

Interpretation is to observation what diagnosis is to inspection. In observation we see what is there, in interpretation we answer what does what we see mean. We are now getting to the meat and potatoes of Bible Study. This phase of the process requires a great deal of care, in that we are now trying to determine just what it is God means when he speaks. In one respect its easier than observation, because we are now beginning to take what it is we have already observed, apply some specific guidelines to our observations and formulate the truth. Unfortunately, however, its not always quite that easy.

2 Timothy 2:2-3

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 3You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

3 Steps to Teaching

- **Gathering** our Material
 - Observation
 - Interpretation
 - Application
- **Organizing** our Material
- **Presenting** our Material

} Correlation

Interpretation

2 Timothy 2:15, "You study, to show yourself approved unto God, and workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth."

Interpretation seeks to find the meaning in a word, phrase, sentence, verse, chapter, section, book, testament and whole of the Bible. It is the next logical step following observation:

"In observing what the Bible says, you probe; in interpretation, you mull. Observation is discovery; interpreting is digesting. Observation means depicting what is there, and interpretation is deciding what it means. The one is to explore, the other is to explain."^{2.1}

The art and science of interpretation is called Hermeneutics.

It is both an art and a science. As a science we need to know the rules so well that we have the freedom to apply them, and we need to know when to apply which principal. As an art, we realize that because this Book is a living book, we cannot just throw some nice, neat principles at a passage and always walk away with a nice, neat answer. Its an eternal process of study because we are looking at the eternal truths of God.

Our approach to interpretation is based on our broad understanding of the Book. When we look at the Bible we realize that it is both a book and a divine book. That is, like all others books, it is written using human language to convey truths from a human author to human readers. It is also a divine book, in that unlike any other book, it has a unique divine origin and purpose, and can only be understood by the help of our divine tutor, the Holy Spirit. We have certain principles, or corollaries we'll apply along both these two lines of self-evident truth:

The Bible is a Book
and
The Bible is a Divine Book.

The following introduction is largely borrowed from Roy B. Zuck's fine work, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, chapter 3.

The Bible as a Book.

As is the case with any book, the Bible was written in human language with the intention of communicating a message to humans. Granted the message is special, or divine, as is the actual origin and means of spiritual understanding, but that's for our next section, The Bible as a Divine Book. For now, we want to emphasize the traits of the Bible common with all books, or written forms of communication.

All forms of communication always involve three common pieces: 1) The communicator, or sender of a message. 2) The information, using words, symbols or commonly understood signs. 3) The recipient of the message.

If you think about it, the reception of the message, or understanding thereof, can be hindered at all three points. The sender can either poorly send, or can be at such a distance, either in time or space, that the transmission of the message has a tendency to lose its signal strength. This is, from a human perspective one difficulty with the interpretation of the Bible, because our message senders were both great distances and a great number of years apart from us. This presents cultural, historical, and language barriers.

The information itself is sometimes difficult for us to understand for the same reasons as above, plus its not just human information. Furthermore, we tend to inhibit the reception of the message, sometimes because we do not listen well, (or at all); sometimes because we have our own preconceived notions, and other times because we do not want to know the truth. But this is getting to our next section on the Bible as a divine book.

Back to the common traits of communications. The Bible, like any book, is a means of communication. Common to all books are the following six corollaries of this truth.

6 Corollaries to the Bible as a Book

1) "Each biblical writing - that is, each word, sentence, and book was recorded in a written language and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language."

- The Bible was not written in unintelligible code. It is not something you have to search for some deeper, hidden truth to understand. Its to be understood in its plainest sense. This does allow for, even requires, figures of speech.
- As with any book, you must seek to avoid preconceived notions. If we come to it with the idea, for example, that every instance of a word always means the same thing, we will run into great problems.

Imagine, for example, someone says to you, "On Sunday I ate too much and gained 3 pounds." You would not normally think that to mean that you felt like you gained too much spiritual insight from the Sunday sermon, are spritually bloated, and as such are now feeling like you are on equal footing with the triune God. Instead you would take that to mean that you ate too much *food* and gained 3 literal pounds of *fat*.

- The literal approach is the normal approach with all literature. There will always be those who want to find the deeper truth to the Gettysburg address, but the fact is that 4 score and 7 years does not refer to anything other than 87 years. Likewise, when the Bible speaks of a ruling Kingdom, in the Temple, in Jerusalem, for 1000 years it does not refer to some spiritual plane of infinite existence.

Interpretation

1) “... was recorded in a written language and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language.” (CON’T)

- We can look at already fulfilled prophecy and see that it was indeed meant to be understood in its literal sense.
- The goal of interpretation is to determine the original meaning of the text. That is to say we don’t want to impose our own meaning, or approach it as a proof text and try to make it fit our determined purpose. This is called eisegesis, where we want to practice exegesis. The getting out of (ex) the meaning, instead of the putting into our meaning (eis).
- We need to take into account each author’s styles, and even individual purpose, but NEVER at the expense of The Author’s purpose. The book is not a collection of individual pieces as much as a single book. Furthermore, we cannot know what the author was thinking, we cannot get behind their motives...that’s deviating from our purpose...which is to study the text. The text can give us an idea of the authors purpose, not the other way around.

2) “Each Biblical writing was written by someone to specific hearers or readers in a specific historical, geographical situation for a specific purpose.”

- When Lot was told to never look back, or when Noah was told to build an ark, or Peter to meet Jesus on the water — not one of these commands applies directly to us today.
- Likewise, today if you were to arrive at someones house that had the following sign on the door — “Come on in, sit down, and have a piece of cake” — you would be wise to make sure the sign was directed to you before enacting.

3) “The Bible is affected and influenced by the cultural environment from which each human writer wrote.”

- Cultural, historical, geographical, environmental variables all play a part in what’s being said. Its important to bridge that cultural gap in order to understand, or interpret, the statements made.

4) “Each biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context.”

- Words vary their meaning based on context. “Run” has literally hundreds of definitions. Imagine this sentence: She got a run in her hose and had a run-in with a man running for office, when she made a run to the 2nd bathroom, (because she had the runs that she got from running with the wrong crowd and eating the wrong foods) since the comode in the first bathroom wasn’t running.
- Sentences, likewise vary their meaning. “He ate his lunch” can mean varied things, given a varied context. Was he in the cafeteria, or in a courtroom?
- Several words you always need to be certain of the context of:
saved/salvation, law, end times, Kingdom. world, and faith

5) “Each biblical writing took on the nature of a specific literary form”

- We must take into account the different forms of literature present in the Bible: prophecy, poetry, narratives, letters, proverbs, law, wisdom literature, drama, apocalypses, parables and discourses. If you read poetry like you read the epistles, or Revelation like the law, you’re in big trouble. That’s not to say we ever abandon the principle of plainest is best, but each form of literature shines a different light on the understanding of the text.

6) “Each biblical writing was understood by its initial readers in accord with the basic principles of logic and communication.”

- Look for ways to put things together. We have to give the benefit of the doubt and not look for contradictions. When we read in the paper that the sun will rise at 5:54 AM we do not think this a contradiction, when the same paper may have an article on the upcoming solar eclipse, which discusses the fact that the earth rotates-not the sun.
- Likewise, when we read apparent contradictions in the Bible we need to look for the solution. 1 John 1:8 vs. 3:9.

These 6 corollaries suggest that we ask the following 6 questions in our approach to the Bible:

1. What did the words convey in the grammar of the original readers?
2. What was being conveyed by those words to the initial readers?
3. How did the cultural setting influence and affect what was written?
4. What is the meaning of the words in their context?
5. In what literary form is the material written and how does that affect what is said?
6. How do the principles of logic and normal communication affect the meaning?

The Bible as a Divine Book

While, on the one hand, we can, and should approach the Bible as we do any other book – in terms of basic interpretation – we also must recognize the divine nature of this book. Because it is the Word of God, and not just the words of man, there are 4 corollaries to keep in mind in our interpretation of this book, the word of God.

1) The Bible is the innerant Word of God.

This applies to the original manuscripts. As discussed previously, there are errors that have crept into our modern translations. However, because of the Biblically prescribed method of Biblical interpretation, the comparison of Scripture with Scripture, along with the promise by God that He would protect His word, we can be fully confident in all but the worst of our modern translations. Even the worst of translations though, will still hold true if you compare Scripture with Scripture. Even the liberal translations wherein God is neutered, are not a problem (although I don’t recommend them), if you compare Scripture with Scripture.

2) The Bible is authoritative.

Since this is the innerant Word of God, the Bible is intrinsically authoritative. Because of the binding nature of this authority, we are behooved, even obliged to be as accurate with our interpretation as possible.

3) The Bible has unity.

Although penned by (2) scores of authors, it is the Word of God, a single author. As such there are 4 principles to bear in mind. **First**, the Bible cannot contradict itself. God is not Himself contradictory, therefore, neither is His word. If you believe the Bible is God’s word, and you believe God is trustworthy, then you must believe the Bible will not

contain contradictions. There are at times different perspectives given on the same event, but this does not constitute contradiction. All the prophetic utterances, when put together, form a well-designed, well-fitted storyline, through and through. Where there are *apparent* contradictions, more study, more comparison is needed.

Second, because of the unity of the Bible, it is *sometimes* helpful to interpret the more difficult passages in light of the more clear passages. There is *much* caution needed in this however. This is where it is very easy to become an eisogete, instead of the preferred exogete. It is very easy to place a meaning on something that we do not understand because we think we do understand something else. In other words, how do you know what is the easier, clearer passage.

Third, because of this unity, the Bible interprets itself. One passage will give light on another. If you don't understand, for example, what one author has written in one passage, look for more information by that same author on that same subject in another passage of the same book. Then look for other information by the same author in another book, then look for other information by the same Author in the rest of the book.

This relates to the first principle that all scripture must agree. Since it must all agree, then it is only obvious that one passage will often throw light on another. Seek it out. Find it. Study.

When Paul says, "Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him" (1 Cor. 7:17) this does not mean if you are a bank-robber, living in an adulterous relationship, and come to the Lord, that you should continue to steal money and affection.

Fourth, the unity of Scripture does not negate the concept of progress of revelation. Because the book was given over a period of time, we need to understand new revelation sheds light on old. Furthermore, some commands will later be negated. This does not impose on the consistency of God, it simply means that rules change with the circumstances.

4) The Bible has mystery.

As such, each student will not always understand every passage. There are prophecies, which can never be fully understood until having been fulfilled. Miracles are also beyond our scope of understanding. And certain doctrine is very difficult: who gets the trinity? The hypostatic union? The sovereignty of God along side the love of God? Who understands why God would be willing to become a worm to die for one?

Summary:

If we ignore the Bible as a book, ignoring its human elements, then we will approach the Bible as only a mystical book. If we ignore it as divine, then we approach it only with human logic and ration. "Seeing that the Bible is a book that is both human and divine, we seek to interpret it as we would any other book while at the same time affirming its uniqueness as a book of divine truth from the hand of God."

Hermeneutics

We'll divide our discussion of hermeneutics into two categories, general and specific (or special). Both categories has its own set of laws that aid us in our interpretation. Remember, however, that we are not looking for a nice, neat box we can pass our scripture through and expect a nice, neat interpretation from. Rather, these are principles to aid us in our discovery process, and will keep us on track. Rules never produce results, they merely limit them.

General Hermeneutics

These are the principles of interpretation that relate to all passages of Scripture (and except the last one, to all writing in general), in contrast to special hermeneutics, which only apply to certain instances.

(pg)

Law of Grammatical Construction

You must interpret a statement in the Bible in its gramatically constructed, literal, grammatical, historical interpretation.

Jesus argued from the grammar (Mark 12:35-37)

Paul makes an argument based on a word being single and not plural (Gal. 4).

Jesus says, not one jot nor one tittle will pass from the law (Matt 5:18).

Law of Context

A word or phrase has to be interpreted in light of its given immediate context (the paragraph, or chapter).

Law of Scope and Design

Everything in Scripture must be interpreted in light of the author's purpose, **where clearly stated, or easily seen.**

Law of Circumstance and Custom

The circumstances or customs/culture which may have a bearing on teh work in which the author/readers existed.

Law of Analogy of Faith

You may not interpret one part of the Bible in contrast to another part of the Bible, since the bible is God's truth, *All Scripture must agree.*

Special (Specific) Hermeneutics

These principles of interpretation apply to specific types and/or kinds of passages, and/or specific situations.

Law of Progressive Revelation

God is revealing his truth to mankind in a progressive fasion over the course of its history. Adam did not know what Abraham did, nor what Paul did.

When dealing with a portion of Scripture pertinent to a particular character, you can only hold them responsible for what they know.

Interpretation

Law of First Mention

The first place a subject, term, or concept is mentioned, or introduced, its often, if not usually, defined.

Law of “Obscure” Passages

I’m not too fond of this one. But basically, we’re told to always interpret obscure passages in the light of the clear passages and never vice versa. Again, as discussed in the previous section, there are many problems with this approach. Take caution when using it.

Law of Single Interpretation

There is only one correct interpretation to any given term or passage of Scripture, though there may be many applications.

Checking Principle

After you’ve interpreted a passage of Scripture, you should check with outside sources to verify your interpretation, including commentaries, Pastor, etc.... Its a rare, rare day when you discover legitimate truth to the Word that’s not already been discovered. Not to say that it won’t ever happen, but take a new angle with a great amount of caution.

Law of Induction

We must be careful to discover the meaning to a passage and not attribute meaning to a passage: be an exegete, not an eiseget.

Law of Proper Cross Reference

When you use other passages of the Bible, make sure you’re comparing parallel concepts. Keep your apples to apples.

Law of Hebrew Poetry

Remember the principle of parallelism (see pg. 23).

Law of Prophecy

Interpret literally, where at all possible.

Interpret it historically.

Keep in mind the possible (even probable) double fulfillment.

Law of Parables

Parables are an extended metaphor (a comparison without the use of “like” or “as”) or extended simile (with the use of “like” or “as”). The word *Parable* comes from two greek words, *para* (along side) and *ballo* (to throw), meaning something thrown along side the truth. As such, they are always related to true life, either actual or possible real life story (as opposed to a fable which is fantastical in nature).

Generally, parables are used for the following reasons:

- 1) to embellish language (make it more interesting)
- 2) to communicate unknown truth, from the known to the unknown, from something otherwise difficult to grasp.
- 3) to make truth impersonal, easier to communicate (2 Sam. 12, Nathan’s parable to David about his sin).

Law of Parables, (cont).

Jesus' Parables were also used to...

- 1) Conceal truth from unbelievers (Matt. 13:11-15)
- 2) Reveal truth to believers (Matt 13:11)
- 3) Communicate Kingdom truths

Principles of Parable Interpretation

- 1) Look for the main idea/truth. What's the main point of the story. Don't work it too hard...but hard enough to bring out the main point.
- 2) Identify the Kingdom Truth intended (Jesus' parables)
- 3) Identify the need or problem involved in the parable.

Example: Luke 10:25 (Parable of good Samaritan)

- Answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?"
- Which of these 3 was the neighbor?

- What is a neighbor?

- Anyone who comes across your path
- who has a need
- that you can meet

Word Studies

Word studies are the most basic (don't confuse *basic* with *simple*) form of interpretation we can do. Below are some guidelines we'll use to do a good word study.

You will need some tools to do this. At the minimum, a good concordance, such as the Strongs (preferred) or Youngs is needed. Also helpful, but not absolutely needed are either a basic Bible dictionary (such as Vines) or an exhaustive one (such as the 10 volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, by Kittel, or the 3 volume *International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, by Colin Brown). **Or**, a combination tool such as Zondervan's *The Complete Word Study New Testament*. **Or**, a good Bible computer program.

5 Steps to a Good Word Study

- 1) Identify the Greek, or Hebrew term used in a particular verse, and its corresponding Strongs number. Write (or type) out the verse, underline the word, or group of words, that correspond to this root term.

Example:

Joshua 1:8 "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but **you shall meditate** on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."

- 2) Look up the basic (strong's) definition of this word, and how many times it appears. Write out the definition, along with its different translations.

Example:

You shall meditate = 1897, *hagah*, appears 24 times.
 a primitive root [compare 1901]; to murmur (in pleasure or anger); by implication, to ponder.
 KJV: imagine, meditate, mourn, mutter, roar, sore, speak, study, talk, utter.

- 3) Note any root derivations "[compare to...]", and their meanings

Example:

Related to 1901, *hagiyy*
 From an unused root akin to 1897; properly, a murmur, i.e., a complaint.
 KJV: meditation, musing.

- 4) Look up each occurrence of the word, in bible order. List the reference. Ponder over the meaning of the word as used in the sentence/immediate context, and write out your own definition based on its use here. Also write out the verse, underline the use of the word.

Example:

Job 27:4 *to verbally (using the tongue) express (deceive)*
 My lips certainly will not speak unjustly, nor will my tongue **mutter** deceive.

Note: In your actual exercise, you would start with Josh. 1:8, but I skipped it here intentionally, as to not give away the answer.

5) Categorize the uses of this word. Look over each of the definitions you gave for the passages in step 4 above. You'll find that there are now (in this example) 3-4 different broad uses of the word, *hagah*. Write out your 3-4 different definitions, and list the references that pertain to each below it, along with the definition you gave at that verse level.

Example:

1) To Verbally Express Something

Job 27:4 to verbally (using the tongue), express (deceit)

Ps. 35:28 to verbally (using the tongue), express (God's righteousness)

2) bla bla bla

Ps. 115:7 bla bla bla

Is. 8:19 bla bla bla

3) etc..

5) Define your word (*Meditate* in this example) in the context of your verse (Josh. 1:8) as thoroughly, and as amplified as you can.

Homework:

Define *Meditate* as used in Joshua 1:8, as described above. To help you, I have already done steps 1-3 for you. Following are all the references to this word.

Joshua 1:8 This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

Job 27:4 My lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit.

Psalms 1:2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

Psalms 2:1 Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

Psalms 35:28 And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long.

Psalms 37:30 The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment.

Psalms 38:12 They also that seek after my life lay snares for me: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long.

Psalms 63:6 When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches.

Psalms 71:24 My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long: for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt.

Psalms 77:12 I will meditate also of all thy work, and talk of thy doings.

Psalms 115:7 They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat.

Psalms 143:5 I remember the days of old; I meditate on all thy works; I muse on the work of thy hands.

Proverbs 8:7 For my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

Proverbs 15:28 The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things.

Proverbs 24:2 For their heart studieth destruction, and their lips talk of mischief.

Isaiah 8:19 And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead?

Isaiah 16:7 Therefore shall Moab howl for Moab, every one shall howl: for the foundations of Kir-hareseth shall ye mourn; surely they are stricken.

Isaiah 31:4 For thus hath the LORD spoken unto me, Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey, when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: so shall the LORD of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof.

Isaiah 33:18 Thine heart shall meditate terror. Where is the scribe? where is the receiver? where is he that counted the towers?

Isaiah 38:14 Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove: mine eyes fail with looking upward: O LORD, I am oppressed; undertake for me.

Isaiah 59:3 For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness.

Isaiah 59:11 We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.

Isaiah 59:11 We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.

Isaiah 59:13 In transgressing and lying against the LORD, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood.

Jeremiah 48:31 Therefore will I howl for Moab, and I will cry out for all Moab; mine heart shall mourn for the men of Kir-heres.