

How to read the Bible for all it's worth

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I. Introduction:

The Need to Interpret

- every reader is in the same time an interpreter.
- unique interpretations are usually wrong.
- the test of a good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text.
- a translation is in itself a form of interpretation.
- the antidote of *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation, but *good* interpretation.

The nature of Scripture

- George Ladd said: "*The Bible is the word of God given in the words of [people] in history*".
- because the Bible is God's word, it has eternal relevance; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is the God's word, we must listen - and obey.
- interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the *tension* that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*.
- the Bible is not a series of propositions and imperatives; it's not simply a collection of "Sayings from Chairman God".
- the task of interpreting involves the reader at two levels: first, one has to hear the Word they heard [*then and there*]. Second, one must learn to hear that same Word *here and now*.

The basic doctrines of the Bible – Protestant Biblical interpretation

1. The bible is the revealed Word of God

- a. "And God spoke all these words." (Exodus 20:1)

b. God revealed Himself in Jesus. (John 1:1-3,14) Jesus is the Word.
Jesus is God

c. (Hebrew 1:1)

2. Inspiration – The writers were inspired

a. (2 Pet 1:16-22)

b. (2 Tim 3:16)

c. (Revel 1:1-3)

3. Illumination – we are energized through the Holy Spirit to understand the Scripture. We need to submit our lives to the Holy Spirit.

a. (John 14:25-26)

b. (John 15:26)

c. (John 16:15)

d. (1Cor 2:10-16)

e. (1Cor 3:1)

The need for Hermeneutics

1. To understand what God had said in the Bible

a. the correct understanding of salvation, final things

b. Task theology = comes out of specific situation

2. The bridge the gap of our minds and minds of writers

a. language distance – translation is important

b. culture distance – understand cultural patterns

c. geography distance

d. to understand history

Definitions

1. Interpretation

- a. the Hebrew word *pathar* means “to interpret”
- b. the Hebrew word *pithron* means an interpretation
- c. the Greek word *hermeneia* = interpretation
- d. the Greek word *hermeneuo* = to interpret
- e. the Greek word *dihermeneuo* = to explain

2. Hermeneutics

- a. Hermeneutics as a theological discipline is the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible.
- b. It is a special application of the general science of linguistics and meaning. It seeks to formulate those particular rules which pertain to the special factors connected with the Bible.
- c. It stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game. The rule-book is written in terms of reflection, analysis and experience. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics.
- d. Hermeneutics is a science in that can determine certain principles for discovering the meaning of a document.

The first task: Exegesis

“ exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning of the text. This is basically an historical task.

“ everyone is an exegete of sorts. The only real question is whether you will be a good one.

Learning to do Exegesis

“ the key of good exegesis is to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text.

“ there are two kinds of questions one should ask of every biblical passage: those that relate to *context* and those that relate to *content*.

“ the questions of the context are also of two kinds: *historical* and

literary.

“ the historical context has to do with: the *time and culture* of the author and his readers. The more important questions of historical context, has to do with the *occasion and purpose* of each biblical book.

“ the literary context means that words only have meaning in sentences, and in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. The most important question that it must be asked is: *What's the point? This is always the crucial question.* The goal of exegesis is to find out what the original author intended.

The second Task: Hermeneutics

- hermeneutics covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis and seeking of the contemporary relevance of ancient texts. The goal of hermeneutics is to show what does it mean a concrete text for us "here and now".
- The reason one must not begin with here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text.

II. The basic Tool: A good Translation

- Translations are different and for a good interpretation of the God's word you need a good translation.

The science of translation

- There are two kinds of choices that a translator must make: *textual and linguistic.*
- The Question of the text has to do with the actual wording of the original text.

1. Textual criticism is a science that works with careful controls.

The external evidence has to do with quality and age of the manuscripts that support a given variant.

The internal evidence has to do with copyists and authors.

2. Textual criticism is not an exact science because it deals with

too many humans variables.

3. The KJV is the most widely used translation in the world,

it is also a classic expression of the the English language.

- The Question of Language
- The problem has to do with the transferring of words and ideas from one language to another [verbal and grammatical chooses].

III. The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextual

The Historical context

- *First*, you need to consult your Bible dictionary or the introduction to your commentary to find out as much as possible about backgrounds of the text.
- *Second*, you need to develop the habit of reading the whole letter through in one sitting.
- As you read the whole letter, it will be helpful to jot down a few very brief, notes and references. We suggest four kinds of notes:
 1. what you notice the recipients themselves; how are they, their attitudes, problems
 2. Paul's attitudes
 3. any specific things mentioned as to the specific occasion of the letter
 4. the letter's natural, logical divisions.

The Literary Context

- There is one important question you need to learn to ask over and over again is, *What's the point?*
- Therefore, you want to be able to do two things:
 1. In a compact way state the content of each paragraph. *What* does Paul say in this paragraph?
 2. Explain very shortly *why* do you think Paul says this right at this

point. How does this content contribute to the argument?

- Notice as we summarize this analysis:
- the exegesis is self-contained; that is, we have not go outside the text once to understand the point
- there is nothing in the text that does not fit into the argument,
- all of this makes perfectly good sense of everything. This, then, is what exegesis is all about. This was God's word to them.

IV. The Epistles: The Hermeneutical Questions

- The most important hermeneutical question is: what do these texts mean to us?

Our lack of consistency is the great flaw in our common hermeneutics.

Guidelines for application

- The basic rule is that *a text can not mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.*
- The second rule: whenever we share comparable particulars with the first-century setting, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them.
- What epistles specifically indicate as matters of indifference may still be regarded as such: food, drink, days etc.
- Matters of indifference are not inherently moral, but are cultural even if it stems from religious culture.

Cultural relativity

- The distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent upon or peripheral to it.
- Distinguish between what is moral and what is not.
- Distinguish between principle and specific application.
- Keep alert to possible cultural differences.

V. The Old Testament Narratives

- The Bible contains more of type of literature called "narrative" than it does of any other literary type [40 % of the OT is narrative].
- The following books are largely or entirely composed of narrative material: Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1,2 {Samuel, Kings, Chronicles}, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Job.
- Narratives are stories. But they are not fictional, are God's stories - a story that is utterly true, crucially important, and often complex.
- The purpose of narratives is to show God at work in his creation and among the people. The narratives glorify him, help us to understand and appreciate him and give us a picture of his providence and protection.
- Three Levels of Narratives:
 1. The whole universal plan of God worked out through his creation [redemptive history]
 2. Israel
 3. Individual narratives.

What Narratives Are Not

1. OT narratives are not just stories about people who lived in the OT times. They are first and foremost stories about what God did to and through those people. God is the hero of the story.
2. OT narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings. The ways that God works in history, are not always comprehensible to us.
3. OT narratives are not always taught directly. They often illustrate what is taught directly and categorically elsewhere.
4. OT narratives do not necessarily have a moral all its own.

Principles for Interpreting Narratives

1. OT narratives usually do not directly teach a doctrine
2. OT narratives usually illustrate a doctrine taught proportionally

elsewhere.

3. Narratives record what happened not necessarily what should have happened.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us.
5. We are not told at the end of the narrative whether what happened was good or bad.
6. OT narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions.
7. OT narratives may teach either explicitly or implicitly.

8 of the most common errors of the narratives' interpretation

1. Allegorizing
2. Decontextualizing
3. Selectivity
4. False Combination
5. Redefinition
6. Extracanonial authority
7. Moralizing
8. Personalizing

VI. Acts: The Question of historical precedent

- Acts as History. such as history was not written simply to keep records. rather it was written both to encourage and to inform, moralize, or offer an apologetic.
- Exegesis of Acts includes not only the purely historical question like *What happened?* but also the theological ones such as *What's was Luke's purpose in selecting and shaping the material in this way?*
- It can be demonstrated that Luke's intent in Acts was to lay down a pattern for the church at all times, then that pattern surely

becomes normative, that is, it is what God requires of all Christians under any conditions.

- The division of the book:
 - 1:1-6:7
 - 6:8-9:31
 - 9:32-12:24
 - 12:25-16:5
 - 16:6-19:20
 - 19:21-28:30

VII. The Gospels: One Story, Many dimensions

- Gospels are not books by Jesus but books about Jesus, which at the same time contain a large collection of his teaching.
- One of the problems here is how to translate ideas from the gospels into our own cultural settings.
- Why four gospels? The reason is that different Christian communities each had need for a book about Jesus.
- Exegesis of the Gospels, requires us to think both in terms of the historical setting of Jesus and in terms of historical setting of the authors.
- The historical context
 - The historical context of Jesus - in general
 - The historical context of Jesus - in particular
 - The historical context of the evangelist
- The literary context
 - Interpreting the individual periscopes: think horizontally and vertically.
 - Interpreting the gospels as wholes

VIII. The parables: do you get the pond?

1. Parables are not allegories
2. One of the key understanding the parables is discovering the original audience to whom they were spoken.
3. The best clues as to what the parables are is to be found in their *function*.

IX. THE LAW: COVENANT STIPULATIONS FOR ISRAEL

a) The Old Testament contains 600 commandments, which the Israelites were expected to keep as evidence of their loyalty to God.

b) Christians and the Old Testament Law

1. The Old Testament law is a covenant.
2. The Old Testament is not our testament.
3. Some stipulations of the Old Testament have clearly not been renewed in the New Testament.
4. Part of the Old Covenant is renewed in the New Covenant.
5. All of the Old Testament is still the Word of God for us even though it is not still the command of God to us.
6. Only that is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament "law of Christ".

c) The role of the law in Israel and in the Bible

- 1) Apodictic law
- 2) Casuistic law

d) The Old Testament and ancient law codes

- 1) The food laws
- 2) Laws about the shedding of blood
- 3) Unusual prohibitions

4) Laws giving blessings to those who keep them

e) Some does and don'ts:

1) Do see the Old Testament law as God's fully inspired word for you. Don't see the Old Testament law as God's command to you.

2) Do see the Old Testament law as the basis for the Old Covenant and therefore for Israel's history.

3) Do see God's justice, love and high standards revealed in the Old Testament law. Don't forget to see that God's mercy is made equal to the severity of the standards.

4) Don't see the Old Testament law as complete. It is not technically comprehensive. Do see the Old Testament law as a paradigm - providing example for the range of expected behavior.

5) Do not expect the Old Testament law to be cited frequently by the prophets or the New Testament. Do remember the essence of the law.

6) Do see the Old Testament law as a generous gift to Israel, bringing much blessing when obeyed. Don't see the Old Testament law as a grouping of arbitrary, annoying regulations limiting people's freedom.

X. The prophets

A. The nature of prophecy

- The prophetical books are among the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret or read with understanding.
- The reason of their misunderstanding is their *function and form*.
 1. The meaning of prophecy.
 2. The prophets as spokesperson.
 3. The problem of history.

B. The function of prophecy

1. The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators.

2. The prophet's message was not their own, but God's.
3. The prophets' message is not unoriginal.

C. The exegetical task

1. The need for outside help.
2. The historical context.
3. The isolation of individual oracles.
4. The form of prophetic utterance.
5. The prophets as poets.

D. Some hermeneutical suggestions

1. A caution: the prophet as foreteller of the future.
2. A concern: prophecy and second meanings.
3. A final benefit: the dual emphasis on orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

XI. The psalms: the Israel's prayers and ours

- A question: how do these words spoken to God function as a word from God to us?
- Their purpose: for helping us 1. to express ourselves to God; 2. to consider his ways.

A. Exegetical observations

1. The psalms as poetry: The vocabulary is purposefully metaphorical.

The psalms as a literature.

B. the types of psalms

1. Laments
2. Thanksgiving
3. Hymns of praise

4. Salvation history psalms
5. Psalms of celebration and affirmation
6. Wisdom psalms
7. Songs of trust

XII. Wisdom: then and now

A. Nature of wisdom

1. Abuse of wisdom literature
2. Who is wise? Wisdom is ability to make godly chooses in life.
3. Teachers of wisdom
4. Wisdom in the home
5. Wisdom among colleagues
6. Wisdom expressed through poetry

B. Hermeneutical guidelines

1. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God.
2. Proverbs must be read as a collection.
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not be theoretically accurate.
4. Some proverbs need to be "translated" to be appreciated.

XIII. The revelation

- When turning to the book of revelation from the rest of the New Testament, one feels as if he or she were entering a foreign country.

A. The nature of revelation

1. The revelation as a apocalypse.
2. The revelation as prophecy.

3. The revelation as epistle.

B. The necessity of exegesis

1. The primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean.
2. Even if the book of revelation intends to be prophetic, one must be open to the possibility of the secondary meaning, inspired by the Holy Spirit.
3. Any key to interpreting the Revelation must be intrinsic to the text of the Revelation itself or otherwise available to the original recipients from their own historical context.

C. Hermeneutical question

1. We need to learn that pictures of the future are just that- pictures.
2. Some of the pictures that were intended primarily to express the certainty of God's judgment must not also be interpreted to mean "soon-ness" at least "soon - ness" from our limited perspective.
3. The pictures where the "temporal" is closely tied to the "eschatological" should not be viewed as simultaneous.
4. The pictures that were intended to be totally eschatological are still to taken so.