

Lesson 2: How to Approach Interpretation

I. Introduction

One Tuesday night, you attend a Bible Study at your neighbor's home. The leader opens the Bible to John 10:9 and reads, "***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 group, "What does this passage mean to you?"

Fred says, "It means 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 are mistaken in seeing Jesus as a person. Who's to say that he wasn't actually a walking and talking door?"

Percy remarks, "It means that Jesus 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 Jesus is saying that he is the only way to be saved, and there is no other entry into God's kingdom apart from him."

- Can all of these interpretations be right? Why or why not?
- How would you assess each interpretation?
- What principles are you using to determine which interpretation is correct?

We live in a time of moral and interpretive subjectivism. Everyone believes that their interpretation of the Bible is the right one, regardless of how they got there. Consequently, people use the Bible both to oppose homosexuality and to affirm it, to prove the Trinity and to disprove it, to teach that hell is a reality and to teach that everyone goes to heaven. In light of this confusion, it is important that we develop an interpretative framework that will help us to accurately discern the message of the Bible that God intended to convey.

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 it) by studying the text according to the authorial intent in its historical and grammatical contexts.¹

III. Survey of Interpretive Methods

- A. **Allegorical:** This method, widely practiced by some of the church fathers (e.g. Origen), uses the literal meaning of the passage as a jumping-off point for a deeper meaning. For instance, Origen believed the waterpots which Jesus changed to wine (John 2) were alluding to the Scriptures, given to purify the Jews. Christ gives only certain people special insight to understand these deeper meanings.
 - In this school of thought, who determines the meaning of a text: 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. Naturally, those portions of Scripture that most edify one’s walk with God ought to be emphasized.
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of this view?
- C. **Liberal:** This method holds that human intellect is adequate to sift between truth and error in the Bible, thus science and reason must guide our interpretation of Scripture.
 - 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 transcendent and cannot be confined to mere words or propositional statements. Therefore, the Bible is not revelation but a witness to revelation; it is not the word of God, but *becomes* the word of God when encountered by the reader. Scripture is important because it is there that man

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

meets God in an experiential encounter with Jesus Christ.² It does not greatly matter whether the events in the Bible actually happened, because either way they can still provide this experiential encounter.

- What is wrong with saying that the historicity (historical truth) of the Bible doesn't matter?

E. Postmodern: 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, whether 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 (a.k.a. the master narrative, the story that unifies all the little stories).
- (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 literal-grammatical-historical, this method holds that 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 things like grammar, syntax, and historical background. This method does not insist on wooden literalism, but allows for figurative language, metaphor, and the writing conventions of the author's time. For instance, when Jesus says "I am the door," this does not mean that Jesus has hinges and a knob, but rather that He is an access point.

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

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

- Using this method, who determines the meaning: the author or the interpreter?
- What separates this method from the others?
- What do you think of the claim that no matter how hard anyone tries, they cannot possibly be objective in their interpretation of Scripture?

This last objection has some traction and deserves closer consideration. How can we expect a factory worker in urban Cleveland with an 8th grade education to understand the 2,000-year-old teachings of an imprisoned former Pharisee for the churches in Asia Minor? Scholars have developed the following responses:

1. **False Antithesis:** The problem with this objection is that it assumes we cannot know anything unless we know it omnisciently—either we know something perfectly or we can't know it at all. This factual skepticism makes it impossible to know or understand anything, including the statement, "we cannot know anything unless we know it omnisciently." As we shall see, there are ways to know something *truly* even if we do not know it *completely*.
2. **The Fusion of Horizons:** The factory worker from the earlier illustration lives in one horizon of understanding and Paul lives in another. Even so, it is possible for the factory worker to move closer to Paul's horizon through careful study and research. He can learn Greek, read all of Paul's letters, and study the origins of the Pharisees. At the same time, he can distance himself from his own horizon by purposely discarding any cultural biases that might cloud his judgment. For instance, he can research the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire and read Paul's letters in light of that, rather than assuming that Paul was referring to the kind of race-based slavery practiced in the American South. As he advances, he can experience a fusion of horizons in which he begins to see things from Paul's perspective, and in turn evaluate his own horizon from Paul's perspective. Even if he does not become a Pauline scholar, he can still move closer to the truth and reject false interpretations (something postmoderns are reluctant to do).
3. **The Hermeneutical Spiral:** Similar to the Fusion of Horizons, the Hermeneutical Spiral occurs when the factory worker asks a question, allows the text to answer, and is changed by those answers. He then asks further

questions, which the text answers and which further change him. This process continues, as each additional answer draws the factory worker closer and closer to the center of the circle, where lies the truth. For example:

Factory Worker: Who is Jesus?

Text: Jesus was a carpenter's son who lived in rural Israel 2000 years ago, claimed to be the son of God, and was crucified and resurrected.

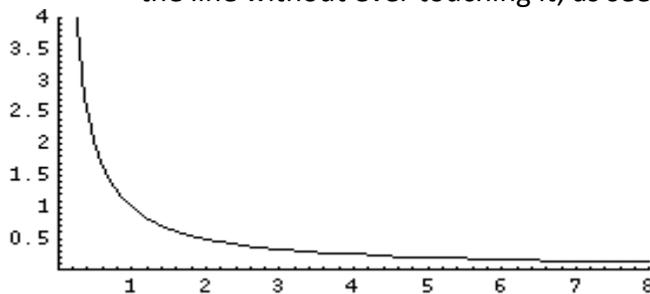
Factory Worker: Was he really the son of God?

Text: Jesus claimed it was so, and it was confirmed by his baptism, his teaching, his miracles, his death, and his resurrection.

Factory Worker: Why would the son of God have to die?

Text: He died on account of our sins and trespasses against a holy God.

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



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

A child attends AWANA's and hears teaching from the book of Romans. As he gets older he reads the entire book for himself, and later he reads a commentary on Romans as well. He goes to seminary and learns Greek, and begins reading Romans in the original language. As a missionary he meticulously translates the entire book into another language. Although he still doesn't have a perfect understanding of Romans, each step has brought him nearer to that goal.⁴

- In light of all of this, is it arrogant to say that a certain interpretation is wrong? For instance, is the interpretation that Paul embraced loving

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

monogamous homosexual relationships just as valid as the interpretation that Paul condemned all forms of homosexuality?

IV. Rationale for the Literal Hermeneutic

The literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic is our chosen method because it alone seeks to understand the text as the author intended it to be understood. While we cannot have omniscient knowledge of authorial intent, we can have increasing knowledge through rigorous, Holy Spirit-assisted study. The following is a brief defense of this hermeneutic.

- A. **The Purpose of Language:** Created in His image, God gifted man with language to understand and communicate ideas, both to and about God. Since God is all-wise, surely He saw to it that the means of language (spoken and written words) are sufficient to sustain the purpose of language (communication of ideas). Also, since language was created for communication of ideas, it makes sense that God would expect man to use language in its normal sense, rather than discover some encrypted speech or “deeper” level of communication outside the channel of normal language.⁵
- B. **The Need for Objectivity:** If one does not employ the normal interpretation, the truth of Scripture is lost. This is especially so when the reader, rather than 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: The Bethlehem of prophecy (Micah 5:2) was an actual town where Jesus was born; Jesus was pierced for our transgressions, as prophesied in Isaiah 53, with a literal hole in his body. There are some instances in which Old Testament events are related to Christ (e.g. *“out of Egypt I called my son,”* Matt. 2:15), but even these Old Testament quotations had a literal meaning at the time of their original writing (see Hos. 11:1). Further, their application to Christ (what we call “typological interpretations”) in the New Testament are inspired by the Holy Spirit, not conjured up in the creative mind of a modern reader. And the only reason we can even understand the interpretations is because we interpret the interpretations literally!

V. The Principles of Normal Hermeneutics

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

- A. **Interpret Grammatically:** Since words are the vehicles of ideas, and since the meaning of any passage must be determined by a study of the words and their relationships within sentences, determining the grammatical sense of a text must be the starting point for 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 of a verse to what comes before, and to what comes after. It is important to relate a verse both to the immediate context and to the theme and scope of the whole book.⁷
- C. **Compare Scripture with Scripture:** The dual authorship of the Bible makes it necessary to know not only the human author's meaning, but also God's meaning. This *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning), while directly related to the human author's intended meaning, may not be fully understood from one passage alone, but is revealed when Scripture is compared with Scripture.⁸ After all, some human authors did not even understand the full implications of their own words (1 Peter 1:10-12)!

Using the Bible to interpret the Bible is not a foolproof method. We must choose the right texts to interpret other texts. For instance, if we want to understand something in Ephesians, it is better to go to Romans than to James, because Paul wrote both Ephesians and Romans. When the New Testament refers to an Old Testament event, we should first seek to understand the OT event in its own context, then see how the NT author uses it to shed some light on whatever he was communicating.

- D. **Recognize the Progress of Revelation:** It is important to realize that revelation was given over a period of time. Beginning in Genesis, the Bible adds layer upon layer to mankind's understanding of God, Jesus, and salvation. So, although Isaiah had much to say about the suffering servant on the cross, his knowledge of the event was not nearly as complete as John's. Therefore, when we read about Abraham's life, we need to bear in mind that his understanding was limited, and his words and actions should be interpreted in light of his position in the progress of revelation.
- How does this concept help us to understand why we can eat bacon and the Old Testament Saints could not?

VI. Thought Questions

⁶ Ryrie, p. 114.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

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

- B. How should we respond when someone says, “This is what the Bible means to me”?

- C. What would you say if someone lamented, “I can’t know what the Bible means unless I have a thorough knowledge of Greek and Hebrew”?

- D. Can we learn anything from the work of non-Christian scholars?

- E. What is the most important step to understanding the Bible? (Hint: Consider 1 Cor. 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

1. As we approach the study of any text, our first step will be learning about the historical background. To begin with, read the introduction to the book in a good Study Bible, looking for information about the author, the audience, the events of the time, and where the book falls in revelation history. All of this will help us to get closer to the mind of the author and the original meaning of what he wrote.
2. The next question we need to answer is, what is the *literary genre* that the author used to communicate his ideas in this portion of Scripture? A literary genre is a category of writing that utilizes certain characteristics such as form, style, and content. For instance, in our bookstores we have sections for fiction, nonfiction,

prose, poetry, self-help, and each category is defined by certain characteristics. In the Bible we find:

- *Historical Narrative*: Books which give a factual account of historical events.
- *Law*: These are didactic commands and standards meant to govern the people of Israel. Much care should be taken in applying the law to our present day.
- *Poetry/Wisdom*: This includes songs, psalms, poems, and proverbs. Characteristics such as structure, repetition, and word choice add meaning and emphasis to the words themselves.
- *Prophecy*: These books detail God's future plans and/or give divine commentary on the events of the time. Often the prophets use poetry, songs, stories, and actions which are rich in symbolism and meaning.
- *Gospels*: These are historical narratives whose main protagonist is Jesus Christ. Unlike the words of other people in the historical narratives, which are accurately recorded but untrue (e.g. the serpent's deception), the words of Jesus are always perfect, true, and right. Also, the parables of Jesus form a sub-genre which will require special interpretive rules and considerations.
- *Personal Epistles*: These are structured letters written by human/divine authors to individuals or churches. Usually, a specific occasion has triggered apostolic intervention through these letters.

3. The next step is to outline the book in order to see its general flow and context. Below is the standard outline format, with at least two points at each level.

I.

A.

1.

a.

i.

Outlining is more of an art than a science, but the following steps can help get your mind thinking in terms of big-picture relationships.

- Give a title to each chapter so you can see the large-scale flow.
- Write a brief (three- to five-word) summary of each paragraph.
- Look at your summary sentences and try to determine which ones go together, or flow into one another.
- Look for things like lists, contrasts, examples, and supporting points to help you know what goes where.
- Look for any wording that seems to start a new section (Therefore, Now, etc.)

VIII. Assignment (to be completed AFTER class meeting #2)

A. Read at least two introductions to the book of Titus (Study Bibles are a great place to find these), then answer the following questions about the HISTORICAL BACKGROUND of the book.

1. Who is the author?
2. When was the book written?
3. What is the occasion for writing this book (why was it written)?
4. What interpretive challenges will we encounter?
5. What are you most excited to learn about in this book?

B. Now, from the text of the book itself, answer the following questions. Please do not consult the study notes until you have attempted to answer yourself.

1. What is the literary genre of this book?
2. List the major themes you see in the book.
3. What is the purpose of this book?

C. Come up with your own outline for the book of Titus

For an Example for this assignment, see the Appendix.

IX. Conclusion

The God of the universe created language and chose to express Himself through language, intending that humans would be able to understand what He communicated to them. Yet it is true that a text may have a wide variety of possible interpretations. Because of the disparity of culture, time, and place, even those who affirm the gospel and gladly submit to the Lordship of Christ will have minor theological variations and conclusions about a text. There is, however, another category of readers: those who do not understand the Bible because they do not *want* to understand it. People who refuse to submit to the living God who wrote Scripture will always seek to dismiss it, twist it, or tone it down to fit their own agenda. Their opinions about God's word need not trouble the faithful, who will continue to serve God and gladly accept what He says at face value.

Appendix

JUDE: BACKGROUND & OUTLINE

A. Historical Background

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?

Jude quotes from 2 Peter 3:3, so we know 2 Peter predates Jude, which had to have been written before 68 AD (the year of his death). Jude never mentions the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), so it was likely written between 68 and 70 AD. Whereas 2 Peter describes the coming of false teachers, Jude describes the presence of false teachers.

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

Though Jude wanted to write to the members of the church about their salvation, he felt he had to instead warn them about certain immoral men among them who are circulating (a possibly Gnostic-style) heresy. They claimed that, since they were saved by grace, they could live any way they want.

4. What interpretive challenges will we encounter?

The use of non-canonical literature in his epistle.

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

*The importance of defending the faith
The effect of proper doctrine on one's lifestyle.*

B. Overview from the Text

1. What is the literary genre of this book?

Jude is a personal epistle.

2. List the major themes you see in the book.

*Apostasy
Contending for the Faith
Discernment of Biblical Truth*

Old Testament Illustrations
The Character of False Teachers

3. What is the purpose of this book?
Jude writes to believers under attack from false teachers so that they will persevere in the faith.

C. Outline of the book of Jude

I. Greeting (1-2)

II. Body (3-23)

A. Call to Contend (3-16)

1. Contend for the Faith against False Teachers (3-4)
2. Warnings from History (5-7)
3. The Characteristics of False Teachers (8-13)
4. The Final Judgment of False Teachers (14-16)

B. Call to Persevere (17-23)

III. Doxology (24-25)