

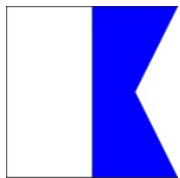
Two Trees: Beginnings
Spring 2020
Session 2 – Introduction to Bible Interpretation

Communication, Cooperation, and Agreement

What does it take for an act of communication to be successful? Why can you call to someone “Look out!” or “Fore!” and they’ll brace or take shelter? Why is it that you can read the words on this page and understand them?

As creatures created for connectedness, humanity has constantly strived to communicate: carvings and paintings, smoke signals, windmill sails, bell ringing, flag semaphore, Morse code, sign language...you get the point. But have you ever paused to consider what is necessary for such methods of communication to work? What must be present for a message to be successfully transmitted from its source to an intended recipient?

Communication is successful when there is a level of cooperation and agreement between the communicator and the recipient of the communication. If you were



piloting a ship and came across another vessel flying the flag to the left, you would know to stay clear, as that vessel has a diver in the water. But maritime semaphore flags only work if all the parties communicating have agreed beforehand upon the meanings of each flag and then operate within those agreed upon meanings. Or, consider traffic signals. What would happen if you one day decided that for you, red is now going to mean “go” and green is going to mean “stop?” And then suppose some other fella thinks, “To me, a blinking yellow arrow on a traffic signals indicates I have the right-of-way when making a left-hand turn across traffic.” What would be the result of this sort of nonsense?

Chaos.

Disaster.

Misunderstanding.

A breakdown in communication.

For an act of communication to be effective in delivering its intended message, cooperation among the communicating parties is fundamental. Cooperation involves prior agreement over the meaning of the medium by which the message is transmitted.

This is true of all communication. Take moment to look around you. What mediums of communication do you see? How is it you can make sense of any of them?

The Bible is ultimately an act of communication. It is God's communication to His people. The Bible's medium of communication isn't flags or traffic signals, but the written word, meaning it is a literary work. And just like with maritime flags, literary communication requires agreement and cooperation to result in successful communication. Even as I write, and you read the words on this page, you and I are engaging in a cooperative endeavor. I am taking efforts to make sure I abide by the accepted rules of grammar and syntax as well as using words within their agreed upon range of meaning. And if I stray from those meanings, as with sarcasms, then I make sure you have enough information to recognize that I am doing so. On your end, you are interpreting my words based on those same rules and agreed upon meanings of the words I use. You are working to understand the words based on the way I am using them. This what we mean by cooperation.

Interpreting the meaning of traffic signal is pretty cut and dry. Even when my daughter was a two year old, she was clear on what the colors communicated. "Red means stop, and green means mean go." Unfortunately, things aren't always quite that simple when it comes to written or spoken words, such as those recorded in the Bible. A red traffic signal always means "stop", but words can have multiple meanings. In fact, they often possess a range of meaning. If you've used a dictionary, or these days dictionary.com, to look up a word and found multiple meanings for that word, that's the word's range of meaning.

When someone uses a word, however, they hardly ever have its entire range of meaning in mind. Usually (unless employing a pun or double-entendre) they intend for only one of the word's meanings to be understood. Our responsibility is to cooperate with the communicator by deciphering which one of those meanings they have in mind in order to not misconstrue what they intended to say.

So, how we do that?

Context.

What if you overheard one person say to another, "How was the course?"

How would you know what was being asked? More specifically, how would you know what was meant by the word 'course'?

What if it's a professor asking a student? A chef asking a dining customer? A friend asking a buddy who just finished 18 holes? Or, a participant who just completed a tough mudder?

The word “course” can have different meanings or referents. To determine what is meant, we might want to know who is speaking (author), who is being spoken to (audience), and/or the situation which gave rise to the question (occasion). In other words, we want to know the context. And these contextual features will help us decide on the intended meaning of the word ‘course.’

We want to ask these same questions when interpreting the words of the Bible. God utilized human authors to communicate. Peter writes, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). While the message originated from God, it was delivered through men. Because of this, when we approach a text in Scripture, we’ll want to know, as best we can tell, what human author delivered it. Further, since the Bible was written to different audiences over a 1,500-year time period, we’ll want to know to whom the text was written as well as the occasion which gave rise to its writing. Thus, interpretive questions we’ll want to answer in order to be good hearers of the Sacred Texts are:

1. Who is the human author?
2. Who is the intended audience?
3. What is the historical situation or occasion which gave rise to the text?

Asking and answering these questions will help us interpret a text in its proper context. Context, however, includes more than just author, audience, and occasion. A word’s meaning is also influenced by the type of literary context in which it occurs. Seldom are words used in a vacuum all by themselves. They usually are part of sentences (like with our word “course” above), which are part of paragraphs, which may make up a pericope (pronounced “*pub-rib-kub-ped*” – this is just a fancy way of saying a section or passage out of a text), which may be part of a larger literary work.

Pericopes and the larger literary units of which sentences and paragraphs are a part have a genre. For now, we’ll simply define genre as the style through which a literary work is delivered. Examples of literary genres might be fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or prose. And within different genres, multiple literary devices may be employed such as alliteration, metaphor, and simile. Paying attention to genre will help us determine the meaning of an author’s words and, therefore, is another way we cooperate with the author. As an example, if we deem a literary work as poetry, we will be extra diligent about staying on the lookout for literary devices such as metaphor and simile and take care not to force too literal of an interpretation on the words.

Since genre and literary devices will also help determine the meaning of an author's words, let's add two more questions to our list on interpretive questions:

1. Who is the author?
2. Who is the audience?
3. What is the historical situation or occasion which gave rise to the text?
4. What genre is being used?
5. Is the author employing any literary devices? If so, how and why?

Phew, this seems like this interpreting business is turning into a lot of work and getting awfully dicey. When it comes to the Bible, aren't we just supposed to read it literally and not worry about this sort of stuff?

I'll address issues of literal interpretations of the Bible in just a moment. But let me first encourage you when it comes to all this interpreting business. Here's the really good news:

YOU are already an expert at this.

You have had loads of experience.

In fact, you're so good at interpreting, you don't even think about it. You and I make hundreds of interpretative decisions daily based on things like genre and different literary devices.

Don't think so? Check out some of the phrases below:

Once upon a time...

It's a beautiful sunrise.

It's raining cats and dogs.

I have a million mosquito bites.

My love, she is a rose.

When hearing each of these phrases you automatically make interpretive decisions. It's so second nature, you don't even think about it. Otherwise, how can we explain why it is that when someone shares with us that they "saw a beautiful sunrise," we don't walk away concluding that the person is either a liar or ignorant since we all

know that the sun doesn't really rise? Or why is it when a husband says his wife 'is a rose' we don't immediately conclude that she breathes CO₂, needs sunlight for photosynthesis, and must be regularly watered?

The reason we don't jump to such misguided conclusions is that we are constantly making interpretive decisions. These decisions are based on our knowledge that we live in a world where people use different styles of speech to express meaning. Sometimes we use phenomenological language to describe our observation of the relationship between the sun and the earth based on our vantage point. Sometimes we use poetry and literary devices such as metaphor to express beauty and love.

Making interpretive decisions is what helps us discern the difference between what a person literally says, and what he or she means. This is an important distinction and necessary in weighing the truthfulness of someone's words. Some of the phrases from above are included in the chart below. By taking someone's style of speech into consideration, we can begin to arrive at the true intent and meaning of their words. This meaning may be called their *truth claim*. And you'll notice that in each of these examples *the truth claim is different from what is literally said*.

What is said	Literal Interpretation	Genre/Literary Technique	Truth Claim
What a beautiful sunrise this morning.	I believe that the sun revolves around the earth and thereby deny the Copernican Revolution.	Phenomenological: statement based on how things or a phenomena appears from my vantage point.	The colors accompanying the first sighting of the sun were aesthetically pleasing.
It's raining cats and dogs.	If you look up, you will see cats and dogs falling from the sky.	Idiom: words that have a figurative meaning separate from their literal meaning	There is a heavy downpour.
I have a million mosquito bites!	If you count the number of mosquito bites on my body, they will total exactly 1 million.	Hyperbole: Exaggeration for the purpose of intensification	I have lots of mosquito bites.

If we ignore context and insist that the true meaning of each of these statements must be what is literally said, we are failing to cooperate with the intent of the speaker and, therefore, missing out on hearing the very things they are attempting to communicate. What is more, demanding everything must be literal in the truth it conveys, we also put ourselves at risk of ascribing error to a person where none exists. In other words, when assessing the *truth value* of their words – that is, whether their words are true or false – we draw the wrong conclusion.

Let's return to our example of 'It's raining cats and dogs.' If someone used that phrase when speaking to you and you ran outside, with grand expectations of witnessing tabbies and Chihuahua's hailing from the sky, but were only met with heavy downpour rain, you would wrongfully conclude that whoever said such a thing was clearly wrong and perhaps untrustworthy. But when you cooperate with the speaker by recognizing they have just employed an idiom, and interpret their words accordingly, you conclude they have made a true statement about the present condition of the weather and intensity of the rain.

The point is, we each make hundreds of interpretive decisions daily. And for a statement to communicate truth, *it does not have to be literal*. We can speak in nonliteral ways, such as metaphorically, figuratively, proverbially, and still say things that are just as true as if they were made with a literal statement. Our job is to interpret people's words based on context, and then discern the truth claims they are making, which may be different from what they literally said. This is what it means to cooperate with a speaker or an author. Only then are we positioned to weigh the truthfulness (i.e. the *truth value*) of what they have said.

Shared Worlds

Living in what has been dubbed a 'shared world' is what allow us to make interpretive decisions second nature.

Every act of communication requires a degree of interpretation. Some more than others. Sometimes we automatically make these decisions based on the cues from a speaker or author. In the above example, the opening line, "Once upon a time..." clues us in that the story we are about to hear is most likely a fairy tale and not an account of a true story.

Other times, literary cues aren't so explicit. In these instances, we can determine the genre or style of speech because we live in a "shared world." A shared world may be defined as the mutual experiences, stories, symbols, and understandings we share with those around us. Living in a world of shared experiences not only allows to make genre decisions and recognize different literary devices, such as figures of speech, but may also at times serve to assign new meanings to words and phrases.

You operate in many share worlds: planet earth, your country, city, place of work, friend groups, household, and if you're married, with your spouse. We could represent these as 'shared worlds' as circles. We might represent the 'shared world'

between you and a person of a different country versus you and your spouse with the following circles:¹



Because of the differences in culture, language, and shared experiences, there will be less of an overlap in the ‘shared world’ between you and someone of another country versus, for example, you and your spouse. The less the overlap (of things shared in common) the harder parties will have to work to bridge communication gaps.

When I was teaching at a seminar in Zimbabwe, one of my co-facilitators, who is an apt and capable communicator, wanted to use an analogy to help illustrate what we believe interactive conversations should look like when teaching and learning theology. He used the example of a Ping-Pong ball being hit back and forth between two players. His audience, composed of well-versed Zimbabwean pastors, met the analogy with blank stares. This prompted my co-facilitator to ask the pastors, “Do you know what a ping pong ball is?” To which the audience all responded by shaking their heads ‘no.’ The analogy was then changed to a tennis ball. Now they understood.

It was unclear whether the original analogy failed either because the pastors were all together unfamiliar with ping pong, or because in Zimbabwe, as in many other places outside of the United States, ping pong is referred to as “table tennis” and not ping pong. Either way the commutative intent was lost with the first analogy due lack of a shared world.

If you’re married, the overlap between you and your spouse is significantly greater in comparison to someone of a different country. Often times a husband and wife can communicate without having to constantly explain context. You will have inside jokes that others won’t get since they don’t fully participate in your intimate shared

¹ This concept is largely dependent on the scholarship of C. John Collins. For more on language operating in a shared world, see Chapter 4 of his excellent work, “Reading Genesis Well: *Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1-11*.”

world. My wife and I might call ourselves or one another ‘bad dogs.’ This may sound strange outside of our household, but for us it is a playful way of saying one of us has messed up and goes back to a funny story involving my father-in-law and an Irish Setter, one we won’t go into.

But even in a marriage notice the two worlds do not overlap entirely. A husband and wife, while one in marriage, are still two individuals. And nobody, except God, has perfect knowledge of what is in your head and heart and how you see the world. No matter how long you’ve been married, there are still the “Oh, that’s not what I meant to say,” moments. Not to mention you both have different families of origins and upbringings.

My wife is from Michigan and I’ve had to learn a whole new set of vocabulary, such as yoopers, trolls, fudgies, pop, up north and party stores. Being from Missouri, for me to cooperate with my wife and her family in communicating, I had to enter into the shared world of Michigan. I had to learn that if someone asks you to make a run to the party store, and you come back with streamers, party hats, and noise makers, as one from Missouri might do, you will have failed miserably in cooperating with the intended message.

In the same way, my wife had to learn things about the shared world of St. Louis. When she moved here to pursue her graduate degree she was bemused at the amount of times she was asked, “Where did you go to high school?”

Asking where someone went to high school is THE St. Louis question. If you’re from St. Louis, you know all about it. We can tell all sorts of things about someone by where they went to high school. To be fair, it’s not just to peg one another demographically – though it is partially that. Though on a more positive note, St. Louis is like a big-small town and many times we can make connections through asking the question, which is usually followed by, “Oh do you know so and so?” If you’re from St. Louis, you can imagine the nonplussed look my wife elicits when she responds, “Holland Christian.” It’s the look that says, “Clearly you’re not from around here.”

When it comes to shared worlds, the wider the gap between two people or groups, the more they must work to communicate and understand what the other means based on their context. On a daily basis, we mostly interact with those whom live in our shared worlds where there is quite a bit of overlap, especially when it comes to the meaning of words. Because of this, making interpretive decisions are often second nature and we rarely consciously think about them. I usually don’t have to stop and think, “Oh, that person is using an idiom.” But to a non-English speaker, our idioms will sound

funny translated into their language, and vice-a-verse, and we're forced to consciously slow down and think about the proper interpretation of what is said.

To belabor the point, even the passing of time can create distance in shared worlds and thus result in a breakdown of communication. In the popular 1980's film *Back to the Future*, Michael J. Fox's character, Marty McFly, travels back from 1985 to 1955. When he arrives he immediately seeks to find the 1955 version of Dr. Emmet Brown, who created the time machine. When Dr. Brown shares something serious, Marty responds, "This is heavy." After multiple occurrences, Dr. Brown finally remarks, "There's that word again. 'Heavy.' Why are things so heavy in the future? Is there a problem with the earth's gravitational pull?"

This slang use of the word 'heavy' was from the world of the 1980's and didn't come into use until the 1960's. For someone living in the world of the 1950's, to call a serious matter 'heavy' made no sense. Because Marty and Dr. Emmet did not share the world of the 1980's, there was a breakdown in communication.

Many factors can contribute to the distance between our shared worlds. The further removed we are from each other in terms of age, culture, and language, the more we will have to work to communicate and understand one another. We must consider this when we read the Bible. The Bible was written in a different age, culture, and language from our own. This means we will have much less overlap in our shared world and will have to do some work to make sure we are deciphering the intended meanings of the authors words. And just like us, the biblical authors wrote in different genres and used literary devices like figures of speech. We'll have to cooperate with them by keeping on the lookout for when they do.

Again, Shouldn't We Just Read the Bible Literally?

It still sounds like we're leaving a lot open to interpretation and things can get all muddled up, shouldn't we just interpret the Bible literally?

The peculiar thing is, that while we each evaluate and make interpretive decisions daily (based on things like genre) to determine the truth claims of our contemporaries, few of us afford this same charity to Scripture. Instead we impose an interpretive principle on the Bible that is artificial to life. We say such things as, "If you don't read such and such a passage as literal, then you don't really believe the Bible is true." This is unhelpful and problematic.

For starters, I have yet to meet anyone who truly reads the whole Bible literally – even among those who claim they do. If they did, then I suspect we should see a lot more

eye patches and prosthetic hands! Go check out Matthew 5:29-30 if you don't know what I'm talking about.

Further, imagine if we applied this same thinking to the variety of forms of communication we encounter every day. If we demanded that every saying we come across must be interpreted literally for it to be true or have meaning, we would all become miniature Amelia Bedilia's and the integrity of language would fail.

If you're not familiar with Amelia Bedilia, take a trip to your local library. Amelia takes everything in a literal fashion. In one episode, when her parents speak of having a yard sale, she can't wrap her mind around why on earth her parents would want to literally sell the yard, especially since they so love playing in it. Her parents then try calling it a 'garage sale'. But, again, why would they want to sell the garage? The Amelia Bedilia series is a cute example of how ridiculous it is to take everything literally. But it's not so cute when we insist on doing the same when it comes to Scripture.

I hope I have demonstrated that people say true things all the time without speaking in a purely literal fashion. To treat Scripture differently fails to recognize the Bible as an act of communication, and that we have a God that is so good that He chose to communicate His Word using the language of the day where different styles of writing and speaking were not only acceptable, but expected vehicles of truth. The decision whether to interpret a passage literally in the Bible is just as much of an interpretive decision as whether to take it as a metaphor. Literalism is not always the default.

Instead of saying we should read the Bible literally, perhaps a better approach is to say we want to read the text in its context and ask what truth claims (given the context) are being made by the author. Looking for the truth claim of a text takes into consideration that God's Word is an act of communication and its authors are at liberty to employ different genres and literary devices to communicate God's truth.

Looking for the truth claims of what is being said will help guard against ascribing error to the Bible where none exists. For example, Proverbs 15:1 reads, "A gentle answer turns away wrath." If we insist that the truth claim is that a gentle answer will *always* turn away wrath, then we will consider the value of that statement to be false, since life shows us that this is not always the case. But if we consider that the Proverbs follow the ancient genre of wisdom writings, and thus speaks in broad generalities, then we'll read the truth claim as, "Generally speaking, a gentle answer turns away wrath." This, of course, is very much a true statement for wise living.

We'll want to keep all these principles in mind as we now begin interpreting Genesis. More specifically we will want to ask:

Who is the author?

Who is the original audience to whom the author is writing?

What is the occasion?

What is the shared world?

What genre and literary devices does the author employ?

Seeking answers to these questions puts us well on the way to becoming good hearers of God's Word, as we work to cooperate with His inspired authors listening for the original intent of their words in their context.