A PRACTICAL METHOD FOR BIBLE STUDY

by Larry R. Kalajainen

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For more than two millenia, people have been reading and studying the Bible. The writings in the Hebrew Bible, or as it's more familiarly known in Christian circles, the Old Testament were written or compiled between the eighth and the third centuries BCE.[1] (The only writing in the Old Testament canon that was written later than the third century BCE, is the Book of Daniel, ca. 160-65). After the Assyrian conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel in the sixth century BCE, Hebrew had gradually become to a lesser or greater extent, a dead language, having been displaced by Aramaic, a Semitic language similar to Hebrew, but Syrian in origin. Jesus and his disciples very likely spoke Aramaic as their "mother tongue." After the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, Greek increasingly became the *lingua* franca of the Greco-Roman world.

Roughly a hundred and fifty years before the time of Jesus, the Hebrew texts were translated into Greek by Jewish scholars in Alexandria. The Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures was known as the Septuagint (from the number 70—the symbolic number of translators who produced it so that it would be available to the 70 known nations of the world. It was this Greek translation of the Hebrew texts that was the "Bible" known and read by the earliest followers of Jesus and by all of the writers of the Christian scriptures, the New Testament. A prominent literary critic, Northrop Frye, wrote a book, *The Great Code,* tracing the profound influence of the Bible on virtually every aspect of Western culture—on history, religious beliefs, cultural patterns, customs, language, and moral values, even though many of them are not overtly recognized.

One may *read* the Bible as part of a regular spiritual practice for personal growth, or hear it read aloud in a worship service, or simply to become acquainted with its contents. *Studying* the Bible, as opposed to simply reading it, however, implies a serious and deliberate engagement with the text of the Bible in order to understand it more deeply, using various tools and interpretive skills. Studying is not incompatible with personal spiritual inspiration, but it does imply a more reasoned approach to the text, treating it less as a divine oracle and more like any other writing which we're trying to understand.

It is important to remember that any reading of any text is an exercise in interpretation. There are no un-interpreted texts. The act of reading is an act of interpretation, because every reader brings to the text his or her own pre-understandings, cultural habits and customary ways of thinking, world view, and questions arising out of the reader's own life experiences. That is why all texts are open to a variety of interpretations. The ancient rabbis insisted that every biblical text had at least 70

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[1] In place of the older division of time in Western culture between B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (in the year of our Lord), which privileged Christianity over Judaism, biblical scholars and others now prefer BCE (before the common era) and CE (the common era).

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interpretations (that symbolic number again). In addition, not a single writing in the Bible as we have it, is the original text written by its original author. In fact, in the early times of literary production, it was almost assumed that the production of a writing was a community affair. Single authorship was not an automatic assumption. Every biblical writing has been copied repeatedly, translated, and edited at various stages by multiple editors before it got into the form in which we now encounter it. Literally thousands of manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts have been worked on exhaustively by thousands of scribes and scholars over the centuries. This fact alone should prevent us from thinking of the biblical texts themselves as "the Word of God." The *words of the Bible* and the *Word of God* do belong together, but we can only get at that relationship through the process of reading and interpreting and trying to understand and being open to the varieties of ways in which texts can speak to us.[2] No single method can get at all the possible interpretations of a text, but the following method is one that has served me well in more than four decades of congregational ministry and seminary teaching.

Although the following steps are presented in a logical order for purposes of explanation and understanding of the process, it is not necessary to apply them exactly in the order presented. All of them are important, but they may be done at different points within the whole process of reading and understanding a text. For example, one does not have to read the introductory material in a study Bible or Bible dictionary *before* beginning to read the particular biblical book or passage under study, though that may be a helpful practice to someone less familiar with the Bible. Ideally one should, however, do a quick scan-read of a whole biblical book before delving more deeply into a particular passage within that book. Most of us wouldn't think of picking up a novel and just randomly reading passages here and there. That's not the way books are meant to be read. Yet many people do pick and choose favorite biblical passages more or less randomly without paying attention to their setting in the book-as-a-whole. *When* a particular procedure is applied is less important than *that* it is applied, except that those parts of the process which provide clues to the meaning of the text should obviously precede those parts in which we are seeking a personal application of the text. In addition to the methodical steps outlined below, you will encounter three "cardinal rules of interpretation" (or at least Kalajainen's rules!) These are important for the study of any text, not only the biblical text.

I. READING THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXTS

No text exists in a vacuum. All texts were written by authors who lived in a specific time, place, and socio-political circumstances, and held a variety of religious beliefs. All readers of texts also exist in a variety of specific times, places, socio-political settings, and religious beliefs. These settings inevitably will affect the way the text is read, understood, and appropriated. There are several contexts (and probably more) that are especially important when engaging biblical texts.

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[2] My book, *The Bible Says. . . How Good is the Good Book?* (Wipf and Stock, 2013) describes in a more thorough way how we can get at the relationship between the words of the Bible and the Word of God.

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A. Historical Context of Author/Compiler and Original (Intended or Implied) Audience.

When we speak of the historical context, we are *not* speaking of the situation of the characters in the author's story, i.e., the stories about David in the Book of Samuel or the stories of Jesus and his disciples in the gospels. We are looking for clues to *what was going on in the author's own time* and setting that motivated him to write the stories of David or Jesus and to shape the stories the way they appear. The authors of the biblical writings were real people, engaged in real events, and they wrote for a variety of reasons. Some were rabbis or pastors writing to congregations addressing specific issues in their communities. Some were court historians, some were prophets who were advisors to the kings of Israel, some were liturgists and poets, some were evangelists giving shape to the foundational stories of their faith and persuading others to believe. Any information, therefore, that we can acquire about their situation or reasons for writing and the original audiences to whom they addressed their writings, will help us in our understanding. While we may never be able to say with absolute certainty that we have understood the historical setting of a particular biblical writing, attention to the real-world setting helps us avoid making the scriptures say whatever we want them to mean.

It's not necessary to spend a great deal of time at this stage. The quickest way, though not by any stretch the only way, is to use a Bible dictionary or the introductory material in a commentary or a study Bible, or even an article in Wikipedia about the particular biblical book. Just remember that you're reading somebody else's opinion, and that other reconstructions are usually possible. (A caveat about online resources: many, if not most, of the Bible-oriented websites reflect a view of the Bible that is decidedly different from that held by most mainline denominations or seminaries. In many cases, the emphasis is on proving that everything in the Bible is factually accurate or on refuting any attempt to question the Bible's authority.)

While reading introductory material is helpful, you should also look for hints about the setting and purpose in the passage which you are studying or in the larger writing-as-a-whole. (See "Reading the Whole Before Reading the Parts" below.) You may want to look at the examples below taken from the Gospel of Mark to practice picking up clues to the historical (real-world) situation and concerns of the author and/or his audience.

B. Literary Context

1. Identify the type of text you are reading.

When we read the Bible, we should keep in mind that we are not reading a single book by a single author, but a collection of writings by many authors. Reading the Bible is really reading our way through a library. There are stories, chronicles, genealogical tables, parables, sayings, poems, liturgies, and letters to name only a few of the types of literature found between the covers of our Bibles. None of us would think of reading a letter from our mothers the same way we read a play by Eugene O'Neill or a history of the fourteenth century by Barbara Tuchman or a detective story by Agatha Christie or an editorial in *The New York Times*. Each type of literature demands that it be read on its own terms and with attention to different things. The same is true of the various types of

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writings we find in the Bible. It's important, then, to decide what type of literature it is we are reading, and that will give us some clue as to how to read it. Is it narrative (story) material? Is it liturgical or poetry (Psalms) or romantic poetry (Song of Songs)? Is it a letter addressed to a local congregation (e.g. I Corinthians)? Is it a religious community's legal code (e.g. Leviticus)? Is it a "communal story of origins" (e. g. the early material of Genesis)? Some literary genres are self-identifying. The most prominent example is the Book of Revelation, which is an example of a type of literature called Apocalyptic found in Jewish writings from the third century BCE through the early Christian period into the second century CE. In fact the name, "Revelation" is a translation of the Greek word "apocalypse," a sure clue to the type of literature it is.

2. Read the whole before reading the parts.

One way we read any writing, including the writings of the Bible, with integrity is to read the whole book, story, essay, poem, or whatever. This doesn't mean that we will not extract quotations or remember certain lines of a play to quote them later in other contexts. It simply means that we will not pull single statements at random out of a work and think that we have thereby understood the meaning of the work. Yet this is precisely the way the Bible has been treated by many people. Individual verses or short passages are extracted from, say, the Gospel of Mark, strung together with a verse from one of St. Paul's letters, another verse from Jeremiah, and a refrain from a Psalm and made to say something about a particular issue. Such mashing together of one biblical passage with another without any regard for either historical or literary context does not treat the scriptures with integrity. This approach often signifies a particular belief about the scriptures held by traditionalist or fundamentalist Christians, namely that the scriptures are "divinely inspired" and therefore, all scriptural texts are equally applicable and interchangeable without regard to historical or literary context.

Another important reason for reading the whole before the parts is that many of the biblical writings are not the work of a single author, but are the product of a communal compiling or editing process over considerable periods of time. A reading of the whole work may reveal where the "seams" are— where an earlier work has been modified or edited or incorporated to fit a later situation. Books like the Psalms are anthologies rather than whole works. Each psalm is a whole work, complete in itself, though there is a logic and structure to the whole collection as well.

When you read the whole book the first time, scan it rather than give it a close and intense reading. You are only trying to get a "bird's eye view" of the writer's general agenda. The first time you read a biblical book-as-a-whole, you may find it helpful to give each chapter or unit a one or two word *descriptive* title, and this will help keep the whole plan of the book in mind. If you have the time and can do this initial scan reading of the whole at one sitting, you'll have a better feel for the overall picture than if you split it up into several chunks.

I call this "Cardinal Rule # 1" of Interpretation: **The smallest literary context for any single statement in the scriptures is the whole book in which that statement appears.**

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3. Read the parts in relation to the whole

If you were trying to explain the operation of a camshaft in an automobile drive train, you could only do so in relation to other parts of the drive train. So no passage of scripture can be legitimately interpreted in isolation from its surroundings. We are dealing with literature, not a collection of isolated oracles. So "get the flow." How does this particular passage sit within the whole book in which it appears? What is the text doing? Where is it going? How does the author move from A to B? How does this passage function in relation to the paragraphs immediately before and after it? Does it offer a contrast with the paragraphs before? A specific outworking of a general principle? A cause-effect relationship? Does it seem odd or out of place? How does it advance the argument/story?

In other words, you cannot simply quote a Bible verse and apply it to a particular situation without having some idea of what that verse means in its context, which is the context supplied by the author, i.e., the whole book (psalm, letter, gospel, etc.).

For example, before one can understand the statement in Mark 4: 34, *"But without a parable, he did not say anything to them, although to his own disciples, he explained everything privately,"* one must understand what Mark means by "parable." One has to become aware, for instance, that the whole of Mark 4 is about parables, and in that chapter, Mark uses the concept of parable not to identify a short story drawn from everyday life which makes a spiritual point, as, for example, Matthew and Luke do. Rather, he uses "parable" in the sense of "mystifying riddle." In Mark, Jesus tells parables, with the apparently intended result that people fail to understand. Furthermore, according to Mark 4: 10-12, this appears to be Mark's understanding of the purpose of parables—to obscure the truth from those who aren't prepared to open their eyes to the truth. This use is hardly what we think of when we think of parables. To extract and try to interpret any of Mark's parables without some attempt to understand how parables function in his writing, is to miss something absolutely essential to understanding Mark's whole Gospel and risk misusing the text for one's own agendas.

C. Congregational or Personal Context.

Everyone brings his or her own agenda to the interpretation of any text. There is no such thing as agenda-free or unbiased interpretation. Being aware of the agendas you or your congregation or study group are bringing to the study of the text will help you, not only avoid the worst aspects of ***eisegesis*** ("leading into" the text your own biases, opinions, cultural and theological tendencies, and personal agendas), but will also help you make connections between the world of the text and your world. This is called ***exegesis*** ("leading out" the meanings in the text that connect to your world). These connections must be made if the Holy Spirit is to speak a new word to us through the words of an old text. Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man,* Orbis Books, 1991) calls this the Social-political or Social-literary reading of the text. What is your own social, historical, cultural and political context? What motivations, concerns, prejudices, convictions, or doubts are you bringing to the text? Can you

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be at least aware enough of your own agendas (individual or congregational or national) that you can consciously try, as far as possible, to hold them in abeyance in order to encounter the text on its own terms?

II. READ THE TEXT CLOSELY—OBSERVE WHAT IS THERE.

A. Read the selected passage carefully. Read it again. And again. Don't jump to meaning at this point; just observe what is there. Focus on whole units of thought. Although a sentence is the basic unit of thought, sentences are combined into groups of common thoughts. We normally call these paragraphs, which, although they appear in English translations of the Bible, are not present in the original texts. But you may use the paragraph divisions in your version as representing more-or-less accurate divisions of the units of thought. *(Don't select the passage based on the chapter and verse divisions. These were added in the 13th century for convenience in locating passages and do not necessarily correspond to the original text or its units of thought.)*

FOR YOUR INTEREST

The work of grouping sentences into units of common ideas has largely been done for us by previous generations of biblical readers and scholars. In the earliest manuscripts that we have recovered, there were not only no paragraph divisions, but no punctuation or word spaces at all. For example, in an ancient manuscript, John 1:1 would have looked something like this (except in Greek rather than in English letters):

INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORDANDTHEWORDWASWITHGODANDTHEWORDWASGO
DTHEWORDWASINTHEBEGINNINGWITHGODALLTHINGSWEREMADETHROUGHHIMAN
DWITHOUTHIMWASNOTANYTHINGMADEWHICHWASMADE.

Add to this the fact that manuscripts were handwritten, with all the vagaries of individual handwriting styles, not to mention accidental or deliberate variants in the process of copying and transmitting, and you can begin to appreciate the painstaking work that has already been done, and why ambiguities in reconstruction of the texts still remain.

B. Give each paragraph or story in the selected passage a short <u>descriptive</u> (not interpretive) title. The use of short descriptive titles is an aide both to memory and to seeing patterns. In the example below, one may immediately see that there are four miracle stories in succession. All of them

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involve saving or restoring life. One of them is split into two parts with another inserted into the middle. (If one gave titles to each unit of Mark's Gospel, this latter point's significance would become clear as it would become obvious that this "sandwiching" of one story into another is a favorite literary technique of Mark.)

EXAMPLE: Mark 4: 35 - 5: 43

4:35-41	Jesus Stills the Storm
5:1-20	Jesus Heals Gerasene Demoniac
5:21-24, 35-43	Jesus Raises Jairus's daughter
5:25-34	Jesus Heals Hemorrhaging Woman

D. Compare translations. If you wish, read the passage from one or more different translations, and note any significant differences or questions which the other translations raise for you. Translations are different from paraphrases. The New Revised Standard, the Common English Bible, the New American Bible, Today's English Version (*Good News for Modern Man)*, the New International Version are all translations done by broad-based committees of scholars. *The Message* (Eugene Petersen) or *The New Testament in Modern English* (J. B. Phillips) are the work of single individuals, and are more accurately described as a paraphrase than a translation, though each did work from the Greek text.

III. INTERACT AND ANALYZE

A. INTERACTION—Questioning the Text

1. 5 W's, 1 H. Who, What, When Where, Why, How. Who are the major players in the story? What role do they play in relation to the situation? in relation to each other?

2. Action. What is happening here? What is being said to whom? Who is doing what?

3. Speaker/Audience. Who is speaking? To whom? Who is the audience of the speaker in the story? Is the audience of the speaker in the story the same as the audience of the author of the writing? (In literary terminology these two audiences are often identified as the "ostensible audience" (the audience of the speaker in the story, e.g., the crowd who hears Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5) and the "implied (or real) audience" (the audience for whom Matthew is telling his story of Jesus.)

In Mark 3: 31-35, Jesus is speaking in response to the crowd's announcement that his mother and brothers and sisters want to take him away because they think he's crazy (cf. 4: 21). The *ostensible* audience is the crowd in the story to whom Jesus speaks. But one suspects that the *real* or *implied* audience may be persons in Mark's community who are also struggling with families divided over the question of following Jesus. Another way of putting it is the audience *in* the story vs. the audience *reading/hearing* the story.

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4. Rhetoric. What rhetorical devices are being used to carry the meaning (e.g., contrast, comparison, cause-and-effect reasoning, general-to-particular reasoning, hyperbole, irony, etc.)? Verbal clues will help you here. For instance, a sentence or verse beginning with "therefore" usually signals a conclusion to a particular line of argument. Constructions such as "If . . . how much more. . ." signal a "lesser-to-greater" form of argument. "If your eye offends you, pluck it out. . ." is probably a good example of hyperbole. Picking up on the use of rhetorical devices demands careful and close attention to the text.

5. Narrative or logical flow. Does the flow of the story/argument make any sense? Are there interruptions in the flow, i.e., does the author make unexpected jumps (e.g. the disruption between Philippians 3: 1 and 3: 2)? Sometimes, these may signal a place where two texts have been patched together by an editor or compiler, and this will have implications for the meaning.

6. Variant readings. Are there any variant readings (usually listed in footnotes in study Bibles) which might significantly change the meaning?

7. Citations, or allusions. Is the writer citing any other scriptures? Sometimes these are set off as quotations in the text, though at other times there are simply allusions which may be harder to identify. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, there are frequent direct citations of the Old Testament, usually beginning with an introductory remark such as *"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. . ."* At other times, the references are more oblique. When the Gospel writers describe the scenes of Jesus' crucifixion, their stories appear to be narrative interpretations of Psalm 22. Even Jesus' cry from the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* is a direct quote from that Psalm, though it is not presented as such. If Mark's statement that all the disciples forsook Jesus at his arrest is historically accurate, then it is possible that none of them were present at the crucifixion, and that, therefore, eyewitness accounts are lacking in the tradition. This would imply that the present passion narratives were actually built up from the earliest Christians' interpretations of the death of Jesus based on their reading of the Old Testament. The more one reads the New Testament, the more one becomes aware how thoroughly permeated it is by allusions to, citations of, and creative and expansive re-interpretations of the Jewish scriptures. This was a common practice in Jewish circles at the time of Jesus. A creative and imaginative interpretation of a scriptural text, often taking narrative form is known as *midrash* or (depending on its form) *pesher.* New Testament authors made liberal use of both interpretive techniques, as did Jewish teachers before them.

This leads me to "Cardinal Rule of Interpretation #2:" **Ask anything about everything. Learning and understanding is the goal, and questions are the vehicle that helps get you there.**

B. Closer examination of the parts))ANALYSIS

1. Key words/phrases. Look for key words, phrases, sentences, especially those which you don't understand fully, or which seem to have special significance for the story/argument. For

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example, when St. Paul asks the Galatians in Gal. 3: 2, *“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith,”* what does he mean by “works of the law?” Does he mean an individual's attempts to earn salvation by doing good works, is he referring to a specific demand of the Mosaic law, or does he mean reliance upon some human system or authority for salvation? How might you go about deciding on one of those three alternatives? The difference in meaning between them is significant.

The questions you're asking at this point are "How do the individual parts of this passage fit together to make the whole?" and "What does the text/author mean by what it/he says?"

Concentrate on details which are significant carriers of meaning. Don't get off-track on trivia, e. g., the correct botanical identity of the tree that Zacchaeus climbed.

This leads me to “Cardinal Rule of Interpretation *#3*”: **The smallest single literary unit which conveys a complete thought is the clause or sentence, not a single word.** Words by themselves do not convey meaning. They only mean something when they appear in combination with other words to express a thought.

A generation ago, a favorite tool of biblical interpretation was word studies. Many compilations of Greek words with all the varied meanings those words may have were done by scholars across the theological spectrum. But with the publication of James Barr’s *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford University Press, 1961—now available free from Amazon or other sources), word studies as primary clues to the meaning of texts began to fade out. We cannot assume that the same word means the same thing when used by different authors or even when used in the same book of the Bible, especially if that book shows signs of having been edited and re-worked. *The sentence and immediate context in which a word appears offer the primary clues to its meaning! Secondary clues are the uses of that word in other writings by the same author.*

For example, one cannot safely assume that "faith" means the same thing in Paul's writings as it means in Luke or in the Book of Revelation. So wordbooks have to be used with care. At best they can give us a range of meanings for particular biblical words, one of which *may* be the meaning of the word in the text we're studying.

2. Consult reference tools. This is the point at which commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and/or theological wordbooks can be helpful, not for authoritative interpretation, but for detailed analysis of the text itself. Do as much work on the text yourself as you are capable of **before** consulting commentaries and other reference tools. Remember that commentaries are only someone else's opinion of what's going on in the text. It may be a better-informed opinion than yours, but not necessarily. So use commentaries but use them with discrimination.

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IV. IDENTIFY THE "BOTTOM LINE."

Another way of saying this is locate the center of gravity of the text. What's the main point the writer/text is making? What's the bottom line? Sometimes this step will be easy: the writer will say what the main point is in so many words. (E. g., Mark 3:35 *"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother,"* is probably the main point in the passage Mark 3: 19b-35.)

At other times, it won't be as easy. You will have to state the main point in your own words. (E.g., I Thessalonians 5: 13-18. The main topic of Paul's discussion is his answer to a question from the Thessalonian Christians concerning the fate of those believers who die before the triumphant return of Christ in glory. Will they miss out on the resurrection and the future kingdom? Paul's teaching is clear, but the center of gravity or the "punchline" will probably need to be stated in one's own words. One way of stating his main point might be "If not all of us, then none of us." Or perhaps, simply that Paul believes that there is communal solidarity in Christ that transcends death.

V. LIVING INTO THE TEXT

This is the final, and in some ways, most important step of all. But it can only come after the previous steps have led to an understanding of the text's meaning in its various contexts or (to the extent this may be recovered) in the author's intent. This is the move from ***information*** to ***formation***, or from ***reading*** to ***action.*** In otherwords, you are now ready to answer the question, "So what?"

This is the stage of imaginative, faith-full listening as opposed to critical reading. We might refer to this stage as "praying the text" or *"lectio divina*--divine reading." Eugene Petersen referred to this step as "contemplative exegesis."

All this is merely to say that while reading the Bible critically for understanding is essential and important, our reading will remain an academic exercise unless we move to the stage of hearing the text as a Word of God to us. The purpose of reading the Bible, for Christians, can never stop at the academic level; our life, and the life of the Christian community, is formed and shaped by these writings. So the goal of our reading of the text is not merely to understand, but to be encountered by a fresh word of the living God to whom the written word of the text bears witness. If the Bible represents the story of this God's dealings with his people, then reading the text, for us, means getting ourselves into that story. Unlike more fundamentalist Christians, we don't turn the Bible into a "paper pope," that we must obey unthinkingly. We accord the Bible authority because the when handled rightly, its words come alive in transformative ways. There are many ways to do this, and to some extent, the appropriate method will be determined by the text itself.

1. **Imagine yourself in the story.** A narrative text (e.g., a story in the Gospels such as Mark 3: 19b-35) might be appropriated by imagining yourself to be either an eyewitness of the scene narrated or by imagining yourself to be one of the main characters in the story. You might, for instance, imagine yourself to be a member of Jesus' family who is concerned for his sanity (or for your own family reputation?) and

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reflect on the story from that vantage point.

2. **Ask "so what?" questions.** If re-living the story in your imagination with yourself as a character in it is not something you can do easily (Many people cannot; this is a function of personality-type.), you might prefer to simply ask yourself "so what?" type questions as you meditate on the story. "When have I been more concerned with my reputation than with doing the right thing?" "Am I guilty of the kind of hard-hearted blindness that the scribes had, so that I can't even see something as God's work if it conflicts with my own agendas?" "Would my actions and attitudes cause Jesus to include me or exclude me from his definition of his true family?" The "so what?" questions you ask will be shaped by the interpretive questions you asked in Step III of the method. In other words, you will be asking questions about personal meaning that are in keeping with the meaning(s) which you have exegeted (led out of) the text itself. This is treating the Scriptures with the integrity they deserve.

3. **Ask what the text is *doing*.** This is a suggestion made by Fred Craddock, a well-known professor of preaching and New Testament. Is it commanding, exhorting, narrating, explaining, encouraging, judging, warning, debating, praying, pleading, or praising? This might even be part of your questioning of the text in Step III. At this stage, perhaps the question is "What is the claim of this text on me?" Or another way of putting it might be, "Am I doing what the text is calling me (our church) to do?" or "What is the text doing to me (us.)"

FOR PRACTICE: Read Mark 4:1-34. If you did not do so when you read the gospel-as-a-whole, give a short descriptive title to each paragraph or unit. Then do a close reading of vss. 10-13. Apply what you have learned so far to this passage. Look for clues as to historical setting, author's agenda, citations or allusions, and key words or concepts. Ask as many interpretive questions as you can think of. How do you see this passage fitting in to the larger unit 4:1-34? How do you see this larger unit fitting in to the gospel-as-a-whole?

FOR PRACTICE: Read and apply the method to I Corinthians 12. (Hint: the literary context will be a particularly important key to interpreting this passage correctly.)