

LESSON 3: READING AND OBSERVATION

I. Introduction

A promotion for HBO's *The Girl in the Café* used a quote from a review in *The Oregonian*, calling it "an endearing romantic comedy."

- How does this quote portray the reviewer's opinion of the movie? Why?

The actual line from *The Oregonian* was, "This new offering from HBO Films is at its heart a bit of political propaganda wrapped into an endearing romantic comedy that starts losing its laughs when it gets to Reykjavik and decides its teachable moment has arrived."

- How does the fuller context change our understanding of the initial quote?
- Why did the promoters of the movie use only a portion of the original quote?
- What does this exercise teach us about the importance of context?

In order to allow Scripture to speak for itself, we need to commit ourselves to *receiving* the word as it stands, and adopting a humble disposition that seeks to accept God's word on its own terms. In approaching the Scriptures we all carry a certain amount of bias: our theology, culture, family background, generation, class, ethnicity, and education can all color the way we look at a text. No one can empty himself of all bias, but we must try. One way we can limit our bias is by taking focused time to thoroughly observe what the text actually says, rather than jumping to conclusions about what it might mean. In this study we'll examine the art of observation so that your future interpretations will be thoroughly grounded in the actual text.

I. Observation Explained

A. What is Observation? Bible observation is the process of inspecting a text from many different angles in order to become familiar with all its contents. A keen observer will seek to uncover every clue and turn over every stone.

- Why do we tend to rush through the observation process when studying the Bible?

B. Why Should We Observe? Charles Spurgeon, quoting a writer from his day, said, “Most read their Bibles like cows that stand in thick grass, and trample under their feet the finest flowers and herbs.”¹ Observation counters this tendency to trample by training our eyes to find things which others would miss. Observation is different from interpretation in that it looks to gather the who, what, when, where, and why of the text. While interpretation asks the question, “What does it mean?”, observation asks, “What does it say?”

- Why is it important to suspend judgment while making observations? What happens if you begin making interpretations too early? (Hint: How might that color your observations?)

C. What am I Looking For? Martin Luther studied the Bible as one who gathered apples: “First I shake the whole tree that the ripest may fall. Then I climb the tree and shake each branch and then each twig, and then I look under each leaf.”²

When observing a text, it may help to look for the following:

- What is the main subject of the sentence/paragraph?
- Verbs – What is the tense?³ What is the voice?⁴ Is it a command or a declaration?
- Nouns – is it singular or plural? Look up unknown words in a lexicon.
- Connecting words – “and,” “but,” “therefore,” “for,” and others.
- Repeated words or phrases
- Patterns in context – Look for similar verb forms in the passage, such as the five participles⁵ strung together in Ephesians 5:19-21.

¹ Richard Mayhue, *How to Study the Bible* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009) p. 62.

² Mayhue, p. 63.

³ Present, past, future.

⁴ Active “He hit the ball.” Passive “He was hit by the ball.” Middle “He hit himself.”

⁵ These are verbal nouns usually identified by the “ing” ending. “We was in the running.”

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- Words a given writer tends to use – For example, Matthew is the only gospel writer who uses the phrase “the kingdom of heaven.”
- Contrasts
- Comparisons
- Command
- Exhortations
- Definite articles (i.e. *the*) or the lack thereof
- Adjectives
- Prepositions (*in, on, before, out of, into, etc.*)
- Genitives⁶ (Revelation of Jesus Christ)
- Relation of the verse to the section it is in
- What does the verse not say?
- Is there a phrase that may be synonymous with some other phrase – For example, may “filled with (by) the Spirit” in Ephesians mean the same thing as “strengthened with might by His Spirit”?
- Evidence of the writer’s passion, feeling, goals, anger or disappointments.
- Various ways the author refers to Christ, God, the Holy Spirit or the Christian.
- The place of the verse in the larger context. For instance, the eight parables of Matthew 13 all deal with the development of God’s kingdom interests in the present age.
- Words that need historical data like the term “Nicolaitians” in Revelation 1.
- Words or phrases which might be explained in books on manners and customs, dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, or commentaries. For instance, what is a threshing floor in 2 Sam. 6:6, or the white stone of Revelation 2?
- References to geography – locale, distance, terrain, climate, vegetation, etc.
- References to chronology – like the relationship between Acts 15 and Galatians 2
- How much space a writer devotes to a given topic. For instance, in Ephesians the first half covers doctrine while the second covers Christian living
- Features of the writer’s style. For example, Paul’s affinity for long sentences
- Differences between Bible translations
- Other ideas?

Remember, an interpretation is different from an observation. Interpretation deals with what the text *means*, whereas the observation merely states what the text *says*.

II. Biblical Examples of Observation

⁶ These usually indicate a possessive relationship between nouns, often identified by “of”.

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A. Matthew 22:31-32 *“But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ³² ‘I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”*

- What observation does Jesus make?
- How does it impact his interpretation?

B. Matthew 22:43-45 *He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ⁴⁴ ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET” ’? ⁴⁵ If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?”*

- What observation does Jesus make?
- How does it impact his interpretation?

C. Galatians 3:16 *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ.*

- What observation does Paul make in this passage?
- How does it impact his interpretation?

III. Tools for Observation

A. **Compare Bible Versions:** Consider three translations of Ezra 7:10.

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New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update	The New International Version	The New King James Version
10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.	10 For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.	10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

- Take a moment to note all the translational differences you can find. Do any of them seem significant? Why are these passages translated differently? (Hint: What is the difference between the NIV and the other versions?)

B. What the Texts Says: Choose one version and write down an exhaustive list of what you can be sure the text says. In this case, your list would look something like this:

1. Ezra is the subject of the sentence.
2. The main verb of the sentence is “set” and the verb phrase is “set his heart.”
3. The main verb phrase “set his heart” is modified by three infinitive phrases “to study the law of the Lord,” “to practice it,” and “to teach His statutes.”
4. The phrase “statutes and ordinances” is modified by “His.”
5. There seems to be a progression from “study” to “practice” to “teach.”
6. The passage begins with “For,” implying a link to the preceding thought.
7. Immediately prior to this passage we read, “For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.” Verse 10 may provide the reason why the good hand of the Lord was upon him.
8. Can you think of any others?

C. What the Text Does NOT Say: Now make a list of things the text does not say.

1. It doesn’t say “to teach His statutes and ordinances to Israel,” but “in Israel.”
2. In the original Hebrew there were no capital letters, so technically “His” could also be translated “his.”
3. The text does not disclose the exact identity of his audience, it merely discloses the location.

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4. Can you think of any others?

D. Block Diagram: We use this tool to discover the flow of the sentence and examine the relationships between various words and phrases. This often helps us to see patterns in the verse.

10 For Ezra
 had set his heart
 to study
 the law of the Lord
 and
 to practice
 it,
 and
 to teach
 His statutes
 and
 ordinances
 in Israel.

E. Outline: This technique also helps us to see emphases, patterns, and relationships. Your block diagram will help you to arrange and order an outline.

Why the Good Hand of the Lord was Upon Ezra:

- I. He Set His Heart to Study the Law
- II. He Set His Heart to Practice the Law
- III. He Set His Heart to Teach His Statutes and Ordinances

F. Questions: Finally, write down as many questions as you can think of. These will help direct your further study.

1. Why does the text say “in Israel” and not “to Israel”? Why the emphasis on the geographic location?
2. Does “His” refer to Ezra, God, or someone else?
3. What is the difference, if any, between “statutes” and “ordinances”?
4. Should “study” and “observe” be grouped together (NIV) or should they be separated (NASB/NKJV)?

5. Can you think of others?

IV. Thought Questions

- A. What are some attitudes, habits, or perspectives that can interfere with making good observations?
- B. Why is it important for the teacher, in particular, to commit to observing what the text says before doing anything else with it?

V. Application

The application of this lesson is easy: Before you interpret, focus on discovering what the text says. When preparing a sermon, you should always take at least an hour or two to notice every nook and cranny of your text before moving on in your study.

VI. Assignment

Read Titus 3:4-7 and write down:

- 1. At least 10 things the text does say
- 2. At least 5 things the text does not say
- 3. At least 5 questions about the text

Feel free to block diagram, outline, or compare translations to help you with the observation process.

Preaching Assignment: Select the text you would like to preach for the Preaching Lab.

VII. Conclusion

Observation is the key to focused Bible study and requires that we train our minds to take meaning out of the text instead of reading meaning into it. A keen observer will approach Scripture without an agenda and humbly wait for the text to speak to them, asking the Lord to reveal wonderful things through His word.

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Appendix

THE STUDENT, THE FISH, AND AGASSIZ

BY THE STUDENT

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well,” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. “Take this fish,” said he, “and look at it; we call it a *Haemulon* [pronounced Hem-yuì lon]; by and by I will ask what you have seen.” With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.” I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly.

Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-besmeared corks half eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor, who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish, was infectious; and though this alcohol had “a very ancient and fishlike smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of eau de cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of the normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face—ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters’ view—just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and

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would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked.”

With these encouraging words he added,— “Well, what is it like?”

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: the fringed gill—arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body.

When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment,— “You have not looked very carefully; why,” he continued, more earnestly, “you haven’t seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!” and he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor’s criticism had been.

The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired,— “Do you see it yet?”

“No,” I replied, “I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.”

“That is next best,” he said earnestly, “but I won’t hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish.”

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

“Do you perhaps mean,” I asked, “that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?” His thoroughly pleased, “Of course, of course!” repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically—as he always did—upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

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“Oh, look at your fish!” he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

“That is good; that is good!” he repeated, “but that is not all; go on.” And so, for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. “Look, look, look,” was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterward, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the museum black board. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydra-headed worms; stately crawl-fishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after, and was as amused as any, at our experiments. He looked at the fishes.

“Haemulons, every one of them,” he said. “Mr. _____ drew them.”

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought in review; and, whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz’s training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

“Facts are stupid things,” he would say, “until brought into connection with some general law.” At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

The same kind of prolonged pondering of the Scriptures will eventually pay even longer dividends, stretching into eternity.⁷

⁷ Mayhue pp. 65-69