**Introduction**

In Lessons 3 and 4 of our *Bible Study Basics* course, we examine the Observation step of Bible study. We devote two lessons to this important skill because we use it in two different ways. When we are observing a whole book of the Bible we will refer to the process as the “macro-observation” step and when we apply it to a specific Bible passage in a book we will refer to it as the “micro-observation” step of Bible study. Lesson 3 will focus on the macro step and Lesson 4 on the micro step.

In both approaches we ask the same, “Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why” questions. In the macro step the text we are investigating a whole Bible book and in the micro step the portion we study may be a chapter, a paragraph, or even a verse in a Bible book. Although we ask the same questions in both observation approaches, we do so somewhat differently when we are studying a specific passage than we do when we are studying a whole book of the Bible.

Many individual passages in a Bible book name people, actions, times, and places that we need to investigate when we interpret those specific passages. However, they provide more detail than we need when we are surveying a whole book of the Bible. We will talk about the micro-observation process in Lesson 4.

**Why Do We Use Macro-Observation?**

Whenever we read a chapter or paragraph or verse in the Bible we must note where that passage is located. Forty individual authors wrote these sixty-six Bible books over a period of sixteen hundred years, on three different continents and in three different languages. We severely limit our understanding of a passage if we lift it out of one of these sixty-six books without first answering some questions about the book from which we
lifted it.

So when we are surveying a Bible book we ask “Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why?” of the whole book to provide the background we need to accurately interpret any single passage we want to study in that book. If we fail to start our observation process by asking these questions of the whole book, we may distort the meaning of individual passages that book contains.

**How Do We Do the Macro-Observation Step of Bible Study?**

There are six questions we must answer when we observe a book of the Bible:

- **WHO** – Who wrote this *book*?
- **WHO** – Who was the *book* written to? And what do we know about their relationship?
- **WHAT** – What is the *book’s* major theme or themes?
- **HOW** – How is the *book’s* content organized?
- **WHERE** – Where was the *book’s* writer and the recipient(s) when the *book* was written?
- **WHEN** – When was the *book* written?
- **WHY** – Why was the *book* written? What was its intended purpose?

We emphasize the word *book* in each question because as we read the book, it’s easy to become fascinated with the details of certain passages and lose sight of our first task. We can’t accurately study any single text in a book until these larger questions about the whole book are answered. Just like we may be tempted to eat our cookie dough before we bake the cookies, we may be tempted to stop and sample specific portions of a Bible book before we have finished the important macro-observation step.

There are two approaches that we use in combination to find answers to our six questions.
Independent Study

There is an appropriate time to use commentaries, Bible handbooks, and study Bibles to help us answer some of our questions. But to go there too soon is to handicap the Bible study process. There is no substitute for our own repeated reading of a Bible book. By searching the book for answers to these six questions we force our mind to interact more deeply with its content. The repeated, intentional reading builds a familiarity with the whole book that allows us to make connections between the book’s various passages and ideas. Like a good detective who makes connections between all the pieces of evidence to solve a crime, we are able to connect the book’s “evidence” by observing and gathering this information ourselves. Repeated reading of the book creates the kind of familiarity with its content that helps us link its various parts together.

Using the Tools

When we have developed a working knowledge of a Bible book and found answers to as many of the questions as we can through our own investigation we may turn to other resources. We use study Bibles and commentaries as tools. But we must not let them become crutches that abort our own discovery process. The level of familiarity we gain with a Bible book through our own macro-observation step serves us well when we apply the micro-observation step to any passage we are studying.

Applying Macro-Observation to a Bible Book

When we ask the “WHO” questions of a whole Bible book we identify the writer and the recipients. Then it’s important to think beyond the names of the writer and his audience and discover the nature of their relationship. We see the importance of knowing something about the writer and the audience when, for instance, we study the four Gospels. We attribute many of the differences between the gospel accounts to the fact that each author was writing from his own perspective and was explaining Jesus’ life to a different audience than the other three gospel writers. Or if when we read 2 Corinthians and Philippians we realize that Paul had a strained relationship with many of the Corinthians but that his relationship with the Philippians was
warm and grateful, we read individual passages in both of these letters with greater insight.

**WHAT** is the book about? Most books have either a single or a few major unifying themes. The theme of Genesis, for instance, is beginnings. Moses presented the beginning of everything in chapters 1–11 and of Israel in chapters 12–50. Amos is mainly addressing injustice in Israel. Ephesians focuses on unity. When we discover the book’s main ideas we will more accurately interpret specifics passages in the book.

**WHAT** genre or genres is the book written in? It is essential to identify what writing style the author used. If we read a psalm as if it’s narrative, or an epistle as if it’s poetry, neither book will make sense. We will talk a bit more about genres in Lesson 4 because many books contain various writing styles. But when we do the macro- study of a whole book we need to be aware of its genre or genres as well.

**HOW** the writer organized his material helps us understand what role a specific passage plays in the book’s purpose and theme. Most of us have heard about the dangers of taking a statement out of context. This question deals with exactly that danger. We read a book’s chapters and verses more profitably if we know how they contribute to the book’s major idea(s) and purpose. Romans 12:1–2, for instance, plays a pivotal role in shifting Paul’s emphasis from explaining the gospel theologically in chapters 1–11 to how we live the gospel in chapters 12–16. Isaiah 40 transitions Isaiah’s content from God’s threat of judgment to His promise of restoration for Israel. When we know how a book is organized we can more accurately interpret each passage’s intended meaning.

Identifying **WHERE** the writer and reader were located is important. We interpret passages in Philippians as we do because we know Paul was writing from prison. Knowing that Jeremiah was in Jerusalem and Ezekiel was in Babylon while they were prophesying is essential to interpreting their books.

**WHEN** a book was written is important to interpreting its content. Something as simple as Old Testament and New Testament, for instance, matters greatly. Knowing that Haggai was encouraging the Jews to rebuild their temple after the Babylonians had destroyed it is essential to making sense of his book.
WHY each book was written is essential to interpreting its contents. Only when we read Deuteronomy as God’s code of blessing and cursing for Israel’s obedience and disobedience do we understand its crucial role in the rest of the Old Testament. And if we fail to see 2 Corinthians as Paul’s defense of his apostolic ministry, we cannot read it correctly.

Conclusion

To accurately interpret any passage in a Bible book we have to understand the “Who, What, How, Where, When, and Why” of that whole book. There is great value in studying portions of any book of the Bible and Lesson 4 teaches us how to do that. But we will always apply micro-observation to an individual passage more accurately if we have invested time to apply macro-observation to the book where that passage is written.

Suggestions for Further Study

An excellent way to gain familiarity with the books of the Bible and add to understanding of each Bible book is to study one of ODBCU’s many Bible courses.

For overview surveys:
- SF105 Bible Basics
- OT128 Old Testament Basics
- NT109 New Testament Basics

For more advanced Bible studies:
- ML507 Biblical Hermeneutics is a more in-depth course on how to study the Bible.
- Old Testament courses OT216 through OT227 are in-depth studies of the Old Testament books.
- New Testament courses NT217 through NT228 are in-depth studies of New Testament books.