How can I read the Bible in context?

Tough Questions · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/how-can-i-read-the-bible-in-context/

One of the most important questions we can ask when evaluating a biblical interpretation is simply: **Where does the text say that?** Sound interpretation seeks to draw meaning out of Scripture based on its words, grammar, historical setting, immediate context, and the rest of biblical teaching. By contrast, *eisegesis* occurs when an interpreter reads an idea into the text that the text itself does not adequately support. This does not mean every valid doctrine must be stated explicitly in a single verse, but the greater the theological claim, the stronger its biblical evidence should be.

Exegesis Versus Eisegesis

The word *exegesis* comes from a Greek term meaning to lead or draw out. In biblical interpretation, it refers to drawing the meaning **out of** the text.

Eisegesis works in the opposite direction. Rather than asking, “What is this author communicating?” we approach the passage with an idea already in mind and read that idea **into** the text.

The distinction sounds straightforward, but eisegesis can be surprisingly difficult to recognize. An interpretation may sound plausible. It may fit someone's larger theological system. It may even be consistent with something taught elsewhere in Scripture. But none of those things demonstrates that the particular passage being cited actually teaches it.

The fundamental question remains: **Can we demonstrate the interpretation from the text?**

Start With the Immediate Context

One of the simplest safeguards against eisegesis is to read beyond the verse being quoted.

Consider the Torah's statement:

> “One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you” (Num. 15:16).

Taken by itself, someone might conclude that “one law” means the entire Law of Moses applied identically to Israelites and Gentiles.

But the surrounding verses reveal that Numbers 15:1–16 is discussing **sacrifices and offerings**. Every native Israelite “shall” follow the prescribed procedure, while a foreigner who “wishes to offer” must follow that same procedure (Num. 15:13–14). “One law” therefore refers to one standard governing the offerings under discussion, not necessarily identical covenantal obligations in every area of the Torah.

The same principle applies throughout Scripture. Before building theology on a sentence, ask what the paragraph, chapter, and larger argument are about.

Pay Attention to What the Text Actually Says

Sometimes an interpretation depends less on something Scripture says than on a series of unstated assumptions.

Acts 15:21 provides a useful example:

> “For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

Some within the Hebrew Roots movement interpret James to mean that Gentile Christians were expected to attend synagogue every Sabbath, where they would progressively learn the Law of Moses and eventually become fully Torah-observant.

But notice what Acts 15:21 actually says—and does not say.

It says Moses was proclaimed in the cities and read in the synagogues every Sabbath. It does **not** say that Gentile Christians should attend synagogue. It does not say they should go there to learn Torah. It does not say the four requirements of Acts 15:20 were temporary or introductory. And it does not say Gentiles would gradually become obligated to keep the rest of the Mosaic Law.

Each additional assumption creates distance between the interpretation and the actual words of the passage.

That does not automatically prove an inference is wrong. Scripture often communicates things by implication. But an interpreter should be able to identify which parts of an argument are explicitly stated and which are inferred.

Distinguish Observation From Inference

Good Bible study distinguishes between **what the text says** and **what we conclude from what it says**.

For example:

Observation: Paul regularly entered synagogues on the Sabbath (Acts 17:2).

Reasonable inference: Synagogues were an important part of Paul's missionary strategy.

That inference is strongly supported because Luke repeatedly tells us what Paul did there: he reasoned from the Scriptures, persuaded Jews and Greeks, and proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 17:2–4; 18:4–5).

Now consider another inference:

Claim: Paul's synagogue attendance proves that all Christians are required to observe the seventh-day Sabbath.

That conclusion requires substantially more evidence. Paul's behavior does not by itself establish a universal Christian obligation—particularly when the narrative explicitly identifies an evangelistic purpose for his synagogue attendance.

The question is therefore not whether an interpretation involves inference. **All interpretation involves inference to some degree.** The question is whether the inference is warranted by the evidence.

Don't Confuse Description With Prescription

Biblical narratives tell us many things that God's people **did** without necessarily commanding believers in every age to do the same things.

Acts tells us that early Christians sold property and distributed the proceeds to those in need (Acts 2:44–45). Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). He attended synagogues (Acts 17:2). He took part in Jewish purification rites (Acts 21:23–26).

Those events are historically significant, but simply finding an apostle doing something does not establish a universal Christian command.

This is the distinction between **descriptive** and **prescriptive** passages. A descriptive text tells us what happened. A prescriptive text tells God's people what they ought to do.

Of course, narratives can carry prescriptive implications, and commands can sometimes be limited to particular people or circumstances. So the distinction is not mechanical. But before turning apostolic behavior into Christian obligation, we should look for evidence that the apostles actually **taught or commanded** the church to practice it.

Follow the Author's Argument

Another safeguard is to identify the question or problem the biblical author is actually addressing.

Acts 15 is a good example. The controversy is introduced when some Jewish believers argue that Gentile converts must be circumcised and commanded "to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:1, 5). The apostles gather to consider "this matter" (Acts 15:6).

That establishes the interpretive frame for everything that follows.

Peter speaks about God accepting Gentiles by faith (Acts 15:7–11). James says they should not "trouble" Gentiles who are turning to God (Acts 15:19). And the Council's letter declares that the Holy Spirit and the apostles would impose "no greater burden" beyond the listed requirements (Acts 15:28–29).

An interpretation of Acts 15 should therefore explain how those statements contribute to Luke's argument. If an interpretation ends up reaching essentially the same conclusion as the position the Council was convened to consider—that Gentiles should ultimately keep the Law of Moses—we have good reason to examine that interpretation carefully.

Test an Interpretation Against the Rest of Scripture

Context extends beyond the immediate passage. Scripture should also be interpreted canonically—that is, in light of the rest of Scripture.

Suppose someone interprets the Torah's statements about "one law for the native and the stranger" as meaning that Israelites and foreigners were always under exactly the same Mosaic obligations.

We can test that interpretation elsewhere in the Torah.

Deuteronomy 14:21 prohibits an Israelite from eating an animal that died naturally but explicitly permits the sojourner living among Israel to eat it. Deuteronomy 15:2–3 distinguishes between debts owed by fellow Israelites and foreigners. Deuteronomy 23:20 permits Israelites to charge interest to foreigners while prohibiting them from doing so to fellow Israelites.

Those passages do not merely provide alternative interpretations. They demonstrate that “one law” cannot mean that Israelites and foreigners had identical obligations in every respect.

A good interpretation should account for **all** the relevant evidence rather than relying on one isolated proof text.

Watch for Hidden Premises

Many weak biblical arguments depend upon a premise that is never established.

For example:

1. Paul attended synagogue on the Sabbath.
2. Christians are supposed to imitate Paul.
3. Therefore Christians are required to attend worship on the Sabbath.

The first statement is biblical. The second requires qualification. And the conclusion does not necessarily follow from either one.

The hidden premise is that Paul's Sabbath synagogue attendance represents a universal Christian worship obligation rather than, for example, a missionary practice.

Identifying hidden premises can be enormously helpful when evaluating theological arguments. Ask:

What would have to be true for this conclusion to follow—and has that premise actually been established from Scripture?

Often the disputed theology is hiding precisely at that point.

Be Careful With Word Studies

Word studies are valuable, but they can also become a sophisticated form of eisegesis.

A word's possible meanings do not determine what it means in every passage. Context does.

For example, discovering that a Greek or Hebrew word can carry several meanings does not give us permission to select whichever definition best supports our theology. Nor should we assume that a word contains every possible nuance of its lexical range every time it appears.

The proper question is not merely, “What can this word mean?” but **“What does this word most likely mean here?”**

Grammar, syntax, immediate context, historical usage, and the author's own patterns of expression all help answer that question.

Ask Whether the Interpretation Is Falsifiable

A useful diagnostic question is:

What biblical evidence, if it existed, would cause me to conclude that my interpretation is wrong?

If the answer is “nothing,” the problem may no longer be biblical interpretation. The theological system has become immune to correction.

Healthy interpretation allows Scripture to challenge our assumptions. We should approach the Bible seeking to understand what God has revealed, not merely looking for ways to defend conclusions we have already reached.

This applies to every theological tradition. Protestants, Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed Christians, dispensationalists, Torah-observant Christians, and everyone else can read their assumptions into Scripture. No theological system makes its adherents immune to eisegesis.

A Simple Test for Evaluating an Interpretation

When you encounter a disputed biblical claim, ask several questions:

1. **What does the passage actually say?** Identify the explicit statements before drawing conclusions.
2. **What is the immediate context?** Read the surrounding paragraph and chapter.
3. **What question is the author addressing?** Follow the author's argument rather than imposing your own.
4. **Is the passage descriptive or prescriptive?** Does it describe what someone did or command what believers should do?
5. **Which parts of the interpretation are stated, and which are inferred?** Inferences can be legitimate, but they need evidence.
6. **Does the interpretation depend on an unstated premise?** Identify what must be assumed for the argument to work.
7. **Does it fit the rest of Scripture?** Test the interpretation against other passages addressing the same subject.

8. **Am I willing to let the text correct my theology?** Scripture should determine our doctrine rather than our doctrine determining what Scripture is allowed to say.

These questions will not eliminate every interpretive disagreement, but they greatly reduce the likelihood of reading ideas into Scripture.

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Luke 24:25–27** — Jesus interprets Scripture within the larger biblical story that points to Him.
- **Acts 17:10–12** — The Bereans examine the Scriptures to test Paul's teaching.
- **Acts 17:2–4** — The context explains why Paul regularly attended synagogues.
- **2 Timothy 2:15** — Believers are called to handle God's Word accurately.
- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** — All Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching and correction.
- **2 Peter 3:15–16** — Peter warns that Scripture can be twisted by its interpreters.
- **Numbers 15:13–16** — Immediate context clarifies the meaning of “one law” for the Israelite and sojourner.

Objections & Misconceptions

“Doesn't saying ‘Where does the text say that?’ rule out legitimate theological inference?”
No. Many biblical doctrines are established by synthesizing multiple passages and drawing necessary or well-supported conclusions from them. The question is not whether we may make inferences, but whether those inferences are justified by the biblical evidence. “Where does the text say that?” is an invitation to demonstrate the textual basis for a claim, not a demand that every doctrine appear verbatim in a single verse.

“Can't two sincere Christians read the same passage and reach different conclusions?”
Certainly. Interpretation requires judgment, and some passages are genuinely difficult. Christians should distinguish between teachings Scripture states clearly and conclusions that depend upon more debatable inferences. Disagreement does not mean truth is unknowable; it means our confidence should correspond to the strength of the evidence.

“Isn't everyone influenced by their theological assumptions?”
Yes. No interpreter approaches Scripture with a completely blank slate. We bring theological traditions, experiences, assumptions, and prior beliefs to the text. The goal is not to pretend those influences do not exist, but to remain aware of them and allow Scripture to correct them.

“If an interpretation agrees with other biblical teachings, doesn't that make it legitimate?”

Not necessarily as an interpretation of that particular passage. A theological statement can be true while still being drawn from the wrong text. Sound interpretation asks both, **“Is this doctrine biblical?”** and **“Does this passage actually teach it?”**

Why This Matters

Eisegesis can produce conclusions that sound biblical because they are surrounded by biblical language and supported by Bible verses. The danger is that Scripture becomes a source of phrases used to support a theology rather than the authority that actually shapes that theology.

This is especially important in apologetics. Our goal should not merely be to find verses supporting the position we already hold. We should be willing to ask the same difficult questions of our own interpretations that we ask of those with whom we disagree.

The goal of biblical interpretation is ultimately not to win an argument but to understand God's Word faithfully. That requires intellectual humility, careful attention to context, and a willingness to distinguish between **what Scripture actually says** and **what we think follows from it**.

Recommended Resources

- Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*
- Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*
- William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*
- Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*
- D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*