

Biblical Interpretation

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Problems in Interpretation

- **Literal** – the simple understanding of Scripture. Sometimes misses the symbolism and imagery that was intended by the poetic literary styles employed by the human writer.
- **Allegory** – the method of seeing a symbolic meaning beneath the historical meaning. Tendency is to superimpose a meaning that misses the intended meaning of the text.
- **Higher Critical** – the rationalistic method of extracting truths out from a text after considering the historical setting, psychological make-up, culture, and intellect of the author, with the presupposition that God cannot and does not intervene in history. According to this method of interpretation, there are no miracles, and the world-view of the Bible is a myth.

Presuppositions

- **Verbal, plenary inspiration** – Every single letter and word (verbal) of Scripture as put down in the original autographs were inspired of God (Matt. 5:18; 22:32). All of the Bible, in all of its parts, is equally inspired. No part is more inspired than the other parts (Matt. 5:17-18; 2 Tim. 3:16).
- **Infallibility and Inerrancy** – The Bible is free from error, mistakes, and contradictions, even in areas where it touches on matters of science and history.
- **Organic inspiration** – Scripture is fully the Word of God, expressed in the human writers' own vocabulary and style. (Tit. 1:2; John 17:17)
- **Authority** – All the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God. (Grudem, p. 78) It is therefore the highest authority in the Church for the knowledge of God, faith, and life.
- **Sufficiency** – Scripture contains all the words of God that we need for salvation, for trusting Him perfectly, and for obeying Him perfectly. (Grudem, p. 127)
- **Necessity** – The Bible is necessary for knowing the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for knowing God's will. (Grudem, p. 116)
- **Perspicuity (clarity)** – The Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it. (Grudem, p. 108)
- **Canonicity** – The Bible is composed of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, as accepted by the Protestant churches.
- **Illumination of the Holy Spirit** – We need to be illumined by the Spirit in order to understand and interpret Scripture. (1 Cor. 2:12-14; Eph. 1:17) Yet we recognize that the Spirit also comes upon one through his reading of Scripture. (Acts 10:43-44)

Note: Every approach to study the Scriptures involves presuppositions, even atheistic and miracle-denying approaches. For example, some liberal and atheist interpreters presuppose that *miracles cannot happen*. Consequently, they hold that the Biblical accounts about Jesus' resurrection are only myths. Moreover, liberal theologians presuppose that the Bible is only a record of human religious feeling rather than the word of God. As a result, they deny the historicity of the narrative stories, leading to the need to read between the lines to discover the underlying truths about God. In short, all Bible interpreters work from presuppositions.

Reformation Rules

- Necessity of Grammatical-Literary Study: study of grammar, syntax, style, broader context, genre, purpose, authorship.
- Necessity of Historical Study: Redemptive history, cultural history
- Necessity of Theological Study: Study types, prophetic message, theocentricity, christocentricity.
- "The infallible rule in interpretation of Scripture is Scripture itself." Westminster Confession, 1:9

Steps of Interpretation

1. Get the "big picture."

- Read the entire book of the Bible (e.g. Genesis) before studying the details.
- Note the author's background, and his purpose for writing.
- Note the date of writing, and its historical setting.
- Note the cultural setting, and the culture of the original audience.
- Note the original audience for the writing.
- If the writing is a narrative, make a rough map of the area where most of the story takes place.
- Make an outline to notice the flow of thought between parts, paragraphs, and sections of the writing.

2. Study the details.

- Identify the literary genre (e.g. narrative, poetry, epistles). Genre has an enormous influence on the message and meaning that is to be gleaned from the text. See next section on genres.
- Identify and focus on the pericope, i.e. the literary unit of thought.
- Note grammatical insights, e.g. repetition, verbs, participles, that may highlight a thought intended by the writer. For those who don't study in Greek and Hebrew, you can use and compare multiple Bible translations (e.g. NIV, ESV, ASV) instead.
- Note any geographical, personal, cultural, and historical details behind certain words.

3. Reflect theologically.

- What is this text saying about God?
- What is this text saying about Jesus Christ? Note any Christ-types.
- What is this text saying about the Holy Spirit, if anything?
- What is this text saying about Man, e.g. our stubbornness, our sinfulness, our need for a Savior?
- What is this text saying about God's plan to redeem the world? Identify the text's place in salvation history, climaxing with the coming of Jesus Christ.

4. Apply to life.

- How would the original audience have completed the sentence, "Therefore, I _____."
- How would you complete the sentence, "Therefore, I _____."

HOW DOES THE BIBLE PASSAGE COMPLETE THESE SENTENCES?

God _____.

Jesus Christ _____.

The Holy Spirit _____. (not all texts)

Man _____. (not all texts)

Therefore, I _____.

SUMMARY OF BIBLE STUDY STEPS

1. Big Picture
2. Details
3. God
4. Apply

Old Testament Genres

Narratives

Genesis, most of Exodus, most of Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Additionally, the prophetic books Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai are primarily narratives, along with large portions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the poetic book Job.

Luke 24:27 – *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.*

Common Errors in Interpreting

- Allegorizing – Instead of concentrating on the clear meaning people relegate the text to merely reflecting another meaning beyond the text. There are allegorical portions of Scripture (e.g. Ezek. 23 or parts of Revelation) but none of the scriptural allegories is simple narrative.
- Exemplifying -- Using Old Testament characters and their actions simply as examples for us in our lives.
- Decontextualizing -- Ignoring the full historical and literary contexts, people concentrate on small units only and thus miss interpretational clues. If you decontextualize enough, you can make almost any part of Scripture say anything you want it to.

Principles for Avoiding Interpretation Errors

- An Old Testament narrative by itself usually does not teach a doctrine. The narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
- Narratives record what happened not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time.
- Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.
- What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.
- Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect and their actions are, too.
- We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge that on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically already in the Scripture.
- All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.
- Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt elsewhere, in other ways.

- Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).
- An Old Testament narrative must be interpreted in light of what the New Testament says concerning it. Use clear NT passages to interpret unclear OT passages. e.g. 1 Cor 10:11, Rom 15:4, Heb 11, Heb 1:1-4, Gal 3 :1-25, etc.
- God, not the man, is always the hero.

Basic Questions to Ask About an Old Testament Narrative

- What is it saying about God? (usually easily done)
- What does the New Testament say about it? (use a concordance)
- What is it saying about Christ? (harder, since it requires New Testament knowledge)
- What is it saying about God's plan of redemption (e.g. sin, faith, salvation, etc.)?

Law

Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy (Ex 20 through Deut 33)

- Old Testament law was a binding covenant between God and Israel. In return for benefits and protection, Israel was expected to keep the more than six hundred stipulation, as we find it in Exodus 20 – Deuteronomy 33. Therefore, unless an Old Testament law is somehow restated or reinforced in the New Testament, it is no longer directly binding on God's people, e.g. food and ceremonial laws. Do remember that the essence of the Law (Ten Commandments and the two chief laws) is repeated in the prophets and renewed in the New Testament.
- Do see God's justice, love, and high standards revealed in the Old Testament law.
- Do see the Old Testament law as a paradigm – providing examples for the full range of expected behavior.
- Certain types of laws are addressed in the New Testament. The book of Hebrews explains that the Old Testament ceremonial laws were a foreshadowing of Christ's work of salvation. Dietary laws, too, no longer apply to Christians, as Acts 10:15 and Romans 14:14 indicate that for the Christian, all foods are ceremonially "clean." Moral laws are useful today, in that they make us "conscious of sin," and therefore reveal our need for a Savior (Rom. 3:20)

Prophecy

(Major Prophets) Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel

(Minor Prophets) Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

- The role of Old Testament prophets was to enforce God's covenant and encourage God's people to obey it. Through reminding us of the covenant stipulations, warning us of the discipline of disobedience, and foretelling glorious future events, prophets exhorted audiences to follow and keep following God's commands.
- Old Testament prophecy requires historical background study. Most prophecy addressed the situation and condition of the original audience, while a minority of the prophetic texts addressed their future. Still even fewer texts address *our* future.
- Prophets were also poets. They wrote using such literary devices as Hebrew parallelism to make the prophecy more memorable and easily learned.

Poetry: Psalms

- Psalms model what a God-centered view of life is like, through expressions of worship and prayer, and the way believers may express their deepest needs, pains, and concerns to God in passionate prayer and worship.
- Psalms are poetry. They address the mind through the heart, as does music. Therefore, be careful about over-interpreting the texts by finding special meanings in every word or phrase, where the poet may have intended none. For example, in Psalm 19:1, the writer uses synonymous parallelism as a literary device, where all four lines say the same thing. An over-interpretation of this verse would lead one to think that the first line is about outer space, the second line is about the earth's atmosphere, the third line is about the daytime, and the fourth line is about the evening. To force a distinction of meanings between all four lines would be a misinterpretation of the text. Other poetic literary styles include: antithetical parallelism, synthetic parallelism, the acrostic, anthropomorphisms, repetition.
- Psalms can be grouped into seven different categories:
 1. Laments (e.g. 3, 12, 22, 31, 39, 42, 44, 57, 71, 80, 94, 120, 137, 139, 142) – These psalms express with a deep, honest fervor the distress that God's people feel.
 2. Thanksgiving (e.g. 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 65, 66, 67, 75, 92, 107, 116, 118, 124, 136, 138)
 3. Praise (e.g. 8, 19, 33, 66, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 117, 145-148) – These psalms center on the praise of God for who He is and for His greatness.
 4. Salvation History (e.g. 78, 105, 106, 135, 136) – A review of the history of God's saving works among the people of Israel, especially His deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt.
 5. Royal and Enthronement (e.g. 2, 18, 20, 21, 24, 29, 45, 47, 93, 95-99, 101, 110, 144) – Psalms that have to do with a king or the enthronement of a king.
 6. Wisdom (e.g. 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127)
 7. Songs of Trust (e.g. 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131) – These center on trusting God, even in times of despair.

- Four basic benefits of the Psalms: (1) guide to worship, (2) shows how we can relate honestly to God, (3) shows the importance of reflection, meditation, and intimacy with God, and (4) reveals the character of God.
- Ask: “What does this psalm tell us about how God’s presence and His work connects with our deepest concerns and emotions in the midst of difficult or joyous circumstances?” Also ask: “What does this psalm tell us about how we should pray, praise, and generally express our hearts’ desires to God in individual and corporate worship?”
- Exercise: Psalm 8

Wisdom

Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs

- Wisdom is that genre of literature where the writer applying truth to his life in the light of experience.
- Proverbs tend to use figurative language and express things suggestively rather than in detail. Analogy: “Look before you leap,” “a stitch in time saves nine.” Example: Prov. 6:27-29.
- Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God. Example: Prov. 22:26-27.
- Proverbs must be read as a collection. Example Prov. 15:25, compare w/Prov. 23:10-11; Luke 1:52-53.
- Some proverbs need to be “translated” to be appreciated. Example: Prov. 25:24 – trans. Better to live in a garage than in a spacious house with a woman you never should have married.
- Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.

New Testament Genres

Gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

- The gospels as a literary genre is similar to the historical narrative, yet with particular emphasis on moving the reader to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. The gospels lay out historical events, not to simply be a chronicle or record of God's acts, but to compel the reader towards discipleship. Think of each gospel as a sermon (which some scholars think the gospel of Mark was, of Peter's preaching).
- Ask: "What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and about how I should respond to being His disciple? How then should I live as a citizen of the kingdom of God?"
- The gospels require some background study regarding history and culture, e.g. John 15:1, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower."
- Compare a particular text in one gospel with the corresponding text in another gospel. The differences will provide clues as to what in the story that writer intended to emphasize.
- The primary focus of the gospel writers was to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, and of the centrality of the kingdom of God.

Parables

Continuous Allegory	Partially Allegorical	Main-Point Allegory
Most points have meanings	A few main points have corresponding meanings	Only the main thrust of the parable has a corresponding meaning (almost always the kingdom of God)
e.g. Parable of the Soils	e.g. The Prodigal Son	e.g. The Good Samaritan
Soils, seed, thorns, etc. have corresponding meanings	Father & sons are all that have corresponding meaning	The good Samaritan's actions personify being neighborly to anyone we encounter

- Determine where the parable falls on the “Allegorical Continuum.”
- Determine if the parable:
 1. Answers a question (e.g. Luke 10, “who is my neighbor?”)
 2. Addresses a concern (e.g. Luke 15, Jesus relationship with sinners)
 3. Clarifies a teaching (e.g. Matt. 13, the unexpected form of God’s kingdom)
- Be sensitive to the historical and cultural background of the parable that would heighten the impact of the parable on its original readers (e.g. view of Samaritan by Jews, insult to father to ask for early inheritance).
- Exercise: Luke 10:30-37

Epistles

Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 & 2 & 3 John, and Jude

Epistles are mostly prescriptive, but sometimes descriptive.

THE FORM OF AN ANCIENT EPISTLE	
Salutation	Phil 1:1-2
a reference to a sender and the recipients of the letter, along with a greeting.	<i>Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.</i>
Thanksgiving / Prayer	Phil 1:3-11
	<i>I thank my God in all my remembrance of you...having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.</i>
Body	Phil 1:12-Phil 4:4
The largest part of a letter	<i>Only conduct yourselves... Do all things without grumbling or disputing... Brethren, join in following my example...</i>
Exhortation and Instruction	Phil 4:5-9
	<i>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!... Finally, brethren, whatever is true...</i>
Conclusion	Phil 4:10-23
This can include things like: a blessing – a greeting – a kiss – a benediction – an autograph –	<i>To our God and Father... Amen. All the saints greet you... The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.</i>

Revelation

- Four ways of interpreting Revelation:
 1. **Preterist:** Most prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled during the time of the Roman empire.
 2. **Historicist:** The prophecies have been fulfilled throughout history and are still being fulfilled today.
 3. **Futurist:** Most prophecies beyond Revelation 3 are yet to be fulfilled.
 4. **Idealist:** Most prophecies portray the ongoing cosmic conflict of spiritual realities and may have many fulfillments throughout history.
- The purpose of Revelation was to encourage the church to overcome in difficult times by revealing God's ultimate triumph over Satan in establishing Christ's kingdom and the new heavens and the new earth.
- Remember that Revelation is about Jesus Christ, not Satan or the Antichrist!
- Because Revelation is in large part a prophetic word to the church, expect to be exhorted to holy living today by this vivid picture of God's future triumph through Christ.
- Because Revelation is about the end of history, it is not meant to be surrealistic or unrealistic, but rather a realistic glimpse of the future in order to inform godly choices today.
- Revelation is filled with over three hundred allusions to the Old Testament; therefore, it is really intended to function as the capstone of all of Scripture and to complete the picture of what God has been doing in human history.
- Expect apocalyptic to be full of metaphorical language. Do not attempt to identify the significance of every detail in apocalyptic.
- Do not look for something in apocalyptic that it does not intend to disclose.
- Read apocalyptic in the context of crisis.
- Study biblical apocalyptic in the light of ways of thinking in the ancient world.
- Ask: "What insights into God's ultimate triumph does this passage give us and how does it encourage us to live faithfully and courageously today in the face of opposition to and persecution of the church?"