

An Introductory Guide to Bible Interpretation¹

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The Bible's Nature

The Bible is the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21; e.g., Matt. 15:4).² This means the whole Bible—every last word of it—is God’s written communication to mankind.³ Thus, the Bible is perfect and reliable, void of error or flaw, absolute in its authority, and sufficient to train a person spiritually, properly relating them to God. Because the Bible is the Word of God, it is the only book of its kind. On the other hand, because God used men to write it, it shares human language as the common feature between itself and all verbal communication.⁴ Accordingly, when interpreting the Bible, the divine and human qualities of its text must be taken into account. For, if one ignores the Scriptures’ nature as divine special revelation, they ultimately reject the power with which God has fashioned them; and conversely, if one ignores their nature as communication through customary human language, they will fail to accurately understand them, treating

¹ This guide has been built primarily upon the information of three resources: courses taught by Dr. George Gunn at Shasta Bible College and Graduate School; *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* by Peter Cotterell and Max Turner; and *Basic Bible Interpretation* by Roy B. Zuck. There is a debt of gratitude to these men as this entire guide is thoroughly a by-product of their work.

² The phrase “word of God” and related phrases are found repeatedly in the Scriptures to speak of themselves. It should be noted that these phrases do not always directly refer to God’s written Word, such as in cases where God spoke directly to individuals (e.g., Gen. 15:1: “the *word of the Lord* came to Abraham in a vision. . .” [italization added]). In Matthew 15:4, Jesus quotes Exodus 20:12 (from the Ten Commandments) and says, “For God said . . .” This is but one internal example which demonstrates that the Bible is indeed God’s Word.

³ Modern translations of the Bible’s text are a result of God’s preservation of His Word (Matt. 24:35; 1 Peter 1:25), though inspiration and inerrancy are only characteristic of the autographs. Unfortunately, preservation of the Scriptures is a doctrine which has been misunderstood and abused. The Biblical doctrine of preservation simply means that the Scriptures are ultimately indestructible. See William W. Combs, “The Preservation of Scripture,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 5 (Fall 2000): 11. The text of Scripture has been maintained to an astonishing degree in the vast collection of extant manuscripts, clearly displaying God’s preservation of His Word. See Norman L. Geisler, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 239–246.

⁴ Second Peter 1:20–21 explains the process by which God produced His Word, saying, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The statement that no prophecy is a “matter of one’s own interpretation” is explained in the next clause: “for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will.” These verses refer not to the study and interpretation of the already-written text, but to the production and source of the text being written. The end of verse 21 then explains the process by which God produced His special, written revelation: carrying the human writers along by the Holy Spirit. These men were not passive in this process, mindlessly recording the Holy Spirit’s words. Instead, the writers of Scripture were actively engaged in the process, using their unique personalities.

them as though they were a mystification. Understanding the human and divine qualities of the Bible is imperative if one is to understand the message of the Bible.

Interpretive Foundations

In Biblical interpretation, one's philosophy of interpretation will entirely determine how they understand God's intended message in the Bible. When one constructs their philosophy of interpretation upon the recognition of the Bible's human/divine quality, they will arrive at the grammatico-historical hermeneutical approach to interpretation. Only this approach accounts for both the human language of the text and the divine purpose in the language. The grammatico-historical approach is built upon four indispensable tenets regarding the language of the Bible:

- 1) *Perspicuity*: The Bible was communicated in clear language. For anyone to expect their communication to be understood by their recipient, they must communicate in a clear way according to their knowledge, skills, and shared knowledge with the recipient. God designed the Bible to be understood by its original audience; thus, the Bible was delivered in language that was clear and straightforward. Perspicuity does, however, account for intentional enigmas, though these are rare. Such communication devices are quite effective in not only communicating information but forcing the recipient to more fully engage the information to gain a stronger understanding of the concept.⁵ Yet, the use of enigmatic communication must be prudently applied so as not to deteriorate the process of communication; thus, these devices are seldom utilized in the text of Scripture. The Bible was communicated clearly by God and must be interpreted literally.⁶
- 2) *Authorial Intent*: God determined the meaning of the Bible. It is the author's responsibility to communicate effectively. The message he intends to deliver must be communicated as clearly as possible according to his knowledge, skills, and

⁵ This should not be confused with reader-response criticism.

⁶ Clear language is literal language. Literal language does have flexibility for special features, such as figures of speech, symbolism, types, and so forth. The primary control of literal language is that all language must be taken in its most straightforward sense according to its grammatical context and historical context. For any communication to be clear, it must be transmitted using literal, normal, and plain language. Rather than dichotomizing language into categories of literal or figurative, it may be preferred to divide language into conventional usage or figurative usage.

shared knowledge with his recipient. It is the recipient's task to receive the communication and understand what the author means to the best of his knowledge, skills, and shared knowledge with the author.⁷ Because the Bible is the product of God, it is God Who has placed meaning on its text, using the unique personalities, minds, and abilities of the writers. God has effectively and inerrantly communicated in clear language to the original audiences for whom the Bible was written. It is only as a result of human fallibility that people must labor intensively to understand God's Word as He intended it.

- 3) *Single Meaning*: The text of the Bible possesses only one meaning.⁸ When an author communicates, he can only expect his audience to understand his communication if he attaches a single meaning to it. In any body of communication—words placed in sequences forming sentences, which are then placed in sequences forming paragraphs, which are finally placed in sequences forming a discourse—an accurate understanding for the audience can only be obtained if the units (i.e., words) and sections express only a single concept.⁹ Forms of communication which assign multiple meanings to a single message are communication breakdowns. These lead to confusion at best or deception at worst—whether playful puns, secretive code wording, or malicious lying. Only single meaning preserves the integrity of communication; thus, single meaning is an essential feature of human language. The Bible was communicated with single meaning of the text.

⁷ As a fundamental presupposition to all communication, there is a component which must be considered, namely: participation. Without participation between author and recipient, the communication process will be prevented.

⁸ See Robert L. Thomas, "The Principle of Single Meaning," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 33–47. Human language is descriptive and not prescriptive. Thus, the meaning of a word is determined by its usage. Languages develop naturally first, and then people find ways to describe the functions and patterns within those languages. Rules of grammar, then, are born in order to describe the way a given language functions and to foster order among those who participate in its use.

⁹ Words are symbols and the component vehicles of verbal communication. When these symbols are organized in sequences, forming complete ideas, there can only be one concept bound to any given symbol to maintain the integrity of the communication. Thus, the single meaning of each word, in relation to the other words, dictates the meaning of the whole discourse. One caveat is that there are instances in the Bible where a passage speaks about two different referents at separate points within the single discourse without ever specifying a shift from one to the other. See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of Messiah: A Study of the Sequences of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2004), 4–6.

4) *Interpretive Gaps*: The Bible's language and background is ancient and remains distant from a modern audience. The Bible was written over the course of more than 1,500 years, from roughly 1450 BC to AD 95, and its language is contemporary to the time of its writing. Often, it is questioned why the Bible did not simply identify future individuals, nations, or events by name to help later audiences. Certainly, there are occasions in which God called out persons by name who had not yet been born (cf. Isa. 44:28—45:1), but this is quite the exception, not the rule. Some teach that *Meshech* from Ezekiel 38:2 is a prophetic reference to Moscow and that *Rosh* refers to the country of Russia simply because of the similarity of their names in relation to their regions.¹⁰ However, it is more likely that these refer to modern-day Turkey.¹¹ The fact is, the Bible rarely ever used terminology and names of future places and people. But if the Bible is perspicuous, why did God not use the name *Rome* for the fourth empire in Daniel 2, since God certainly knew that would be its name and that would have provided greater clarity? Also, why is the Antichrist's name not given in order to help identify him in the Tribulation? If Ezekiel prophesies of a war that is still future, why did he describe their weaponry in terms of swords and horses (Ezek. 38:4)?¹² The reason for locking the Bible's language in to that of its audience at the time it was written is that God has provided a path for them and all subsequent audiences to correctly understand His message. Had He used language common only to a future period of events, all previous audiences would have no way to understand its meaning. Thus, the Bible was written in vernacular coincident to its writing, entirely creating the need for interpretation. People today stand at a roughly 3,500- to 2,000-year time gap from the time of the Scriptures' composition. This means that today's audience is separated from the Bible's message in terms not only of time but also in terms of culture, language,

¹⁰ There are some well-respected scholars who take this position. This is not meant as a criticism of them; simply an illustration of the ancient language of the Bible and the need for labor-intensive study. For an example of this view, see Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of Messiah*, 107.

¹¹ Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel*, vol. 6, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 930.

¹² Some see this as a result of economic restrictions in the Tribulation. See note on Ezekiel 38:4 in *The Ryrie Study Bible*. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 1323.

geography, styles of writing, and so forth. The Bible is an ancient book and requires careful study by modern audience to be understood.

Interpretive Process

Having established the foundational tenets of interpretation, these can now be applied to the actual work of interpretation.

- 1) *Observe*: The first step in the process is observation. This is where the groundwork is laid for understanding the meaning of the Bible. The interpreter should read their passage and begin taking notice of what is plainly there, without bringing in any biases or conclusions. To fully engage the relevant details of the passage, an interpreter should include the observation and analysis of such things as grammar, cultural and historical context, discourse context, literary genre, figurative and idiomatic considerations, and more. Asking and answering questions using who, what, when, where, why, how, and so forth is very helpful here. The more thoroughly and objectively one examines the facts of their passage, the better prepared they will be to draw accurate interpretive conclusions. This is not the place for opinion but simply examining the facts.
- 2) *Interpret*: The second step is interpretation. This is where one collects the facts and determines the meaning of the text. Having gathered all the facts at this point, the interpreter must now apply the facts to the text and draw solid conclusions as to what the passage means. Questions should be asked, such as: “What does the grammar, vocabulary, and topic tell me about the meaning of this passage?”; “What does the inter-book and intra-book context tell me about the meaning of this passage?”; and “What does the historical and cultural context tell me about the meaning of this passage?” This is the place to draw well-supported and sensible conclusions based upon the facts.
- 3) *Apply*: The final step is application. Now, understanding the meaning of the text, the question of how this affects one’s life must be considered. One of the primary bases for the application of the Bible is drawn from 2 Timothy 3:16–17, which states, “All Scripture is inspired by God and *profitable* for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be *adequate*, equipped for

every good work.”¹³ The all-encompassing “all Scripture” is what indicates that the entire counsel of God is useful (i.e., profitable) for these purposes, which ultimately lead a person to be adequately equipped for serving the Lord.¹⁴ The conclusion from this is that the whole Bible applies to the life of every believer. Yet, not every passage applies directly to believers today. To be sure, there are many passages that call believers today to apply the exact requirements of the text. These are primarily in the New Testament Epistles, though each text should be considered in light of its content. At the same time, there are passages that do not require believers today to apply their exact requirements but their underlying principles and truths. For example, when God told Noah to build an ark (Gen. 6:14–21), God was not commanding believers today to build an ark, but within that account—and all Scripture—there is an essential application (or multiple applications) to be extracted. In understanding the record of Noah, one application is this: God promises future events and instructs believers through His Word; therefore, believers should trust the certainty of God’s prophetic plan and plan their lives accordingly. Thus, the step of application takes the meaning of the text and applies it to the lives of individuals in a responsible way. Questions which ask: “How directly does this affect me?”; “If it is not directly to me, what are the underlying truths?”; and “How should I respond to this?” are helpful in gathering applications which derive from the meaning of the text. This is the place to use the Bible in shaping one’s life.

Conclusion

While this is simply an introductory acquaintance with Biblical interpretation, it should serve as a solid resource for those who are seeking to begin the work of studying God’s

¹³ Italicization added.

¹⁴ The idea of adequacy as an English word leaves the idea here somewhat underwhelming. On the other hand, the King James Version’s rendering *perfect* went in the other direction and led to some misunderstandings toward Christian perfectionism. The idea is that the Scriptures are sufficient to provide everything a person needs to enter a relationship with God through salvation and to equip them to live a growing, active, and pleasing life before God. The fact that “all Scripture” is mentioned in this passage demonstrates the application of the entire counsel of God to the lives of believers for the purpose of sufficiently equipping them before God.

Word (2 Tim. 2:15). May this guide be a blessing to help in the study of God's Word, and may the Lord grant an abundant harvest.