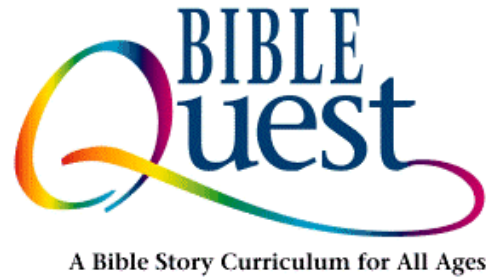


## Leader Article



## Every Learner an Interpreter

“Through their imaginations, emotions, and minds, persons are invited into the biblical world, its dilemmas, and situations. By entering into the Bible story, persons of all ages may come to imagine themselves, their community, and their world in new ways. Such imagination may lead to shaping and forming them in faith, encouraging them to connect the Bible story with their contemporary situation.”

*(Bible Quest Foundations paper, page 3)*

In a church school group for grades 6-8 thirteen-year-old Mindy has been listening to the leader tell the story of the wise men who visited Jesus at his birth. She has heard the story more times that she can remember, but today it catches her attention in a new way. “Opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). As the leader suggested resources for learning about frankincense and myrrh, Mindy pounced on the term “treasure chests.” She had recently been in a school play in which the characters stored up their leftover goods in a treasure chest. Could it be that the wise men were very wealthy, she wondered, or were they offering Jesus gifts that were leftovers from something else, gifts that did not really cost them very much? Was she doing the same thing with the small change she put in the offering every week?

Mindy was interpreting the Bible story from her recent experience. So was her father when, on another Sunday, his adult group considered the story of Noah. “Why do you think God destroyed the earth in a flood?” the leader asked, then paused to give the group time for reflection. “The text says that God saw all the evil in the hearts and deeds of people and was grieved,” suggested Alice Anderson. Mindy’s father, having years before lived through the flooding of the river near his childhood home, had often wondered about the Noah story. Today the story hit him afresh. “Maybe God sent the flood because God was disappointed in human beings,” he suggested. “Do you suppose God is ever grieved over our relationship with God and with one another?” asked the leader. “What in the world causes God grief?” As the group entered into a lively exchange about the troubles of the world today, they were interpreting the Noah story.

On yet another day, a group of three- and four-year-olds worked together on a puzzle based on Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-9). Sammy Anderson, Alice’s grandson, about to turn four, remembered a phrase from the story the group had just heard, “the wolf shall live with the lamb.” “I thought a wolf would eat a lamb,” Sammy said. “My dog would eat a cat if he could catch it.” Then Sammy remembered another phrase in the story, “a little child shall lead them.” He began to wonder

how he, a young child, could help bring about peace between his dog and the neighbor's cat or between his older brother and sister.

Sammy, too, was interpreting the Bible, as were his cousins in a smaller church in another state. Nan, age eleven, and Joe, age seven, participate in a group that includes learners from kindergarten through grade 8. Recently they heard the story about two disciples who encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). "Who do you think those disciples were?" Nan asked her brother. "According to Luke, one of them was Cleopas," Joe answered.

"Yes, but who was Cleopas, and who was the other disciple?" pursued Nan. "I bet the other disciple was his wife!" Thus began speculation between brother and sister about the real identity of the two disciples who met Jesus. They were learners. They were interpreting the story, bringing their personal experiences to their understanding of the story.

A basic tenet of *Bible Quest* is that we who are learners interpret the story of the Bible through the lens of our lives. No matter how young or how old we may be, when we encounter the stories of scripture, we seek meaning from those stories in our own experiences. We ask questions; we ponder questions posed by others; we pray; we play; we act; and we state our views and beliefs.

## A Long History of Interpretation

This principle of Bible study that focuses on the learner as an interpreter, harks back to the Protestant reformation with its emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. Yet long before John Calvin and John Wesley, long before Martin Luther, the actors and writers of scripture interpreted earlier revelations of God in light of their times. From the beginning, when the stories of Scripture were first told, those stories were themselves interpretations of God's mighty acts in the human arena.

Thus, the writers of Genesis's telling about creation interpreted God's creative activity in light of their understanding of the world. Thus, psalm writers, reflecting on Israel's history, addressed God with a variety of personal emotions. Thus, The Acts of the Apostles tells about the growth of the Christian movement in light of what God had already done through Peter and Paul and other followers of Jesus. Further, Bible stories often openly interpret other stories in scripture. Recall, for example, Jesus and the disciples walking through a grain field on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). When the Pharisees criticized the disciples for plucking grain, Jesus, in defense of his followers, cited David and his companions, who ate holy bread because they were hungry when they entered the house of God.

The Pharisees, of course, had a different interpretation of David's experience in eating the holy bread. This disagreement indicates the tension that often arises as different learners, out of their different personal backgrounds, interpret the Bible in different ways. We live in continual tension with scripture as we seek its meaning for us, and we live in frequent tension with one another as the Holy Spirit speaks to us in our unique personal situations. Nonetheless, we trust the Holy Spirit to reveal God's way to us as individuals and to the Christian community.

## Personal Insights

Through personal study of the Bible, God speaks to us. Moreover, the learner soon discovers that the best insights into scripture are gained through relationships within the Christian community. In study groups, in worship, in the sacraments and ordinances, in social activities, in outreach programs, in everything the church does, the learner is continually being prepared to interpret the story of scripture. When the church is caring and open, the learner is challenged and enabled to take risks in expressing a personal understanding of the biblical story.

Each learner comes to the Bible with unique experiences and with a variety of abilities. As we grow and mature, our insights change. A Bible story can take on a different meaning for us when we are thirty than it had when we were twelve. Not everyone learns in the same ways, and not everyone has developed personal learning abilities to the same extent. Thus, two learners may have nearly equal gifts for music, but only one of them can play an instrument or sing with confidence. Two learners may be given a reading assignment, and one gets right to the task while the other, unable to read above a third-grade level, stares out the window. To explore this idea further, read the article “Many Ways of Learning,” found in this Leader Kit.

## **Tempered by Community**

In *Bible Quest*, Bible stories are regarded as open ended. Revelation closes with a promise, not with “the end” to the story that begins in Genesis. Each learner, each teller and hearer of the story, interprets the story personally. That does not mean, however, that any and every interpretation can be accepted as correct. Rather, the learner, having exercised the right and responsibility to interpret the story, is then obliged to assess that interpretation in light of the best insights and interpretations of others in the Christian community. The Holy Spirit that reveals God’s truth to individuals also moves in the church to reveal the truth. For that reason, the learner, the interpreter, never views scripture alone, but submits all personal understandings to the scrutiny of others.

It is inevitable that we who hear and read the Bible story, we who experience it in any way, shall interpret the Bible for ourselves. Every time we tell or hear a Bible story, we reinterpret it in the light of the immediate situation. Further, we avoid attaching moral lessons to the story (lessons that other may or may not find relevant). Rather, we trust others, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to interpret the story in their lives.

“Every learner an interpreter” is a far cry from the pat answers that Sunday school teachers and preachers sometimes give. It is a far cry from the clear-cut advice that some learners seek. Yet, it is the only way we find relevance in the Bible for our own lives. It is one way that the Bible becomes God’s Word to us.

