

Observation has been called “the art of awareness,” or the “act of taking notice.” The key question answered in this stage is the question, **“What does the text say?”** It uncovers the ‘raw data.’ The purpose of this step is “to enable one to become *saturated* with the particulars of a passage so that one is thoroughly conscious of their existence and of the need for their explanation” (Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study*, 31). As such, the results of observation will provide the basic building blocks from which one constructs the meaning of a passage. It provides the data that will be analyzed during the ‘Interpretation’ stage.

The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz

(as recorded in American Poems and Grasping God’s Word)

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, 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 proposed to devote myself specifically 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; by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me. In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started to 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 dried 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 a 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 fact – ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters view – just 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 would not return for several hours. 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 fingers down its

throat to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that was non-sense. 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 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: fringed gill-arches, fleshy lips, lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and the forked tail. 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 mortified. Still more of that wretched fish? But now I set myself to the 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 see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he 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 your look at the fish."

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of the 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.

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 say.

"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.

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 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 left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

When we observe, we want to look, look, look! And we want to do this on a number of different levels. We start from the broadest context, and work our way in to the most minute. As we begin to study Scripture, we start by becoming familiar with the Bible as a whole (which we have done) and then move on to looking intensely at each more intricate part of what we are studying. In doing this we will:

- Observe a Book
- Observe a Paragraph
- Observe a Sentence
- Observe a Word

observing books (ch. 4 of *Grasping God's Word*)

genre

As we begin to read and observe the different books of Scripture, one of the first things we must do is to identify what type of literature we are reading. Again, here is a list of possible literary forms:

<u>Old Testament</u>	<u>New Testament</u>
Narrative	Gospel Narrative
History	Parable
Law	Prophecy
Oracle of Salvation	Old Testament Reference
Announcement of Judgment	History
Apocalyptic	Epistle
Lament	Apocalyptic
Praise	Prayer
Proverb	
Non-Proverbial Wisdom	

Identify the genre of these three passages:

2 Samuel 2:1-7

Jeremiah 49:34-39

Luke 18:10-14

overall flow of thought

Most of the books of Scripture (except Proverbs) are written with a certain flow of thought or reasoning. To be able to ascertain the authorial intent, we must begin to feel for a logical line of thought as we read. Some may be harder to discover than others, but they are always present.

Flow of thought in 1 Peter

major themes

One of the most important things to notice as you read through a book of the Bible is the major themes present in a particular book. This may come by finding repeated words or phrases, it also may come as you get a sense of the occasion to which the author is writing. Either way, when we discover a book's larger theme or purpose we can begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together in a way that makes sense.

Theme of James

Theme of 2 Corinthians

major breaks and pivots

in the midst of many books, authors may shift or change direction in their logical flow of thought. These breaks ought to be signals that we pay attention to as we ask questions such as: What was the direction before the break? What is the direction after the break? Why is the break here? How can the break make sense?

Ephesians 1-3 vs. 4-6

Questions to Ask

Who? – Who is the author? Who is the book written to/for?

What? – What are the major events/themes of the book?

Where? – Where is this taking place?

When? – When is this taking place?

Why? – Why is this book included in the Bible?

observing paragraphs (ch. 3 of *Grasping God's Word*)

immediate context

Even if the focus of our studying is on a single verse, simply reading through the book and gaining the general flow of thought is not enough. We must also observe the surrounding paragraphs in order to gain an understanding of the immediate context and consequently be aware of what the author had in mind.

Ephesians 5:15-22

general to specific

Often times biblical authors will state a general principle or command, and then later explain it in greater detail. Often times the specifics will provide the practical implications of the general, which can be of great help as we move forward into interpretation. We must observe these connections in the text and be aware of their implications.

Galatians 5:16

Galatians 5:19-23

questions and answers

Often times questions in Scripture are asked for a very specific purpose. Many authors (especially Paul) will ask a rhetorical question and then answer it (or fail to answer it) in order to make a certain point. If we do not connect the questions to their entire answers, we can be left with an incomplete understanding of what the author is trying to communicate.

Romans 6:1-6

Romans 9:14-16

Romans 9:19-24

dialogue

Dialogue may seem at first glance to be too obvious to worry about. Clearly, in narrative material dialogue is employed frequently and is easy to spot. But do not simply read past the point of the dialogue. Note the fact that a dialogue is taking place. Then ask questions of the dialogue. Who are the participants? Who is speaking to whom? What is the setting? Are other people around? Are they listening? Are they participating in the dialogue? Is the dialogue an argument? A discussion? A lecture? Friendly chitchat?

Grasping God's Word, p. 49

Habakkuk 1:1-2:20

purpose statements

It is important as we look at specific paragraphs that we identify any purpose statements that they contain. At this point in the process, we are simply identifying them, but they will be important pieces of evidence as we begin to interpret and apply what we are reading. These phrases describe the reason, result or consequences of some particular action. They are usually introduced by words such as "that," "in order that," or "so that."

John 3:16

Deuteronomy 6:3

Psalms 119:11

means by which something is accomplished

It is also important to notice how things are accomplished throughout Scripture. Since much of what is done in the lives of believers is accomplished super-naturally through the power of God and His Word, not by the efforts of people, we need to observe and take note of the means that bring about particular actions, results or purposes.

Psalms 119:9

Philippians 2:12-13

conditional clauses

Much of Scripture, and God's explanation of our lives with Christ is given in the form of conditional statements. It is important whenever we encounter a conditional statement to make sure we clearly understand what the required condition is and what the result or consequence is. We can be easily led astray by quick or lazy readings of conditional clauses. We can easily identify most conditional clauses by the "if" that precedes them.

1 John 1:6

Romans 8:10-11

actions of people / actions of god

Another potentially confusing aspect of Scripture that needs to be carefully observed in order to be correctly understood is the contrast between the actions of God and the actions of people. Swift readings may leave us confused about what exactly is our responsibility to do and what God promises He will do. As a result, we ought to carefully mark out and note these two things separately so that there will be no confusion when we come to interpret.

Ephesians 5:1-2

Romans 8:1-4

tone

In addition, it is important to try and ascertain the tone of the particular passage that we are studying (which will only be able to be correctly identified from the paragraph or book levels). One of the major clues for the mood will be looking for emotional terms (as will be discussed below). Identifying the tone of a passage will be an important thing to know as we seek to determine the authorial intent of what we are reading.

Colossians 3:1-4

Galatians 3:1-4

observing sentences (ch. 2 of *Grasping God's Word*)

repetition of words

One of the most powerful teaching tools available to a speaker or an author is repetition. When phrases are repeated we know that they stand out as of special importance to the communicator. Similarly, when words are repeated within the span of a couple sentences (or even multiple times in one sentence) we ought to sit up and take notice of what it is the author is trying to convey.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

John 15:18-19

contrasts

Often times contrasts are given in Scripture to help communicate what God is like, or what He is not like. They are also used to communicate how we are supposed to live, or how we are not supposed to live. The important questions to ask are: What is being contrasted? and What does the contrast represent or mean?

Romans 6:23

1 John 1:5-7

comparisons

While contrasts focus on the difference between things, comparisons focus on the similarities. Often times spiritual truths are communicated through comparisons such as metaphors and similes as the most effective means of communicating a truth that cannot be fully comprehended by our minds.

James 3:3-6

John 15:1

Isaiah 44:6-7

lists

We also ought to stop and take notice any time we see some form of list in Scripture. A list can be any more than two itemized things placed together. When we encounter a list, we ought to ask questions like: Is there any order? Are the items grouped in any way? Is the list exhaustive? But, as we do, we can't forget to notice each individual item in the list, and make sure we understand what each one is.

Romans 12:3-8

1 Timothy 3:1-7

cause and effect

Cause and effect relationships play an extremely important role in the Bible. Much of our theology about our salvation and sanctification are derived from cause and effect statements in Scripture. Whenever we see one of these phrases we need to carefully identify the cause and carefully identify the effect. Doing so haphazardly can cause us to expect an effect from a cause that is not actually there in the text. Cause and effect statements ought to be handled with care and diligence.

Romans 12:2

Colossians 3:1

figures of speech

There are many different figures of speech throughout Scripture that need to be carefully identified and understood. Sometimes a figure of speech will be unintelligible without the aid of a commentary or study Bible. However, make sure you identify figures of speech when you see them, and be careful to define them (even if it means a little extra work).

Psalms 119:105

2 Corinthians 9:6-10

emotional terms

The words of Scripture were not written in a vacuum, but were all written in different relational contexts. There were the relationships between the authors and God and also the relationships between the authors and the recipients. As a result, Scripture is replete with emotional terms that convey important aspects necessary for accurate interpretation. These terms also convey certain types of passion and emphasis that the reader must also observe.

Galatians 4:12-16

Psalms 142:1-2

Questions to Ask

Who? – Is there anyone specifically addressed (of or to)?

What? – What are the major events/ideas described?

Where? – Any locations mentioned?

When? – Any time references (before, after, etc.)?

Why? – Why is this passage included in the Bible?

observing words

verbs

Verbs are where the action is! One of the most important places to start is to find the main verb in a sentence. What is the overall action taking place? What is the secondary action taking place? What voice is the verb (active, stative or passive)? What tense is the verb (past, present, future)? Does the verb express continuing action (like -ing verbs)? Is the verb an imperative (command)?

Colossians 3:1

Romans 12:2

nouns

People: Are there any people mentioned? Who are they? Are they mentioned anywhere else in Scripture? How are they related to the author? What is the significance of them being mentioned?

Philippians 2:19-24

Ezra 5:1

Places: Are there any places mentioned? Where are they? What was the area like? What was the terrain like? Can you find the location on a map? What was it near? What significant Biblical events took place there?

Ezra 6:6-7

John 4:1-5

Things: What other items or measurements are mentioned? Do you know the definitions of these words? Do you know what it looks like? Do you know what it feels like? What do you know about it? What should you know about it?

1 Peter 2:6-7

Luke 18:25

adjectives/adverbs

In addition to identifying the nouns and verbs and defining them, adjectives and adverbs give us a great deal of insight into the significance or nature of those nouns and verbs. First, it is important that we identify the adjective or adverb and are able to grasp what they mean, but secondly, we also need to make sure that we know which noun or verb a particular adjective or adverb is referring to.

2 Corinthians 6:14

Proverbs 10:5-6

pronouns

Pronouns are scattered all over Scripture and are (in and of themselves) not very insightful words. However, to neglect the importance of pronouns may lead us very easily into interpretational issues. The most important part of identifying a pronoun is to identify, with confidence, what it is referring to.

1 Timothy 2:3-4

1 Peter 1:12

conjunctions

If we imagine the biblical text to be like a brick house, then conjunctions are the mortar that holds the bricks (phrases and sentences) together. One critical aspect of careful reading is to note all of the conjunctions ("and," "for," "but," "therefore," "since," "because," etc.). Our tendency is to skip over them – but don't do it! Without the mortar the bricks fall into a jumbled mess. So always take note of the conjunctions and identify their purpose or function. That is, try to determine what the conjunction connects.

Grasping God's Word, p. 35

2 Timothy 1:7-8

Romans 12:1