

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 2: How To Approach Interpretation

I. Introduction:

On Tuesday night you attend a Bible Study at the invitation of your neighbors. You gather together in their home with an assortment of individuals, and the leader opens the Bible to *John 10:9* "***I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.***" He then asks the question, "What does this passage mean to you?"

Fred says, "I believe that Jesus is the door of hope. He invites us to graze in his pasture, and feast upon his body every time we take the Eucharist."

Nancy responds, "Perhaps we mistakenly see Jesus as a person. Who's to say that he wasn't actually a walking and talking door?"

Percy remarks, "I believe that he is the key to understanding the Old Testament. If you want to understand Isaiah, you have to walk through the door of Jesus."

Wendy comments, "Perhaps he is saying that he is the only way to be saved, and there is no other entry into God's kingdom apart from him."

A. Can all of these interpretations be right? Why or why not?

B. Is one interpretation more right than others?

C. How would you assess each interpretation?

D. How can you determine which interpretation is correct?

We live in a day and age of moral and interpretive subjectivism. Everyone believes that their interpretation of the Bible is right in their own eyes. Consequently, the Bible is used to oppose homosexuality and affirm homosexuality. It proves the trinity and disproves the trinity. It teaches the reality of hell and affirms that everyone goes to heaven. In light of this confusion, it is important that develop an interpretative framework so that we can accurately understand the message of the Bible as God intended.

II. Key Terms:

- A. **Hermeneutics:** The theory, method, or rules of biblical interpretation.
- B. **Interpretation:** The process by which the Scriptures are understood by the reader.
- C. **Exegesis:** The process of discovering the original meaning of the biblical text, “bringing it out” (“exegeting”) by studying the text according to the authorial intent in its historical and grammatical contexts.¹

III. A Survey of Interpretive Methods:

- A. **Allegorical:** This perspective widely practiced by some of the church fathers (i.e. Origen) sees the literal meaning of the passage as a jumping off point for a deeper meaning. For instance, Origen saw the water pots in John chapter 2 that contained the water which Jesus changed to wine as alluding to the Scriptures – given to purify the Jews. Such insight is given to those granted special grace by Christ to have unique spiritual insight.
 - Under this school of thought who determines the meaning; the author or the interpreter?
- B. **Devotional:** The Bible is a rich and wonderful book and should primarily be used to nourish the spiritual life of the believer. Emphasis is placed on the aspects of the Bible which edify their walks with God.
 - What is your assessment of this view? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

¹ The Theology Notebook – Bibliology and Hermeneutics (The Theology Program, 2005) p. 129. Downloaded from bible.org on August 12th, 2009

C. **Liberal:** This holds that Scripture must be interpreted within the framework of science and reason. Human intellect is adequate to sift between truth and error in the Bible.

- How would a liberal interpreter regard the miracles of the Bible?
- How would a liberal interpreter view the formation of the Bible?

D. **Neo-Orthodox:** God is a transcendent God who cannot be confined to mere propositional statements. The Bible is not revelation but a witness to revelation: it is not to be equated objectively with the Word of God; the revelation of God is not in words. Jesus Christ is the focal point of God's revelation and consequently man meets God in an experiential encounter with Jesus Christ. ²

- What regard does this view have for the "historicity" of the Bible?

E. **Post Modern:** This view's proponents are skeptical of the reality of absolute truth and suspicious of anyone who claims to know it. This approach to hermeneutics teaches that:

- (1) We cannot know God's revelation with confidence because we *always* ascribe meaning to the biblical Text (consciously or unconsciously);
- (2) We must constantly dialogue with different traditions or theological models to formulate theological constructions that are *closer* to biblical revelation;
- (3) We need to restrict formal or even practical certainty to the Bible's metanarrative (aka the master narrative, the story about the story which makes sense of all the little stories).

²Enns, Paul P.: *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago, Ill. : Moody Press, 1997, c1989, S. 465

(4) We must discourage, modify, or eliminate the positive role of individual understanding.³ This is because we will always contaminate meaning with our individual experience.

- What role does God play in this interpretive scheme?

F. **Literal:** Also known as the literal grammatical historical method. One arrives at the meaning of the passage by a “normal” reading of Scripture. We read the Bible like we read the newspaper taking into account grammar, syntax, historical background, etc. Not an advocate of wooden literalism, this school of thought takes into account figurative language and metaphor. For instance, when Jesus says “I am the door” they would not believe that Jesus had hinges and a doorknob, but they would understand Jesus as an access point.

- Under this school of thought who determines the meaning; the author or the interpreter?
- What separates this perspective from the others?
- How would you respond to the charge that no matter how hard anyone tries they cannot be objective?

G. The last objection has some traction and requires some consideration. How can we expect a factory worker with an eighth grade education living in urban Cleveland to understand the teaching of an imprisoned former Pharisee writing to churches scattered through Asia Minor approximately 2,000 years ago. Some scholars have developed the following responses:

³ Paul R. Shockley “The Postmodern Theory of Probability on Evangelical Hermeneutics” *Conservative Theological Journal Volume 4*. Tyndale Theological Seminary, 2000; 2003, S. 4:71

1. **False Antithesis:** The problem with this objection is that he assumes that you cannot know anything unless you know it omnisciently. Therefore you must know someone perfectly or you can't know it at all. This antithesis makes it impossible to prove such events as "I graduated from the University of Kansas" or "I have traveled to Samara Russia." This factual skepticism makes it impossible to know or understand anything, including the purveyors of this post modern ideology. As we shall see there are ways to know something truly even if you do not know it completely.
2. **The Fusion of Horizons:** To use the above analogy, the factory worker lives in his own horizon of understanding and Paul lives in the other. But the factory worker through careful study and research is able to move closer to the horizon of Paul. He can learn Greek, read all of Paul's letters, study the origins of the Pharisees, etc. At the same time, he seeks to distance himself from his own horizon, purposely discarding cultural biases which may cloud his judgment. For instance, in reading about his union with Christ, he remembers that they did not have labor unions during that time, and endeavors to see what Paul means. As he advances he can have fusion of horizons where he can see things from Paul's perspective, and evaluate his own horizon from Paul's perspective. This does not mean that he has to become a Pauline scholar, but he can move closer to the truth and thereby reject certain interpretations as false (an activity which post-moderns are reluctant to do.)
3. **The Hermeneutical Spiral:** Similar to the fusion of Horizons the factory worker asks the text questions, and the text answers them. These answers subtly change the man and shape his additional questions. In the middle of this circular exchange is the truth, and as each question is asked and answered the radius of the circle shortens drawing the factory worker closer to the truth. For instance:

Factory Worker: Who is Jesus.

Text: A carpenter's son reared in rural Israel 2000 years ago who claimed to be the Christ and was Crucified.

Factory Worker: Was he really the son of God?

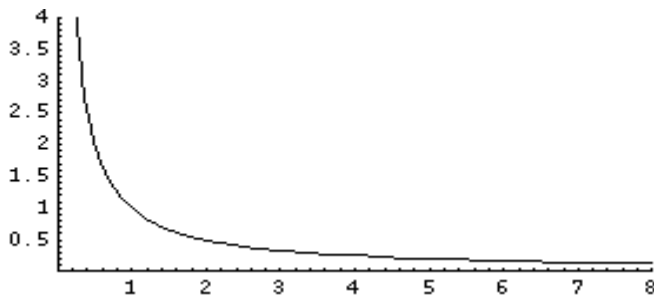
Text: Jesus attests to this, and it was confirmed by his teaching and miracles. It is also confirmed by His death burial and resurrection.

Factory Worker: Why did Jesus have to die?

He died on account of your sins and trespasses against a holy God.

As you can see, each answer changes the questioner and his future questions. If he asks enough questions, he will become a believer, which will shape additional questions. When he keeps interacting with the Bible, he descends into a tighter spiral around the truth.

4. **The Asymptotic Approach**: An asymptote is a curved line which gets closer to the line without ever touching it.



In this case the vertical axis (y) is the distance from reality and the horizontal (x) is time.

A child attends AWANA's and learns a little about Romans. As a result he will move closer to the truth. As he gets older he reads the entire book for himself. Then he reads a commentary. Called to ministry he learns Greek, and as a missionary meticulously translates Romans into another language. By this time he may not have perfect omniscient knowledge, but he has closed the gap.⁴

- In light of all of this, is it arrogant to believe that a certain interpretation is wrong? For instance, is the interpretation that Paul embraced loving monogamous homosexual relationships just as valid as the interpretation that Paul condemned all forms of homosexuality?

⁴ D. A. Carson *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2005) pp. 115-120.

IV. Rationale for the Literal Hermeneutic:

The literal grammatical historical hermeneutic is our chosen method as it seeks to understand the passage as the author intended it to be understood. While we cannot have omniscient knowledge of authorial intent, we can have increasingly certain knowledge through rigorous Bible Study along with the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit. The following is a brief defense of this hermeneutic.

- A. The Purpose of Language:** The purpose of language itself requires a literal interpretation. Created in his image, God gifted man with language to understand, pray, and communicate to and about God.

Two ramifications flow from this idea. First if God originated language for the purpose of communication, and if God is all-wise, then we may believe that He saw to it that the means (language) was sufficient to sustain the purpose (communication). Second it makes sense that God would expect man to use language in its normal sense. He does not expect us to use an encrypted speech or communicate on a “deeper” level outside the channel of normal language.⁵

- B. The Need for Objectivity:** If one does not employ the normal interpretation then the truth of Scripture is lost, especially when the reader and not the plain sense of Scripture determines its meaning. This is why subjective “what the Bible means to me” interpretations are fraught with peril.

- C. The Example of the Bible:** The prophecies of the first advent of Christ were fulfilled literally. Bethlehem meant Bethlehem (*Mic. 5:2*). When Jesus was pierced for our transgressions, there was a literal hole in his body (*Isa. 53*). There are some instances of what we call “typological” interpretations” where the imagery of Old Testament events (i.e. “*out of Egypt I called my son*” *Matt. 2:15*), are related to Christ. But these are exceptions to the literal fulfillment of numerous prophecies. These typological interpretations in the New Testament are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Additionally, the reason we can understand these interpretation is because we interpret the interpretations literally.

V. The Principles of Normal Hermeneutics:

- A. Interpret Grammatically:** Since words are the vehicles of thoughts, and since the meaning of any passage must be determined by a study of the words therein and their

⁵ Charles Ryrie, (Wheaton, IL, Victor Books 1986) p. 113.

relationships in the sentences, determining grammatical sense of the text must be the starting point of normal interpretation.⁶

- B. Interpret Contextually:** Words and sentences do not do not stand in isolation; therefore, the context must be studied in order to see the relation that each verse sustains to that which preceded, and to that which follows. Involved are the immediate context and the theme and scope of the whole book.⁷
- C. Compare Scripture with Scripture:** The dual authorship of the bible makes it necessary not only to know the human author's meaning but also God's. God's meaning may not be fully revealed in the original human author's writing but is revealed when Scripture is compared with Scripture. We must allow for a *sensus plenior* which allows for a fuller (though directly related) meaning in the mind of the divine author of Scripture. We cannot say that the human authors of Scripture always understand the full implications of their own words. When we compare Scripture with Scripture, we can discover the fuller intention of the divine author.⁸

Using the Bible to interpret the Bible is not foolproof. You must use the right portions of the Bible to interpret the Bible. Certain texts are more suited than others. For instance, Romans is better suited to help us understand Ephesians, than say James. Reason being, Romans and Ephesians share the same author. At the same time, the New Testament refers to many Old Testament events, thus it makes sense to seek to understand the Old Testament event in its context, and then see how the New Testament uses it.

- D. Recognize the Progress of Revelation:** It is important to realize that revelation was given over a period of time. While Isaiah may have prophesied about the suffering servant on the cross, his knowledge of the event was not as complete as John's. Beginning in Genesis, biblical history adds additional layers as to our understanding of God, Jesus, and salvation. With this said, we should not assume that Abraham was fully informed, and interpret his understanding of events in light of his location in the progress of revelation.

- How does this concept help us to understand why we can eat bacon whereas the Old Testament Saints could not?

⁶ Ryrie, p. 114.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

VI. Thought Questions:

- A. How would you answer the following objection, “Scholars and theologians disagree on the meaning of this passage, so my view is just as valid as yours”?

- B. How would you respond to the following “This is what the Bible means to me”?

- C. How would you respond to the following “I can’t know what the Bible means unless I have a thorough knowledge of Greek and Hebrew”?

- D. Can non-Christians teach us anything about the Bible? Can their studies help us to make sense of the text?

- E. What is the most important step to understanding the Bible?

1 Corinthians 2:14-16 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. ¹⁵ But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. ¹⁶ For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

VII. Application:

In view of the need to plunge ourselves into the Biblical world in which we study. It is important that we learn about the ancient world. This introduces us to the significance of studying the historical background. As we progress in our study we will learn more about this principle and its application. But suffice to say, it is important that we do our part to get into the mind of the author.

VIII. Assignment:

A. Read at least two introductions on the book of Titus (i.e. the beginning of the MacArthur Study Bible)

B. Then answer the following questions:

1. Who is the author?
2. When was the book written?
3. What is the occasion for writing the book (why was it written)?
4. What are some major themes which will be discussed?
5. What interpretive challenges await us in our study?
6. What are you most excited to learn about the book?

See Appendix 1 For an Example:

IX. Conclusion:

The God of the universe who created language and chose to express Himself through language has surely given humans the ability to understand language. Yet, there remains variety of interpretations. Some of this may be because of the distance between the audience and the authors. This may account for some of the minor theological variations among Christians who gladly submit to the Lordship of Christ, but vary in how this is to be done. Still, there is another category of readers. They do not understand the Bible is because they do not want to understand it. So long as they live in opposition to the Living God, the author of Scripture, they will seek to tone it down and shape it to fit their own agenda. But when you submit your life to the Lord of the Universe and the God of the Bible, you will gladly accept what He says at face value.

Appendix 1:

Background Study on the Epistle of Jude

1. Who is the author?

Jude the half brother of Jesus. He identifies himself as the brother of James in the first verse and in verse 17 he does not include himself as one of the apostles.

2. When was the book written?

On account of the relationship between 2nd Peter which had to have been written before 68 AD (the year of his death) and the absence of the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), it may have been written between 68 and 70 AD. Whereas 2nd Peter describes the coming of false teachers, Jude describes the presence of false teachers. Jude also quotes from 2 Peter 3:3. Thus, Peter predates Jude.

3. What is the occasion for writing the book (why was it written)?

Though Jude wanted to write to the members of the church about their salvation, he must warn them about certain immoral men among them who are circulating heresy. Namely, that since they were saved by grace they can live any way they want. It has been suggested that Jude is battling a Gnostic type of heresy.

4. What are some major themes which will be discussed?

Apostasy

Contending for the Faith

Discernment of Biblical Truth

Old Testament Illustrations

The Character of False Teachers

5. What interpretive challenges await us in our study?

Namely the use of non-canonical literature in His epistle.

6. What are you most excited to learn about the book?

The importance of defending the faith as well as the effect of proper doctrine upon one's lifestyle.