up what has been observed.

A. Key terms

These are the words you identified that are hard to understand, and notably different in the translations, or appear to carry extraordinary influence in the meaning of text.

B. Key grammatical features

Grammar refers to word-relationships, so the observations in this category relate to what you observed in the structure of your text—the relationships of phrases and clauses to one another, punctuation issues, etc.

C. Key facts

This category relates to the data you mined from the text—issues not subject to varying points of view but clearly demonstrable from the text when taken at face value.

D. Key questions

These are all the questions that arose as you studied the text—questions which require further research and interpretation.

In sum, keep in mind this rule for Bible study: The more time you spend in observation, the more effective and efficient you will be in interpretation. The pains you sow at this stage of the process will yield a harvest of rewards. Conversely, the degree to which you take shortcuts and fail to acquaint yourself with the data of the text is the degree to which the rest of your study will suffer.

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