

Interpreting the Bible

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It is one thing to believe the Bible is the Word of God; it is another to understand it. Written by many people over a period of 1500 years, in three ancient languages, the Bible touches both easy and difficult subjects, and sometimes uses words and ideas we do not normally think about.

If the Bible is to be of any use to us, we must *interpret* it: that is, we must find out what it meant when it was first penned, how the various parts fit together, and how we are to apply it to our own lives.

The first step, of course, is translating it into our own language. Even this first step demands that we take some decisions about what the text means. We must study the words — their background, various meanings, and above all how their meaning varies according to context. 'Lion', for example, can refer in the Scripture to an animal, or it can serve as a symbol for a king, for the devil, or for Jesus. The same careful study must be applied to the grammar of the Bible, especially the way parts of sentences fit together to convey ideas. Even the kind of literature must be weighed, for a parable will not be handled in quite the same way as a genealogy, a list of household duties, or a proverb. Some of this study is necessarily a bit circular: the more you know about a verse, the more it sheds light on the context; and the more you know about the context, the more it sheds light on the verse.

Some of the other principles which help readers accurately interpret the Bible are sometimes difficult to apply, but not less important for that. The literal or natural meaning of a word or phrase should be adopted, unless there is a good reason for doing otherwise. An example is the metaphor: for instance, when Jesus says he is the 'door', he does not mean he has hinges and two flat sides! But this means an interpreter must decide whether an expression is a metaphor or not. Again, the literary structure of a passage can be of immense help in finding the climax or the main point of a passage. But in all cases, the meaning must arise naturally out of the normal use of language all the time the literature was written, as far as we can determine it; and that means scholars must compare the language, style and form of other ancient literature written about the same time and place and in the same languages, with the biblical writings themselves.

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More difficult yet is the question of how best to fit the parts of the Bible together. The biblical writers do not always use language the same way (e.g. the 'call' of God in the Gospels means God's invitation; but in Paul it refers to God's certain salvation of his people); and sometimes they focus on quite different questions because they stand at different places in the history of redemption. Above all, those who read the Bible thoughtfully must be careful to study how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together. It is important not to read back into older revelation what God reveals only at a later date; yet sometimes the later revelation does indeed clarify or enlarge upon or amplify or fulfil a theme already presented much earlier. As a rule of thumb, each part of the Bible must be read against the background of its own historical and literary setting. Another helpful approach is the study of close parallels (for instance, where Mark and Matthew

Professor Carson whose prolific literary output will have made him familiar to EVANGEL readers suggests some of the principles underlying the Christian's interpretation of Scripture.



tell the same story). Comparison of the two accounts may show us how the second writer has phrased things a little differently in order to stress certain points.

Since the Bible deals with revealed religion, we should not be surprised by those passages which insist that necessary ingredients to good Bible interpretation include loving God, trembling in holy reverence before his Word, and willingness to obey it. The purpose of the entire exercise is to let God speak for himself, and try to avoid reading into his Word, and willingness to obey it. The purpose of the entire exercise is to let God speak for himself, and to try to avoid reading into his Word interpretations not in the text. Otherwise we can get it to say whatever we want, yet never hear what God says.

The Christian aims to be one 'who correctly handles the Word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15); and along the way he discovers that the Bible is like a pool in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim. The youngest Christian can read the Bible with profit; the most senior scholar finds after years of prolonged study that he has barely scratched the surface.

As a reader of the Bible applies his mind to the sacred text, he often discovers that his own ideas are being changed and deepened. He may find that, in one sense, the Bible is 'interpreting' him: it is explaining him to himself, exposing him to himself, teaching him what he is like and what he needs from God by way of forgiveness and life. This means that as he continues to study the Bible, he now asks questions that are more discerning and probing than before; and so the answers he gets are better. In other words, as a person studies the Bible, more and more he brings his mind into line with the Scriptures, not only by trying to think the biblical writers' thoughts after them, but also by applying the Bible to himself. He comes to grips with its principals, direction, demands, conclusions; and in the ideal case he grows in both obedience and understanding. The Christian aims to be one 'who correctly handles the Word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15); and along the way he discovers that the Bible is like a pool in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim. The youngest Christian can read the Bible with profit; the most senior scholar finds after years of prolonged study that he has barely scratched the surface.