



Detailed Observations

Before interpreting Scripture, the reader needs to observe biblical text with careful intent. Its observation involves taking a discourse's smaller unit and placing it under the microscope, so to speak, to examine its fine details while asking closed to open-ended questions. Why complete a detailed observation? First, a close reading forces the exegete to put aside any preconceived or outside source interpretations. Second, it opens access to both clear and deeper meanings to authorial intent and the original audience. The most basic observation level determines responses to the who, what, when, where, how, and for what reason questions. In a more advanced reading, the next level establishes deeper meaning through resolving open-ended questions in three areas:

1. within the text (literary, co-text¹);
2. behind the text (historical, cultural, social, geographical, political); and
3. cross-cultural communication (i.e., cultural boundedness, contextualization, cultural location, social location, cultural sifting, etc.).²

Step 1: Read and listen to the passage in whatever translation you normally use for study several times before writing any observations. Remember, people listened to both Hebrew and Greek text orally centuries before the availability of print. Listening to Scripture gives you a different understanding of the biblical text in contrast to reading it. Read and reread the assigned passage several times throughout the detailed observation process. Rereading gives access to a fuller meaning and opens the door to the Spirit's knowledge and revelation.

Upon engaging with the passage, ask the following questions. What did the inspired author want to say in this passage to the authorial audience?³ What does God want to say to the readers then and now, each with different locations? Also, what understanding/s does the Holy Spirit illuminate?

During initial readings, look only at the selected passage. After developing initial close-ended questions, read within the immediate and surrounding chapters to find the answers to the queries;

¹ Co-text refers to connecting words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and larger text that merge to provide meaning. Contextually, one piece of linguistic data gives clues to a smaller and larger understanding.

² See glossary that defines the communication terms at the end of this document.

³ Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). The authorial audience refers to readers living in the sociohistorical context of the text. In other words, the actual historic readers.

however, do not cross-reference outside the book at this time. Instead, find the basic information first.

Step 2: Set up the detailed observation template with four different translations: New King James Version (formal equivalence), English Standard Version (formal equivalence), New International Version (formal and dynamic equivalence), and New Living Version (dynamic equivalence), and Hebrew or Greek Interlinear (formal equivalence). The multiple translations provide diverse perspectives.

Some people work with a two-column template with observations and questions, while others use a three-column format looking at the text, observations, and questions.⁴ In another three-column variation, the structure includes observations, questions, and possible meaning.⁵

This class will work with a three-column format, divided by observation, questions, and possible meanings (possibilities) detailing each verse comprising a passage. Place the verse, written in five translations above it. I will provide the completed template for each of you on Google docs. **You will work right on Google docs. Do not send me the pdf of it. Do begin over the weekend. You cannot complete a detailed observation in a one-hour sitting.** A detailed observation takes time and meditation to complete. See below for an example of a detailed observation template for Ezr 9:5.

Ezr 9:5

“At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God (NKJV).
“And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, (ESV).
“Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God” (NIV).
“At the time of the sacrifice, I stood up from where I had sat in mourning with my clothes torn. I fell to my knees and lifted my hands to the Lord my God” (NLT).
“And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God,” (Interlinear).

Observations	Questions	Possibilities
9:5		•

⁴ Kenneth Schenck, *Brief Guide to Biblical Interpretation* (Marion: Triangle Publishing, 2009), 6.

⁵ Abson Joseph and Larisa Levicheva, "Doing Detailed Observations" (Lecture, Indiana Wesley Seminary, August 24, 2021).

Step 3: Once you have read and listened to the text several times, highlight the key words, prepositions, conjunctions, verbal commands, patterns, repetitions, themes, words you don't understand. Then, read across the translations (NKJV, ESV, NIV, NLT, and HIL/GIL). You can color code them. See the Ezr 9:1 example on page 4.

Without making any interpretation, what do each of these say about the text? For example, in Ezr 9:1 (NKJV), the sentence begins with “when,” indicating something occurred before it. The verse does not say what, though. That is an observation for the first column. In the second column write what occurred at the end of Ezr 8 that preceded 9:1. Looking briefly at 8:36, the verse doesn't tell much that would explain 9:1. For right now, leave the observation and question as is and return to it later.

Ezra 9:1 also shows three keywords that stand out and need defining: separated, peoples of the land, and abominations. First, separated in the NKJV may refer to Israel keeping themselves apart from peoples of the land. Ezra 9:1 also shows three keywords that stand out and need defining. However, at this time, the text does not give enough information to define it. So in the middle column, write the questions, what does separated mean in this context? Please do not assume it translates the same as somewhere else in Scripture or define it in contemporary terms—language changes over time, as does the reader's receptivity and social/cultural location to it. Thus, write in the questions column; what does separated mean in this verse? Leave the possibilities column blank for now.

Second, the next keyword that jumps out is “peoples of the land” (NKJV). The descriptor uses peoples written in the plural in a purposeful form to denote foreign nations outside of Israel: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. That becomes an observation to write in the first column. Leave the second and third columns blank for this one.

The third keyword is abominations (plural). The passage gives a clue to its meaning by saying it occurred due to the people of Israel, priests, and Levites not separating themselves from the “peoples of the land” (NKJV). Further, the NIV and NLT referred to an abomination as detestable practices. (Perhaps, the plural form reflects more than one action.) Write this in the observed column. Then, write in the second column the question, what more does the passage say about the abominations? Since you do not have an answer, leave the possibilities column blank.

Ezr 9:1

“**When** these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not **separated** themselves from the **peoples of the lands**, with respect to the **abominations** of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (NKJV).

“**After** these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (ESV).

“**After** these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites” (NIV).

“**When** these things had been done, the Jewish leaders came to me and said, “Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land. They have taken up the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites” (NLT).

“**Now** when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, [doing] according to their abominations, [even] of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (Hebrew Interlinear).
<https://www.scripture4all.org/OnlineInterlinear/OTpdf/deu6.pdf>

Observations	Questions	Possibilities
<p>9:1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When (NKJV, NLT) or After (ESV, NIV) and Now (HIL) mean that some event or action occurred before it. • Key word: abomination (need meaning), separated, peoples of the land. • The “peoples of the land” (plural), as noted by the text, include the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites (NKJV). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What occurred at the end of Ezr 8 that preceded 9:1?? • What does separated mean in this verse? • What more does the passage say about the abominations? • Did Israel denote only the Golah from Babylon or other exilics from the Northern Kingdom? • What were the abominations? • Who caused the abominations? • When does this event occur? During exile or after? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •

<p>9:1 Continued</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abominations (plural): The passage gives a clue to its meaning by saying it occurred as a result of Israel, its priests and the Levites not separating themselves from the peoples of the land. Further, the NIV and NLT referred to abominations as detestable practices (Maybe more than one action.) The verse does not specify date. The leaders spoke (ESV uses officials, NLT says Jewish leaders, and HIL calls the leaders princes). They spoke to “me,” unidentified throughout Ezzr 9; however, the previous chapter identifies the listener as Ezra. While the verse does not specify the event location, Ezzr 2:70 locates the Golah in Jerusalem and the cities where they lived in all Israel upon return. The verse does not state what led to it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To whom did the leaders speak? What more can we learn about the leaders? If the leaders spoke to Ezra, what position did he hold? How does not separating themselves from the “peoples of the land” relate to the Shemas of Dt 4:1; 5:1; and 6:4. How can the practice of Israel separating themselves from the peoples of the land be understood in the Deuteronomic Code? . 	
--	---	--

Step 4: Determine the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the passage. You want to know the date of the passage, not the time of writing the book. This verse does not say when. Research the passage occurrence more later. Write that the verse does not specify the date in the observation column. Then, in the question column, ask when did this event occur? (Whether the event transpired during pre and/or post-exile makes a difference in terms of understanding the passage.)

Who does the talking in this verse? The leaders spoke, but to whom? Who is “me?” That person remains unidentified in Ezzr 8; however, the previous chapter describes the message recipient as Ezra. Also, the text does not say much about the leaders. We might take clues from other versions. The ESV uses officials, NLT says Jewish leaders, and HIL calls the leaders princes. What does that mean? Reword this for the observed column and write a corresponding question in the second column. Leave the third column blank for now.

Finish the where, and how of the passage. The verse does not specify the location of the event, nor the how behind it. Write this information in the first column. We can ascertain the why due to the nature of the abomination.

Step 5. Continue this process for each verse. When you learn information from a preceding verse, you can add to it and also write it in that verse box. For example, Ezr 9:2 explains more about abominations noting Israel had taken daughters for themselves and their sons from the peoples of the land (foreign nations) so that the holy seed mingled with them (NKJV). The leaders and officials led the way. Then, remove the questions as you answer them (What more does the passage say about the abominations?). For the first round, you want to answer questions.

Step 6.

Ultimately, by the second round of the detailed observation you want to answer all the basic questions. In the next step, you'll ask open-ended questions related to culture and contextualization. I'll teach you that with followup instructions.

Conclusion

The first and second run-throughs of your detailed observations provide you with a beginning understanding of the text. It will not provide you with all the answers, rather the basics from which you can move to a text-to-life application regarding communication across cultures.