

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE THROUGH THE FATHERS

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Who are the Fathers of the Church? Orthodox people hear them mentioned often. The Fathers were holy men who were great theologians, thinkers and writers of the Church. They expressed the doctrines of the Church, they gave moral instruction to the faithful, they explained the Scriptures, they defended the Church against heresy—all of these things. Were there mothers of the Church also? It isn't that the Church is trying to be sexist, but the fact is that women barely received an education in antiquity because they didn't go out and have careers. So because there were not educated women very often, we don't have any mothers of the Church—not in the sense that we have Fathers of the Church. A few Christian women did leave writings, but not very many, certainly not compared to the men. There were certainly just as many great female Saints, but because women weren't educated they didn't leave behind writings and we don't have their influence.

When did the Fathers live? We do have Fathers from recent centuries, but the most famous are those from the Golden Age of the Fathers, that's basically the fourth century. And they're the ones referred to the most often. People like [St. John Chrysostom](#), [Basil the Great](#), Athanasios, [Gregory the Theologian](#), Gregory of [Nyssa](#),

Jerome, Augustine, and others. We talk about them quite a lot, but the purpose of the Christian life is not simply to celebrate the memory of these men, not just to remember them, to paint their icons, to quote them, study them, but as in the case with all the Saints, the Fathers of the Church are placed before us by the Church as exemplars that we might imitate them, as they imitated Christ. Certainly they are guides for us in interpretation of the Bible, in theology. They are Saints. That's why we read them, not because they were brilliant, not because they were great orators or great writers, but because they were holy men. That's why we trust them in what they have to tell us. If we are to imitate them, let's discover what shaped them. What inspired them? What influenced them? Certainly, many had wonderful parents. Many had holy parents. Many had great spiritual mentors and teachers, and all of them had a wonderful education, a pagan education, a university type of education. But what did they all have in common? They all had different parents, they had different educations, different teachers, different mentors. What did they have in common that formed their character? Of course, it's the Bible. What did Chrysostom take with him to the desert, when he subjected himself to extreme fasting? What did he spend hours memorizing? The Bible. When Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian went off to the wilderness of Pontus to live in their little monastery, what occupied the intellect of those great minds? The study of the Scriptures. What was the foundation of the prayer life of all of the Fathers and frankly all early Christians? The Psalter (the Psalter is another word for the book of Psalms.) What did Athanasios turn to when he was fighting Arianism? What did Cyril of Alexandria turn to in order to fight Nestorianism? What did all the Fathers turn to in all of the battles against heresy? Of course, the Holy Scriptures.

We have always been reading the Bible

Now since they used the Scriptures so effectively in these great battles, and of course, since they were all so well educated, does this mean that the Fathers considered the Scriptures to be the domain of only monks, priests and bishops (because most of them were bishops, although some were presbyters, like Jerome, and some were laymen, like Justin Martyr)? Did they think that only the educated, clerics and monastics should read the Bible? Certainly not. All of the Fathers emphasized the importance of the Bible as an indispensable source of spiritual instruction, inspiration, guidance, and comfort for all Christians. This was the case not only in the East, but also in the West. The Western Fathers such as Ambrose and Augustine and Jerome also encouraged Scripture reading and study for all Christians. They immersed themselves in the Bible. They wrote and preached on the Scriptures endlessly. They discussed and debated controversial passages, and we have wonderful exchanges between Augustine and Jerome on certain passages, the interpretation of which they didn't agree on. They pushed for more accurate Latin translations.

But what happened in the West was that soon after the Golden Age of the Fathers, the city of Rome fell, and of course the Western Roman Empire fell, and education and culture dramatically declined in the West. The Western Church kept their Scriptures in Latin and kept their liturgy in Latin. Latin almost disappeared as a spoken language; even if someone was literate in his own, native language, the Holy Scriptures were inaccessible to him, since the only people who knew Latin were the very wealthy, who were educated, and clerics and monastics. So eventually the Catholic church adopted

the attitude that the Scriptures were never intended to be read by ordinary people, but only by the clergy. This, in fact, was never the case! From the very beginning the Fathers of the Church encouraged everyone to read the Bible, but that was not the stance of the Catholic church after it had split from the Orthodox Church.

One of the complaints of Martin Luther against the Catholic church was this very thing. One of the first things that Martin Luther did was to translate the Bible into German, and in general during the Reformation there was a great deal of interest in providing the Scriptures in the common tongue of the people. This had been going on for some time in Western Europe, but people paid a heavy price for it. There were people such as Tyndale who translated the Bible into English, and people who did this kind of work were subject to a lot of persecution. They were imprisoned, they were burned at the stake, they had to flee for their lives, or they had to go into hiding.

This was the situation in Western Europe, but in the East the situation was never like that. The Orthodox Church always encouraged the reading of the Bible by all Christians. When Orthodox missionaries took the faith to other places in the world, one of their first tasks was to translate the Divine Liturgy and the Bible into the language of the people. We see this consistently. Very often those people to whom they took the Gospel did not even have a written alphabet and the missionaries had to create one. And we see this in the case of St. Innocent of Alaska, who lived among the Aleut peoples of their islands and translated the Scriptures into several of the native dialects. We see this in the case of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, who evangelized the Slavs and translated the Bible into Slavonic, and St. Euthymius who did this for the Georgian people, and so on. So this was the Orthodox tradition. This is not something unique to Protestants. The Protestants didn't invent the idea of translating the Bible into many languages and making it available to people. They certainly protested against the Catholic church for not doing that, but that was the Orthodox tradition long before the Protestants ever existed.

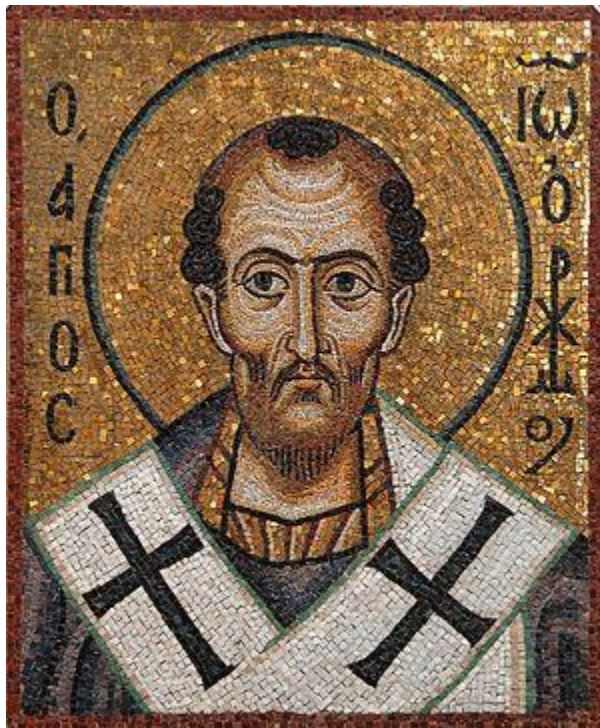
Why don't we study the Bible today?

Now despite our rich heritage of preserving and promoting the Bible, despite the countless advice of Holy Fathers as to the importance and benefits of Bible reading, the fact is that most Orthodox Christians today rarely pick up and read a Bible, so we're going to discuss that today. Why were the Fathers so insistent on regular Bible reading and what benefits did they see in it? How would they respond to the excuses that we offer today for neglecting Scripture study? Well first let's consider that St. John Chrysostom observed that Jesus did not write Scriptures. The Lord instead bequeathed to us the Holy Spirit. The Lord intended that we live lives directed by the Spirit, but because we do not live according to the grace of the Spirit, we stand in need of Scriptures. So Scriptures exist because of our weakness and sinfulness, and the Scriptures' sole purpose is the salvation of humanity. All of the Fathers said this and repeatedly emphasized to their congregations that Scriptures were written for our benefit and correction.

Among the favorite verses consistently quoted by the Fathers, including Chrysostom, Basil, Augustine, Ambrose and others was St. Paul (1 Cor. 10:11), when he said, *All*

these things were written for our instruction. They really took that to heart. Another one of their favorite verses to quote was, *Search the scriptures*, which is the title of this program for precisely that reason. They loved to quote the Lord who said, *Search the Scriptures* in John chapter 5 verse 39. Since the Scriptures were given for our benefit, it's even more important that Christians study the Bible and profit from it. Chrysostom warned that the Christian who chooses not to profit from the Scriptures (because it is our choice to read them or not), Christians who instead neglect Scriptures, give them no account and treat them as though they have no purpose, will be judged even more severely, since they were given by God for our benefit. It is as though we are despising God, rejecting Him, by not reading the Bible.

St. John Chrysostom. Why study the Bible?



St. John Chrysostom

Now, why is it that Chrysostom, for example, was so adamant about his congregation reading the Bible. What benefit did he think it would provide to them? Well, he was very worried about the evil influences that were corrupting his congregation. In the 390s, the late fourth century, St. John Chrysostom was a presbyter in Antioch, which was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. After that he became the bishop of Constantinople, which was of course the Eastern capital of the Roman Empire. So he served in two large urban places; the people in those cities were very sophisticated, not at all different from what we are like today. They enjoyed their entertainment, and their good times, and their parties; they had beautiful mansions and all kinds of luxuries that we really can't even comprehend. We have technology, but in many respects the lifestyle was the

same. Chrysostom worried about this and said that if his parishioners were leading virtuous lives, he would not have been so concerned that they were almost entirely ignorant of the Scriptures. But he was worried, because they had no trouble remembering the names and characteristics of the charioteers and the horses that were racing that week in the stadium, they knew lots of verses of lewd songs that they learned in the theatre, but they were so ignorant of the Bible that they couldn't even quote a single psalm. They had no difficulty sitting for hours at the theatre to watch immoral pagan plays, but they complained of fatigue and boredom if his sermon ran too long. So Christians at that time were not like the Christians of earlier eras, who were subject to persecution. Christianity was not only legal, but it was the official religion of the empire and people had become quite lax. So instead of avoiding the evil influences and unwholesome customs of the prevailing culture, which was still very much influenced by paganism, (because there were still many pagans around), most of Chrysostom's congregation pursued those things. They partied it up, they enjoyed these immoral kinds of entertainment, and there was the threat of heresy. The greatest threat at that time was Arianism, which taught that Christ was not God equal to the Father but instead He was a created being. Heresy and the lifestyle of the people led Chrysostom to emphasize the study of the Bible with the hope that reading the Bible would counteract these evil influences and draw his congregation's attention back towards the spiritual life.

Chrysostom believed and stated often that one's salvation would be aided if not virtually assured through the diligent and thoughtful study of the Bible. He in fact was convinced that it was impossible for a person not to be saved if he was attentive to the Word of God in the Scriptures, that the Scriptures were something that sanctified the person who read them. One who studied the Bible could not remain in a bad spiritual state but would certainly improve and acquire many, many blessings. There is a beautiful passage in his 32nd homily on the Gospel of John, and I want to quote it for you. Now listen to this: "Sanctify your soul, sanctify your body by having these thoughts always in your heart and on your tongue. For if foul language is defiling and evokes evil spirits, it is evident that spiritual reading sanctifies the reader and attracts the grace of the Spirit." So spiritual reading sanctifies us. It is interesting how it not only sanctifies our soul, but it also sanctifies the body. So, reading the Bible has a sacramental effect. It attracts the grace of the Spirit. What a beautiful thing! Why wouldn't all of us want to spend our time, at least some time every day, reading the Bible? We can't usually receive Holy Communion every day, but we can read the Bible every day.

Now what else did Chrysostom have to say about the content of the Bible, and why is it beneficial? Because of course it guards against evil influences. If we go out into the world and are subject to these influences, reading the Bible helps protect us from these things. It also protects us from heretical doctrines. It gives us direction; it gives comfort in hard times. It gives examples of virtues people who lived in a variety of situations, whose lives have been preserved for us in the Scriptures as examples for Christians to imitate. I'll give you one example of this that comes up every year during Holy Week. One of the examples we have of a virtuous life is that of Joseph from the Old Testament, the Joseph who spurned the advances of the evil Egyptian woman. This is just one of many examples of virtuous people that are presented for us in the Holy Scriptures. There are also evil people and sinful deeds in the Bible, but those are there

to warn us not to imitate them. St. John Chrysostom also said that the Scriptures contain the remedy for every spiritual ill, as well as instruction for every virtue.

No excuse.

Now there's no doubt that more than any other Father, Chrysostom encouraged his congregation to read the Bible. A few followed his advice, but let's face it, most people only gave excuses for why they couldn't. Now I'd like to go through some of those excuses with you, and you can see how similar they are to the excuses that we have today for not reading the Bible. The one excuse you will not find is probably the one that you're anticipating. Most people think that people in antiquity couldn't read, or that most people couldn't read. People assume that that would be the number one excuse given by Chrysostom's congregation for not reading the Bible. The fact is that the level of literacy of antiquity is a subject that is hotly debated among historians, and we really don't know how high literacy was in antiquity. But I will tell you, from reading the sermons of Chrysostom—and I've read hundreds of them—it seems that the level of literacy was extremely high in Antioch and in Constantinople, because he often responds to the excuses that people give him for not reading the Bible, and in all of the times he discusses those excuses I only found one instance in which he mentions that perhaps someone couldn't read; and he doesn't seem to suggest that it's because they're uneducated, but perhaps because they have some kind of infirmity or their eyesight is poor, etc. And even in that instance he doesn't excuse them from not reading. He says, "Have someone read it to you," which suggests that there's someone else in the household who could read the Bible for them.

They didn't have Bibles, but we do.

So what was the number one excuse that Chrysostom's congregation gave for not reading the Bible? The number one excuse was, very simply, "I don't have a Bible." Isn't that interesting? We certainly can't make that excuse today, can we? Before the invention of the printing press, books were expensive since they had to be copied by hand. This was very tedious, very time consuming, and very expensive. We call those handmade copies of books "manuscripts", and we still have many, many manuscripts of the Bible—these hand copies. Very few people owned a manuscript of even one book of the Bible. Occasionally, wealthy people possessed beautiful Bibles with purple pages and letters in gold leaf or silver leaf, but those people kept these Bibles like a status symbol, the way today someone would buy a very expensive car. But even those Christians that owned those expensive Bibles never opened them to read them, and of course Chrysostom complained about this. Now what about the poor people? It has been estimated, that the cost of a New Testament was like the cost of a whole year's salary for someone, so it was very expensive. But even poverty was not something that Chrysostom accepted as an excuse. He pointed out that if someone really needed something for his business, for his trade, for his financial survival, like a tool, he would find a way to get it. But he said that spiritual survival is even more important, and even for the poor it ought to be their priority, so there was no excuse for not having at least one book of the Bible. Chrysostom said that if you can't afford the whole New Testament, at least purchase one Gospel and read it regularly. Now imagine the availability of Bibles today and the affordability of Bibles. You can go to any used bookstore and find a Bible for 50 cents or a dollar. How shocked and dismayed the

Fathers would be today to discover how rarely Christians read the Bible even now? What reproaches they would have for us, dear brothers and sisters! In a time when it cost the equivalent of one year's salary to acquire the Scriptures and people didn't read them, what would we have to say for ourselves today? Of course there is no excuse.

“I don't have time.”

Let's look at the second excuse. The second excuse was, of course, something very common to us today: “I don't have the time to read the Bible”. Now when Chrysostom encouraged his congregation to read the Bible, they said “we don't have the time, we're not monks, we don't have time for Scripture study.” Chrysostom of course replied that they find time for worldly pursuits, they find time to see their friends, to go to parties, to go to the theater, to go to the races. They spend all day at the racetrack! And they knew all these details about the racers, the charioteers, the horses, etc. But they knew almost nothing at all about the Bible. They didn't know who the Prophets were, they couldn't tell you the number of books in the Bible. And I will quote to you what he said: “If you ask, who is Amos, who is Obadiah, or what is the number of Prophets or of the Apostles, they can not even open their mouths. But with regard to horses and charioteers, they can compose a discourse more cleverly than sophists or orators.” And the same thing of course is very true for us today dear brothers and sisters. We say we don't have time, but we find time for other things. We find time to go golfing, we find time to see our friends, we have time to go to the movies, we find time to watch television and most of us watch television every day at least for a couple of hours. Can we honestly say that we don't have 15 minutes, that we can't open the Bible every day during our lunch hour? We have weekends. People didn't have weekends then, there was no such thing as a day off. So, obviously, we don't have any excuse either for not reading the Bible because we could always find time. And of course many of us spend hours commuting every week; there are Bibles on tape or Bibles on CD, so we can find the time if it's important to us.

“I'm not a monk or priest.”

Now let's consider the third excuse. These aren't necessarily in order, but these are the excuses I have gathered from the sermons of Chrysostom that I have read over the years. Here's another excuse: “I don't need to study the Bible since I'm not a monk or a priest.” Now Chrysostom said that his congregation needed to read the Scriptures much more than monks, because they did not spend their days in prayer the way the monks did, and instead they were constantly occupied with worldly cares. So rather than Bible reading being necessary for monks, it's necessary for the rest of us who aren't monks, because we live in the world and receive spiritual wounds every day, and we have the greatest need for the medicine offered by the Scriptures. Chrysostom often called the Bible a medicine chest with cures for all of our ills. So the pressing concern of business and career did not excuse people from the obligation to study the Bible. Instead Chrysostom said that these circumstances indicated an ever greater need to study the Bible because business people are dangerously enslaved to worldly pursuits. If they can't find the time to attend to the most important things of all, or consider it unimportant, then they're really in trouble.

Now what about family obligations? Those who have a spouse and a child especially need to study the Scriptures, and Chrysostom questioned parents especially. How could a parent make sure that their child goes to school—or today we could add, we have our children learn musical instruments and foreign languages, and they're on sports teams. They do all these things. We make sure that our children have this kind of background to prepare them for life, but then we neglect to bring them up in the fear of the Lord. The parents at his time said, "I don't want my child to read the Bible," or, "He doesn't need to read it because he's not going to be a monk." Chrysostom said to parents, "Reading the Bible will not make your child a monk; it will make him a Christian." What a beautiful thought.

"I don't understand what I read."

Now another excuse the congregation often gave was, "I don't understand what I read." And this is also something that many people say today. They open the Bible, and perhaps they really don't understand it. Now what did the Fathers have to say about this? All of the Fathers agreed that the Bible was written in such a way that everyone can understand something of what is read and obtain great benefit. And that's true. Sometimes we read parts of the Bible and we don't really understand them, but there are many parts that we can understand, so we can't say, "Well, I don't understand anything," and then just forget about it. In fact, the Bible is written in very simple language. It is not written in complex language. It seems difficult to us sometimes, because we don't read it, so it's a little bit foreign. But the fact is that the Bible was written by ordinary people, with ordinary language, because the Scriptures are an act of God's condescension towards humanity. They consistently said this; they used the word "synkatavasis", which means, God "condescended" to humanity. That doesn't have a negative connotation like "God is looking down with disdain" upon humanity, but it means that God lowers Himself down to human level. The Fathers said that the Scriptures are the manner in which God teaches us about Himself in human language, in language and expressions that are really not appropriate to God. God is incomprehensible, but he allows us to use human language to talk about Him. And in fact God is speaking to us through the Bible in a manner which to Him is baby talk. Chrysostom said this and it's a beautiful image. The Bible is God's condescension to human frailty and weakness. Through the Bible God responds to the needs of human beings by meeting them at their level, the way that you try to explain something to a child in the kind of language that he will understand. That's what God is doing for us through the Bible. The Bible and its expression are far below the dignity of God. That's what the Fathers said. But the Scriptures use human language, images, concepts and stories that people can understand, because the Bible is an expression of God's love for humanity. So it's really a very beautiful thought.

Now the fact is that we think of the Bible as very difficult, and if you have a Bible that's for example the King James Version with all the "thees" and "thous", sometimes that's difficult to understand. We'll have an opportunity to talk in the future about Bible translations and how to find a Bible that works for you. I'm going to do that in a couple of podcasts from now. But the fact is that the Fathers said—and it is true—that the Bible was composed by simple people. The Apostles did not attend the university; they used simple language. The Greek of the Bible is ordinary everyday Greek. It wasn't difficult;

in fact, many people who read the Bible, especially the enemies of Christianity, would read it and attack it, saying it was vulgar (common, of low caliber), was full of stories of sinful people, and that the Greek was no good. Many people attacked the Bible because they compared it to the language of philosophy, the lofty thoughts and the very elegant and eloquent Greek of people like Plato and Aristotle and other Greek philosophers. The Bible is nothing like that. It was written in a simple manner so that everyone could understand something of what they read if they tried. Now, at the same, the Scriptures are deep enough to retain our interest—so we understand something of what we read, but we don't understand everything. This is because, according to Chrysostom, the Holy Spirit wanted to encourage us to read more deeply and to study the Scriptures, to search them, so that we would draw closer to Him. So if we don't understand everything we read right away, we need to go back and read it again. Everything is not clear on the first reading, Chrysostom said, in order to compel us to study and to prevent us from becoming lazy.

The Fathers advised Christians to commit to memory as much Scripture as possible, that they might be able to meditate on these Scriptures frequently and benefit from this. St. Simeon the New Theologian said: "For the soul who has chosen to meditate day and night on the law of God, nothing can be more beneficial than to search the Holy Scriptures. The design of the grace of the Spirit to be found therein overwhelms the senses of the mind with fulfilment by removing it completely from earthly realities and visible things, taking the mind to the level of the angels and associating it with the life of the angels themselves."

The Fathers also advised everyone to learn about and study the Bible—not just study the words of the Bible themselves but read books that talk to you about the Bible itself. The Scriptures are not only to be read, but to be studied. Chrysostom frequently echoed the Lord's command to *Search the Scriptures* from John 5:39. He interpreted this statement to mean that we are to study carefully and with accuracy. He said: "We must study it diligently, not on the surface or superficially, because their meaning is not expressed superficially, but like a treasure it lies buried at great depth." Now, the scholarly study of the Bible is not something new that was invented in the twentieth century in the universities. The scholarly, serious, academic study of the Bible was practiced by the Fathers themselves. You see, this is the Orthodox tradition. Many Orthodox think that all we need to do is read the Fathers and repeat what they had to say about the Bible, and that serious study of the Bible from a scientific, academic or scholarly perspective is not Orthodox. But that couldn't be further from the truth. The Fathers did not tell us just to read them, but to study the Scriptures in other forms outside of Holy Tradition. That is, to read books about the Bible, not simply to parrot what had already been said about the Bible. As a matter of fact, St. John Chrysostom became extremely annoyed with his congregation that they were not helping him by studying about the Bible themselves. He said, "You have me here talking to you week after week after week, and I'm doing all of the work!" Can you imagine that? Can you imagine having St. John Chrysostom preaching to you every week, having him as your teacher, and him telling you that listening to him is not enough, but that you should take the initiative on your own to study the Bible? That's what he said to his congregation.

Specifically, the Fathers told us to pay attention to such matters as the point of view of the author, the historical setting, the audience, the literary genre and other literary elements in the text, or the context of a book or passage. All of these things are very important in the study of the Bible, and St. John Chrysostom said that if we do not know and study such details, when we go to read the Bible, it's as though we have been given the tools to mine for gold, but we've neglected them. We've left those tools; we don't know how to use them, so all we dig up is dirt. St. Athanasios agreed with this. He said the following: "It is right and necessary with all Holy Scripture to faithfully take count of the time of which the Apostle wrote, and the person, and the point, lest the reader, missing either of these or any other particular through ignorance be lead away from the true meaning." So what St. Athanasios is saying is that it is important that we study the context in which the Scriptures were written; and each book individually has its own historical context, and purpose, author and audience. This is something that we learn about separate from studying the Fathers. Of course they mention this too, but that doesn't absolve us from studying these things on our own.

Of course, all of the Fathers are in agreement also that to avoid heresy when reading the Bible, one must interpret the Scriptures according to Holy Tradition—that is, according to what was taught by the Lord, preached by the Apostles, and passed on through the Church from generation to generation. St. Athanasios confirmed that Holy Tradition is the most faithful and ancient witness to the Lord and the Apostles, and he said this: "Let us note, that the very Tradition, teaching and faith of the Church from the beginning was given by the Lord, preached by the Apostles and preserved by the Fathers". All of the Fathers agreed of course that the importance of Holy Tradition was that it guided us in the right type of interpretation. St. Vincent of Lerins said that the depth of the Scriptures is such, that they are not interpreted in the same sense by everyone. One person understands the text to mean one thing and someone else thinks it means something else, and because there are as many interpretations as there are interpreters, we must understand the writings in accordance with Orthodox tradition. He lived a very, very long time ago, and imagine how many more interpretations we have today, because now we have the Catholic church, and the Protestant churches, and many, many different kinds of interpretation. So, the fact is that the Scriptures are not self-interpretive—let's put it that way. We need to interpret them and we have to interpret them with great care.