

# The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

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The interpretation of the Bible is called the science of Hermeneutics. Hermes was the winged messenger “god” of Greek mythology and Mercury of Roman mythology. It is interesting that since Paul was the chief speaker of the team of Paul and Barnabas, the pagan people of Lystra thought he was Mercury: Acts 14:12 “And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker.” The interpretation of any message is Hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is both an art and a science. As an art it depends on the skill and dedication of the interpreter of the Scripture. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The interpreter needs to bring the tools he or she acquires over a lifetime to the study of the Scriptures – knowledge of language, customs and manners, history, figures of speech, theology and most of all a knowledge of and a fear of the Lord who is the ultimate Author of Scripture. The more tools acquired and properly applied the easier Scriptural interpretation becomes and the more richness the interpreter can bring to the sacred text.

Hermeneutics is also a science. There are certain rules that apply to it as much as there are specific rules that apply in chemistry, biology or physics! Some of these rules are simple and easy to understand. Others are complex and require much study. But one thing is clear: consistent application of hermeneutical principles leads to clear and consistent interpretation of the Scriptures.

It is not my purpose to be exhaustive (or exhausting) but allow me to give you a few general principles of Biblical interpretation and some specific principles to aid you in your study of the Word of God.

## General Principles of Biblical Interpretation



Here is an excellent general statement to keep in mind: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages, and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.” Dr. David Cooper

Some have shortened this to the following statement: “When the plain sense of the Scripture makes common sense then seek no other sense, lest it result in nonsense!”

There are four general principles in this definition:

Interpret simply.

Interpret contextually.

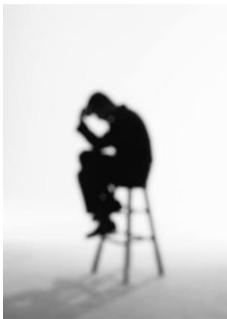
Interpret grammatically.

Interpret by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

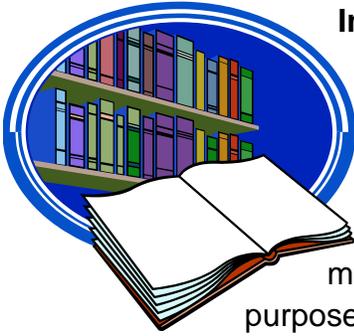
Let’s briefly examine each:

**Interpret simply.** The Scriptures were not given as a puzzle to unlock or a challenge to be surmounted by the best and brightest minds. God’s intention is speak to us plainly, simply, and without confusion. We are flawed creatures because of sin, so God speaks to us in a language we can understand without secret codes to crack, hidden meanings to decipher, or wild, ecstatic utterances to unravel. When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, then seek no other sense!

Paul writes to Timothy in II Timothy 3:15 “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” As a child Timothy began learning the precious Scriptures. This is the glory of the Word of God. Most of it is simple enough for a child to comprehend. Yet it is intellectually satisfying for a Ph.D. to contemplate after a lifetime of profound study.

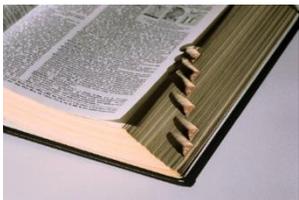


The writer of the book of Hebrews in speaking to his hearers made this statement: in Hebrews 5:11 “Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.<sup>12</sup> For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.<sup>13</sup> For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. <sup>14</sup> But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” Many people consider the book of Hebrews deep and profound. God says He was merely talking simply to those who are dull of hearing! The problem is not the Word of God but our sin enfeebled minds! So “when the plain sense of the Scripture makes common sense then seek no other sense, lest it result in nonsense!”



**Interpret contextually.** The Bible is made up of sixty-six separate books divided into two Testaments but it is ONE BOOK! Verses must be interpreted according to their immediate context (surrounding verses) and in view of their wider context (i.e. the paragraph and the book). In order to truly understand and interpret the Scriptures correctly we must answer some basic questions: What was the stated purpose of the author of the passage in writing his Epistle? What is the general theme of his epistle? Where does the passage fit into his argument? What was he arguing in the previous passage? What is he talking about? Why is he talking about it? To whom is he talking? When is he writing these things? What else does the Scripture say on this subject?

Let me illustrate what I mean by this. Paul wrote the following words in I Corinthians 14:34: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.” From this, and similar statements you might get the idea that Paul had a problem with women! But a careful reading of the context of this passage reveals that Paul is prohibiting the practice of women speaking in tongues. Like their early New Testament counterparts, if women were removed from the modern tongues movement, it would cease to exist! So this is not a prohibition against women singing or speaking or teaching...the context is clear, they cannot speak in tongues!



**Interpret grammatically.** When we interpret Scripture, we must determine the exact meaning of specific words according to their linguistic usage and connection with the other words around them. If we believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, then what we are after is not simply the thought conveyed, but the actual wording used by the human author of the Scriptures by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. For example, pay close attention to the these two Scriptures. Exodus 3:6 “Moreover he said, ***I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*** And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.” Now note what Jesus does with it in Mark 12:26 “And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, ***I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?*** 27 ***He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living:*** ye therefore do greatly err.” The Lord Jesus Christ proves the doctrine of the existence of the soul after death with nothing more than the tense of the verb! Not God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but IS the God of these men. Though they are dead yet they live on. Grammar is most important!



**Interpret by comparing Scripture with Scripture.** 2 Peter 1:20

reminds us that: “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.” By that Peter means, that Scripture needs to be interpreted in the light of Scripture – it cannot be considered by itself or a “private interpretation.” The early church was very strong on comparing Scripture with Scripture. This method, however, became lost with the rise of the Roman Catholic Church and their allegorical interpretation of Scripture. At the Protestant Reformation it was once again discovered and was reinstated as a crucial tool for understanding the Bible. It recognizes the unity of the Scriptures and integrates all Scripture into a single, unified revelation from God. Therefore, a difficult or obscure passage must be interpreted in the light of entire revelation of God on the subject. Here are some examples of people using this method:

- Acts 17:11 “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”
- Luke 24:44 “And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. 45 Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, 46 And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: 47 And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”
- I Peter 1:10 “Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: 11 Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”

With these general principles in mind, let’s turn to some specifics:

## **Specific Principles of Biblical Interpretation**

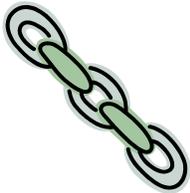
There are many specific principles but let me mention seven:

1. Consistent Hermeneutics; 2. Recognizing Progressive Revelation; 3. Differentiating between Interpretation and Application; 4. Handling Figurative Language Correctly; 5. The Law of Fulfillment; 6. The Law of Double Reference; and 7. The Principle of Time Relationship.



1. **Consistent Hermeneutics:** Prophecy should not be interpreted by a different set of Hermeneutical principles than we use for the rest of the Bible. If we take the narrative or teaching passages literally (and we should unless we have a contextual reason not to), then we should also take the prophetic passages literally! Luke 24:44 “And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.”

2. **Recognizing Progressive Revelation:** We mentioned earlier that that Scripture should be interpreted in the light of other Scripture or as the Scripture says: reminds us that: “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.” 2 Peter 1:20 What this means is that no prophecy of the Scripture is to



be interpreted without taking into consideration all that God has stated to be true on the subject. We must recognize that the Bible is a PROGRESSIVE REVELATION. This means there is a gradual unfolding of a doctrine throughout the breadth and scope of the Bible itself. The Bible unpacks its truth a little at a time and each new facet adds to our ultimate understanding of the truth without contradicting itself. Examples might be the DAY of the LORD, the Seed of the WOMAN, the Kingdom, the advents of Messiah etc.

3. **Differentiating between Interpretation and Application:** There is one and only one interpretation of any given passage of Scripture, but there can be a host of legitimate applications. We strive for the correct interpretation, and having found it, we can make the resulting applications. For example, Psalm 122:6 “ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.” The proper interpretation is that Jerusalem, as the capital of the Jewish Nation, is a fit subject for the prayers of God’s people. When we pray for the peace of Jerusalem we are asking for the Jews to be delivered from their enemies and that the Prince of Peace might reign in their city. On the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant we know to bless this people is to be blessed of the Lord. However, we can make a great number of applications of this verse including the nature of believing prayer.

4. **Handling Figurative Language Correctly:** Figures of Speech are legitimate grammatical tools to express literal meanings. (For in depth look at the use of figurative language in the Bible see my Bible study on the “Figures of Speech in the Bible.”) Fine distinctions can and must be drawn. For example, there are times that Premillennialism

teaches that Israel pictures the church, but the CHURCH never REPLACES Israel in the plan of God. (i.e. Israel in the wilderness cf. I Corinthians 10:1-11.)



**5. The Law of Fulfillment:** The logical and Scriptural way to discover how God will fulfill the Scripture in the future is to look at how He fulfilled it in the past. If the great number of prophecies concerning the first advent of Christ were all literally fulfilled, then how can we argue that the prophecies of His second advent should be spiritualized or allegorical? Luke 24:44 “And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all

things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. 45 Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, 46 And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: 47 And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

**6. The Law of Double Reference:** Often a prophecy of the Scripture will have a double



fulfillment. One fulfillment is generally rather local and immediate while the other may be distant and long term. This is surely one of the marks of the true Scriptures and their divine inspiration. For example, at the conception of the Lord Jesus Christ, the angel announces in Luke 1:32: “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:”

Now we know that these things were true in the first advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, but they won't be universally recognized until His Second Advent. The Psalms are filled with this kind of double reference. The full explanation cannot be found in the experience of David, but are later fulfilled completely in Christ ( i.e. Psalm 22). Let's be clear about this point, double reference is clearly literal fulfillment and is thus completely consistent with the basic rules of Biblical interpretation.

**7. The Principle of Time Relationship:** In this feature of inspiration two or more events of similar character may be described in the same passage. For example, Rachel weeping for her children is a prophecy that applies to both the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews and the slaughter of the innocents that the time of the birth of Christ: “Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. of Christ.” Jeremiah 31:15 “ The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after

that Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he had taken him being bound in chains among all that were carried away captive of Jerusalem



and Judah, which were carried away captive unto Babylon.”

Jeremiah 40:1 “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. Matthew 2:17 -18

The events of this prophecy are so co-mingled on the horizon of time as to appear closer together when they are in reality far away from each other in the plan of God. Other examples might be cited such as Isaiah 9:6-7, Isaiah 61:1-2 cf. Luke 4:16-21 etc.

Your Notes: