

Interpretation Part 1

It is virtually impossible to come to a text of the Bible without bringing our own ideas and understanding of words, ideas and situations to it. We do not intend to change the Scripture, but inadvertently and unintentionally bring our own minds to the Scripture, often distorting it and reading into it those ideas which are as foreign to the text as the ideas of the text are to our own minds.

Key Terms

Eisogesis, exegesis, hermeneutical circle, analogy of faith (or Scripture), *sensus literalis*, distantiatio

Objectives

*Analyze how one should read the Bible in light of: it being God's Word to man, and it being a revelation which includes many literary genres yet one overall theme.

Interpretation

I. Interpretation Is a Necessity. *Interpretation*: the act of discerning the meaning of sensory stimuli

A. All persons are interpreters. Well or poorly, we all interpret what we see whether it is in the Scriptures or elsewhere.

1. Site, sound, smell, etc. All of these sensory stimuli are interpreted by us thousands of times per day.
2. I think Ketchup is good on Macaroni and Cheese, most people disagree. It's okay for me, it works for me, its true for me, therefore ketchup on macaroni and cheese is good in a relative sense.

B. Modern relativism and biblical interpretation: are all interpretations equally valid?

Two assumptions:

1. People are bound by their contexts.
 - a. We do not have direct access to the times, places, customs and understanding of the Biblical writers therefore it is impossible to understand their context from ours.
2. This personal context is the sole norm for interpretation and knowledge.
 - a. The text therefore only means what I think it means because that is how I must interpret it, base upon my context. *Believe it or not many Christians are taught to interpret the Bible in this way.*
 - b. This kind of relativism is not okay!
 - I. Subjective
 - II. Objective
3. Evangelical individualism and biblical interpretation: are all interpretations equally valid?
 - a. Logic demands a "no" answer to this question. If all interpretations are equally valid and do not agree then none are valid.
 - b. Dash Incredible

II. The Role of Presuppositions

A. Francis Turretin and the problems of presumed objectivism and an over-extended use of the principle of clarity

1. Reasons for different interpretations
 - a. People lack sufficient knowledge of the text.
 - b. People remain biased regarding the text.

B. The need to recognize the fact that we all have presuppositions

1. Exegesis
2. Eisogesis
3. The hermeneutical circle

III. Intentional Presuppositions for Interpretation

A. Reader presuppositions

1. Reading is an act of interpretation.

2. Reading is a dynamic activity. TV and movies (our primary source of information) happen to us, reading engages us and demands more of us. TV and movies are essentially egalitarian, with reading, some who do it well and others struggle. Therefore we do not engage a text like we watch our favorite sitcom.

- a. What sort of text is this? (genre)
- b. What is the author trying to say? (intention)
- c. Where is the author going with this line of discussion? (structure)
- d. What does the author expect his reader to do, feel, think? (response)

B. Presuppositions about reading Scripture

1. The Bible is the authoritative and reliable (inspired and inerrant) Word of God.
2. The Bible has a particular content.
 - a. The Bible is revelation, a revealing of what is otherwise unknown.
 - b. The author means to communicate something. Two kinds of questions to help us arrive at the author's meaning:
 - 1) What does the author intend to say?
 - 2) How would the original audience have understood the text?
3. The Bible is a unified Word.
 - a. What is God saying?
 - b. The analogy of faith or the analogy of Scripture
"This principle rests on the prior confidence in the Bible as the inspired Word of God. It is, therefore, consistent and coherent. Since it is assumed that God would never contradict himself, it is thought slanderous to the Holy Spirit to choose an alternate interpretation that would necessarily bring the Bible in conflict with itself." R.C. Sproul

Interpretation Part 2

Key Terms

Written revelation, context, translation, historical, progressive, redemptive, literary

Objectives

*List and explain the various aspects of the nature of scriptural revelation.

*Consider the "real world, in your life" implications of each of these aspects.

Interpretation (cont.)

III. Intentional Presuppositions for Interpretation

4. The Bible is a written revelation.
 - a. Need to pay attention to the particularities of language - **2 Timothy 2:15**
 - I. Don't assign a dictionary definition to every word!
 - II. Understand Semantic Range
 - b. Context: The meaning of words in sentences, in paragraphs, in discourses, in books, in genres, in testaments, in the canon of Scripture
 - c. *Sensus literalis*: The natural meaning of the text
 - I. Not immediate and intuitive sense!
 - d. The Reformation criticism of allegorical interpretation
 - e. Grammatical-historical interpretation
 - f. Be careful not to absolutize grammar.
 - I. Hermeneutics is an art and a science **SEE NOTES BELOW**
5. We read the Bible in translation.
 - a. The Reformation commitment to the biblical text in the original languages
 - b. All translations are interpretations. Not a 1 to 1 equivalence

- c. Translation strategies
 - 1) Formal equivalence - Literal word for word as much as possible, NASB
 - 2) Paraphrase – get the basic gist of it, Living Bible
 - 3) Dynamic equivalence – Idea for Idea, NIV
- 6. The Bible is an historical revelation.
 - a. What happened?
 - I. Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation are all real, historical events.
 - II. Existential relevance comes from actual historical events
 - b. What did God do?
- 7. The Bible is a revelation which is historically removed from us.
 - a. The issue of distantiation – Distant from us, an otherness.
 - I. We need to consciously avoid putting our mind into the text!
 - b. We need to understand the original setting.
 - c. What of “literal” interpretation?
 - I. We need History / Culture / Language
- 8. The Bible is a progressive revelation.
 - a. We cannot assume that the biblical authors knew about the fullness of biblical religion. - **1 Peter 1:10-12**
 - b. As the story grows and develops, it also changes.
 - c. The typological patterning of the history of redemption
 - I. Kinds
 - II. Patterns
 - III. Fulfill means to “fill up.”
- 9. The Bible is a redemptive revelation.
 - a. The Bible is not a scientific textbook.
 - b. The Bible has a theocentric and redemptive focus.
 - c. The Bible is not a collection of morality plays and moral exemplars.
- 10. Biblical proclamation comes to us through a number of literary genres.
 - a. Genre – Epistle, Narrative, Poetry, etc.
 - This forces us to ask the right questions and shapes our expectations of the text.
 - b. Form – Within the text there smaller passages such as dreams, parables, etc.
 - c. Literary devices – Within the text there are also hyperbole, irony, synecdoche, simile
- 11. The Bible is God’s Word for us.
 - a. The first question, the last application.
 - b. What it meant is the key to what it means!
 - c. The original intent governs the contemporary application of the text!
 - d. Then we must ask ourselves the question, “How do I live in light of this knowledge?”
- 12. Biblical interpretation will not solve every theological issue. On essentials – Unity, On non-essentials – Liberty, In all things – Charity.

Based on *Spring 2006, Michael Williams & Covenant Theological Seminary*

NOTES ON INTERPRETATION

We believe that Holy Scripture has one true and authentic meaning, but this meaning can be twofold, either simple or composite. A simple and historical meaning is one which consists of the statement of one fact without any further significance either as commandment or as dogma or as history. This can be one of two kinds, either strict and grammatical or figurative. The strict meaning depends on the exact words; the trope on the figurative

language. A composite or mixed meaning is found in oracles containing typology, part of which [oracle] is type and part antitype. This does not constitute two meanings, but two parts of one and the same meaning intended by the Holy Spirit, who covered the mystery with literal meaning. The oracle of Exodus 12:46: "You shall not break a bone of it," cannot be grasped unless the true antitype, Christ (John 19:36), is united to the true type, the paschal lamb. - Francis Turretin

Interpretation is the opening up of the words and statements of Scripture in order to bring out its single, full and natural sense.

By contrast with this approach, the Church of Rome believes that passages of Scripture have four senses: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological and the anagogical. An illustration of this can be found in the way the figure of Melchizedek is understood. He offered bread and wine to Abraham (*Gen. 14:18*). The literal sense is that the king of Salem, with the food that he brought, refreshed the soldiers of Abraham, who were tired after their travel. The allegorical sense is that the priest offers up Christ in the mass. The tropological sense is that we are to give to the poor. The anagogical sense is that Christ who is in heaven shall be the bread of life to the faithful.

This pattern of the fourfold meaning of Scripture must be rejected and destroyed. Scripture has only one sense, the literal one. An allegory is only a different way of expressing the same meaning. The anagogy and tropology are ways of applying the sense of the passage.

The principal interpreter of Scripture is the Holy Spirit. The one who makes the law is the best and the highest interpreter of it. The supreme and absolute means for the interpretation is the Scripture itself: 'So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading' (*Neh. 8:8*).

There are, however, three subordinate means to help us to interpret a passage of Scripture: the analogy of faith, the circumstances of the particular passage, and comparison with other passages.

The analogy of faith is a summary of the Scriptures, drawn from its well-known and clear parts. There are two elements in it. The first is related to faith, which is handled in the Apostles' Creed. The second concerns charity or love, which is expounded in the Ten Commandments. 'Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus' (*2 Tim. 1:13*).

The circumstances of a passage can be clarified by the following simple questions: Who is speaking? To whom? On what occasion? At what time? In what place? For what end? What goes before? What follows?

A comparison of different passages involves comparing them with each other so that their meaning may be clearer. 'But Saul ... confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving [i.e. by comparing one thing with another] that this Jesus is the Christ' (*Acts 9:22*).

Comparing different passages may involve two things:

1. The first involves comparing a statement in one context with the other places where it appears in Scripture. For example: 'Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed' (*Isa. 6:10*). This is repeated six times in the New Testament (*Matt. 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:27; Rom. 11:8*).
2. The second kind of comparison involves comparing one context with another. Again these may be either similar or different. Places that are similar agree with one another in certain respects, perhaps in their phraseology and manner of speech, or in their sense. - Perkins