Biblical Hermeneutics
Observations of a Biblical Passage

I. **Observation** is the first step of Bible study.

A. Observation finds the facts about the passage without evaluating their meaning or significance.

B. Two main types of observation:
   1. Overview of the whole biblical book (this gives you context for your study of a passage)
   2. Details in a passage of Scripture

II. **Basic steps of observation of a passage**

A. **Pray** (Ps 119:18).
   1. Ask God to open your eyes to see the truth in His Word.
   2. Ask Him to keep you from getting in a rut.

B. **Select a complete thought section (“pericope”) to study.**
   1. Don't study isolated verses. You can misunderstand by reading a statement out of context.
   2. A thought section generally runs from 4-25 verses. It may be one paragraph or several.
   3. A thought section deals with one main idea or if several ideas, there is a natural transition to a new section.
      a. 1 Corinthians 12: spiritual gifts
      b. 1 Corinthians 13: the nature of love
      c. 1 Cor 1:18-31: God's wisdom contrasted with man's foolishness
      d. Hebrews 11: examples of faith
      e. James 3:1-12: the righteous use of the tongue (several aspects of speech)
      f. James 3:13-18: wisdom (clearly shifts to a new subject)

C. **Familiarize yourself with the context.**
   1. Read the whole book through, preferably in one sitting.
   2. Consider making a book overview chart.

D. **Read your passage through several times.**
   1. The goal of the first reading is to get the big picture.
   2. Then read a few more times looking more carefully at details.

E. **Write down everything you see.**
   1. One of the best study aids is a pencil and paper
   2. Writing things down helps you:
      a. Concentrate
      b. See more

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c. Remember more (impresses it on your senses)
d. Retain a permanent record of what you learn

3. List every detail you can see, no matter how trivial it appears.

4. It often helps to set it aside and pick it up the next day. You often see more the second time. See the story of the student and fish (see Finzel, Observe, Interpret, Apply, pp. 20-22 or Jensen, Independent Bible Study, pp. 173-178).

F. Avoid interpreting at this stage.

1. You probably do not have enough information to interpret effectively yet.

2. If an interpretation pops into your head, write it down on a separate sheet of paper. Use it as a possible hypothesis to be tested later after you finish gathering observations.

III. Asking observational questions can help you find important details

A. The right questions can be like a shovel that digs into a passage:

1. **Who?** Who are the people involved?

2. **What?** What does it say about the people? What events happened? What ideas are expressed? What comes before and after the passage? What important words are used? What verb tenses are used?

3. **Where?** Where does the action take place?

4. **When?** When did the events take place? When did a particular event occur in relation to other events?

5. **How?** How are things accomplished? How well? How quickly?

B. Cautions:

1. Let these questions help you see what is in the passage, but don’t limit your observations to the answers to these questions.

2. **Avoid “why” questions** which cannot be answered by a direct statement in the passage. Most “why” questions are interpretive questions.

IV. Some important details to look for in the observation stage

A. **Literary type (genre)**

1. Some major literary types:
   a. Letter (Romans)
   b. Historical narrative (1 Chronicles)
   c. Gospel
   d. Poetry (Psalms)
   e. Prophecy (Isaiah)
   f. Apocalypse (Rev. 4-22)
   g. Proverb
   h. Speech (Acts 17:22-31)
i. Parable (Mt 13)
j. Prayer (Dan. 9:4-19)
k. Legal literature (most of Leviticus)

2. A book may have multiple genres. Paul's letters contain hymns (Phil. 2:5-11) and prayers (Eph 3:16-21). Revelation is mostly an apocalypse, but it contains 7 letters (ch 2-3).

3. The type of literature determines how you interpret a passage. You should interpret a parable differently than a narrative and a poem differently than a letter.

B. Important terms

1. Repeated words emphasize major ideas and help show the theme (Heb 11: faith; Rom 8: Spirit)
   a. The same or a related idea may be expressed in different words: announce, proclaim; son, child
   b. Look for different parts of speech from the same root (true, truth). This is more obvious in Greek and Hebrew than in translation: \textit{pistis} (faith) \textit{pisteuō} (believe)

2. Look for terms that seem central to the teachings of the passage.

3. Unusual terms may be significant to the theme.

4. Words that are typical of the author, but are rarely used by other biblical authors, can reflect the author’s style and special interests.

C. Structural details

1. Structural details show the overall flow of the argument and the relationship of ideas.

2. A literal translation is particularly helpful for showing these structural details. The NASB is particularly good. The NIV often removes many of these structural devices to make the translation easier to read.

3. Repeated words at key places

   a. \textbf{Inclusion}: a word or idea is repeated at the beginning and ending of a section or sentence.
      (1) Ps 103 begins and ends with “praise the Lord”
      (2) Ps 145: most stanzas of the poem are indicated by a repeated word at the beginning and end (e.g. 1-2: praise; 3-6: great/greatness; 7-9: goodness/good; 11-13 kingdom)

   b. \textbf{Chiasm}: repetition of a series of words, clauses or ideas with the repeated elements arranged in reverse order the second time. This creates an A-B-C-C’-B’-A’ pattern or any number of levels deep.
      (1) Is 22:22
          when he opens, no one will shut
          when he shuts, no one will open

      (2) Ps 51:3-11
          A blot out
          B wash me
          C clean me
          D I know
          E I have sinned
          E’ in sin
D’ teach me
C’ I will be clean
B’ wash me
A’ blot out

c. This structuring device is especially common in poetry, but may be used in prose.

4. **Connective words** (also called **conjunctions**)

a. Connective words join ideas or sentences.

b. They serve as “road signs” to the flow of the author’s thoughts and logic. They often point to structural relationships, such as cause and effect or contrast.

c. Some important connectives (adapted from Traina, *Methodical Bible Study*):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporal or chronological</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-after (Rev 11:11)</td>
<td>-although (Rom 1:21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-as (Acts 16:16)</td>
<td>-but (Rom 2:8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-before (John 8:58)</td>
<td>-much more (Rom 5:15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-now (Lk 16:25)</td>
<td>-nevertheless (1 Cor 10:5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-then (1 Cor 15:6)</td>
<td>-otherwise (1 Cor 14:16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-sometimes = logical</td>
<td>-yet (Rom 5:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-until (Mk 14:25)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-when (Jn 11:31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-while (Mk 14:43)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-since - sometimes = logical</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local or geographical</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-where (Heb 6:20)</td>
<td>-also (2 Cor 1:11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-as (Rom 9:25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-as...so (Rom 5:18)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-just as...so (Rom 11:30-31)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-likewise (Rom 1:27)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-so also (Rom 4:6)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logical</th>
<th>Series of facts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Reason</strong></td>
<td>-and (Rom 2:19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-because (Rom 1:25)</td>
<td>-or 2 Cor 6:15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-for (Rom 1:11)</td>
<td>-first of all (1 Tim 2:1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-since (Rom 1:28)</td>
<td>-last of all (Cor 15:8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-sometimes = temporal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2. **Purpose**             |               |
| -in order that (Rom 4:16)  |                 |
| -so that (Rom 5:21)        |                 |
| -sometimes = result        |                 |

| 3. **Result**              |               |
| -so (Rom 9:16)             | -indeed (Rom 9:25) |
| -then (Gal 2:21)           | -only (1 Cor 8:9) |
| -sometimes = purpose       |                 |
| -therefore (1 Cor 10:12)   |                 |
| -thus (1 Cor 8:12)         |                 |
| -so that (Matt 8:24)       |                 |
| -sometimes = purpose       |                 |
5. **Contrasts**: association of opposite words or ideas (1 Thess 1:9: idols/true God; Heb 3:15-18: rich/poor; blind/see; cold/hot)

6. **Comparisons**: point out the similarities between two things
   
a. **Simile**: A direct comparison with “as”, “like”, “just as . . . so also” (John 3:14: as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man will be lifted up)

   b. **Metaphor**: An implied comparison. Often it requires interpretation to identify metaphors. (Luke 13:32: Jesus calls Herod a fox, indicating his craftiness)

7. **Result or cause and effect**: (1 Th 1:6-7--The Thessalonians welcomed the gospel with joy in spite of suffering so that they became a model to all the believers in their area)

8. **Purpose** (Jn 3:16--God sent his Son so that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life)

9. **Particularization**: move from general principle to particulars (Heb 11--general principles about faith, then many examples of people of faith)

10. **Generalization**: move from particulars to general principle (James 2--moves from a case of favoritism to the principle that if you break one point of the law you are guilty of it all)

11. **Interchange**: alternate back and forth between 2 ideas (Nah 1: the Lord's judgment and the Lord's goodness)

12. **Climax**: builds gradually to a strong concluding emphasis (Rom 8:38-39--climax of 8:31-39 and to some extent of Rom 1-8--nothing can separate us from God's love (after a list of things that cannot)

D. **Grammatical details**

1. **Verb tense** (e.g. past, present and future)

2. **Verb voice**
   
a. **Active**: subject performs the action of the verb (“John hit the ball”)
   
b. **Passive**: subject receives the action of the verse (“the ball was hit by John”)

3. **Prepositions**: A little word before a noun or pronoun that indicates the relation of the noun to something else. Often indicates direction or location. (in, through, to, with, under, by)

4. **Questions** (Rom 8:31-35)

5. **Syntax**: The relationship of words, clauses and phrases to one another.


E. **Mood or atmosphere of the passage and book**

1. Thanksgiving (Phil 1:1-6)
2. Anger (Gal, sometimes even sarcasm!)
3. Joy (1 Thess)
4. Sorrow (Mt 27:27f)
5. Zeal (Acts 4)
6. Concern (Rom 9:1-5)
7. Seriousness (most of Rom.)

F. Main theme

Example: 1 Thessalonians 1:
- Greeting (v. 1)
- Thanksgiving for the Thess. faith (vv. 2-4)
- How the gospel came to them (v. 5)
- The Thessalonians spread the gospel (vv. 6-10)

V. Creating a Vertical Chart to Record Observations on a Passage

A. A vertical chart lists the text of the passage and allows you to record observations in an easy to see manner.

B. Advantages of a vertical chart:

1. Clearly shows the overall picture of the passage
2. You can record most observations in one place
3. Easier to record observations, particularly structure and important terms.
4. It makes it easier to use your observations to help interpret the passage.
5. Helps prepare for teaching, because the main points of the passage are laid out clearly.

C. How to construct a vertical chart

1. Copy the biblical text into the chart
   a. Use a literal translation, such as the NASB.
   b. You can paste the text into your word processor from Logos Bible software or from a Web site, such as http://www.biblegateway.com.

2. Arrange the text to display the structure
   a. Put each clause and prepositional phrase on a separate line.
   b. Put the main clauses at the left margin and indent subordinate clauses and phrases.
   c. Example, Col. 1:13:

   For He delivered us from the domain of darkness
   and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,
   in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins

   (1) “He delivered...” and “transferred” are both equal grammatically and introduce the main ideas. So they are at the left margin.
   (2) “in whom...” tells us more about “Son”, so it is subordinate (grammatically secondary) and should be indented.

3. Divide the passage into paragraphs and title each one.

4. Put a title for the whole passage at the top of the chart.
5. **Mark up the text to record your observations.**
   a. Colored pencils or fine tipped marking pens are very helpful.
      (1) Use different colors for each type of observation (e.g. circle all repetitions of the one word in blue and another in green).
      (2) You can also do this in a word processor with colored circles and arrows.
   b. Underline or circle important terms and repeated terms. Use a different color for each term.
      (1) Tip: The Corresponding Words Visual Filter in Logos Bible Software highlights repeated words.
   c. Underline important connectives.
   d. Draw a line with an arrow to show results and purpose. Label the type.
   e. Draw a line with 2 arrows to show contrasts or comparisons. Label the type.
   f. Identify grammatical features, such as verb tenses and commands
   g. Label structural features next to the clauses, such as chiasm (A B C B A) and interchange (A B A B)
   h. Include a legend at the bottom that explains the meaning of each type of markup (see example).
   i. Record additional observations in the margins or separate page.

### Basic Vertical Chart Layout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section Title</th>
<th>Paragraph Title</th>
<th>Bible text ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*other observations*

Symbols:
- ○ = repetition
- ⇆ = contrast or comparison (label)
- ➔ = result or purpose (label)
- _word_ = key word or connective
### John 1:1-18 Observations

**Jesus, the Word**

1. **In the beginning was the Word,**
   - 1) and the Word was with God,
   - 2) and the Word was God.
   - 3) He was in the beginning with God.
   - 4) All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.
   - 5) In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.
   - 6) The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

   *all past tenses*

2. **There came a man,**
   - 1) sent from God,
   - 2) whose name was John.
   - 3) He came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him.
   - 4) He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

   *all past tenses*

3. **There was the true Light,**
   - 1) coming into the world,
   - 2) enlightens every man.
   - 3) He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.
   - 4) He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.
   - 5) But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,
   - 6) who were born,
   - 7) not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man,
   - 8) but of God.

   *two present tenses amidst mostly past tenses*

4. **And the Word became flesh,**
   - 1) and dwelt among us,
   - 2) and we saw His glory,
   - 3) as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
   - 4) John testified about Him, and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’ ”

   *two present tenses amidst mostly past tenses*