

Feature Article: DI501-1

PRACTICAL HERMENEUTICS: HOW TO INTERPRET YOUR BIBLE CORRECTLY (PART ONE)

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This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 25, number 4 (2003). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

SYNOPSIS

As a student of the Bible you have probably encountered someone who disagrees with your interpretation of a passage. That person may be a cultist, a member of another Christian denomination, or even another member of your own church or family. When a debate over the meaning of a passage can't be settled, often someone says, "That's just your interpretation," or, "No one really knows what this means, so let's just agree to disagree." It is true that we should hold our interpretations with humility, but we must not settle for anything less than the *correct* interpretation of the Bible, since it is the very Word of God.

In principle, it is possible to have a correct interpretation of the Bible (to argue otherwise is self-defeating), but this doesn't guarantee that we will discover it. In practice, we must use sound principles of interpretation in order to know what the Bible means. These sound principles of interpretation are known as the *grammatical-historical method*. This simply means that we understand the meaning of the words and sentences of the Bible according to the way they were normally used by the speakers of the language, and in their historical context. To do this we must interpret the Bible in light of five factors: its original languages, its historical/cultural setting, its kinds of literature, the principles of communication and understanding, and our own preunderstandings and presuppositions. Each of these factors plays a significant role in good Bible study. By learning how to apply the basic principles of interpretation we can understand and interpret the Bible *correctly*.

As a student of the Bible, a member of a Sunday school class, or as one who discusses the Bible with others, chances are you have encountered people who interpret various Bible passages differently than you do. If you are an orthodox Christian, you would probably not be surprised to discover that Jehovah's Witnesses interpret many Bible passages differently from what you believe and what you have been taught. If you are a Protestant, you would probably not be surprised to discover that Protestants and Catholics differ in their understanding of the meaning of many Bible passages. You probably also would not be surprised that Protestant denominations differ on many passages. In fact, interpretations often differ among people in the same congregation, or the same Sunday school class, or even in the same family. Questions and debates about what various passages mean are a common occurrence within groups of people who, for all practical purposes, seem to believe and think the same. How can these different interpretations be explained?

Interpreting the Bible is of special concern to Christians, and the problem of conflicting interpretations is a fact of deep concern among those who are diligent students of the Bible. How do people reach contrary and often contradictory conclusions? How can I know whether my understanding of a passage is correct?

Similar questions and issues have been the concern of the Christian church for almost 2000 years. Theologians and philosophers through the centuries have studied the practice of interpretation and endeavored to establish principles that would lead an interpreter to *the correct* meaning of the biblical text. *Hermeneutics* is the term used to identify the study of the principles of interpretation. *Exegesis* is a term that means basically the same thing as *interpretation*. In recent years, many books have been written that not only set forth the basic principles of biblical interpretation and how to apply them, but also address questions such as those asked above.

THE CHALLENGE OF CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

If you have ever engaged in a discussion about the Bible, you have very likely heard someone say, "That's just your interpretation!" That statement is usually made when people disagree on the meaning of a passage, but are unable to settle the debate. When someone says, "That's just your interpretation," they are usually implying that there really is no "correct" interpretation. The claim that there is no "correct" interpretation is the byword of many postmodern schools of interpretation, such as radical reader-response criticism and deconstruction. These approaches deny the possibility of objective interpretation; unfortunately, this is often the assumption of the average person as well. Often they mean, "I don't agree with the way you interpret this passage, and no one really knows for sure what it means anyway, so let's just agree to disagree."

This, however, cannot be an option for any student of God's Word. Our task is to discover what the text means, and to settle for less than the correct meaning is to settle for something other than the very Word of God. We recognize that perhaps there are questions for which we have no definitive answers at the moment. We can acknowledge our shortcomings in these areas and hold our respective positions with humility and meekness, realizing that someone may have an answer that more accurately explains the meaning. We should not, however, rest content with conflicting interpretations. We should diligently seek the truth, which means we should strive to understand *the correct* meaning of the text.

We must also point out that it is simply false to claim that no one can know the correct interpretation of a passage of the Bible. If in principle such accurate understanding cannot be achieved, then there would be no basis upon which to conclude that any given interpretation was *not* correct. In the study of logic, this is called *the fallacy of a lost distinction*: if there is no correct interpretation, then there is no standard by which to distinguish any given interpretation from the "correct" one. If it is true that "it's not possible to have a correct interpretation," then what does that statement itself mean? If someone makes that statement to you, just ask him, "What do you mean by that?" He certainly expects you to correctly interpret his objection. The simple fact of the matter is, it *is* possible to have a correct interpretation, and anyone who says it is not possible is making a self-defeating claim.

In principle, it is certainly true that a correct interpretation is possible. In fact, the critic's own objections are not even meaningful unless this is true. The possibility of having a correct interpretation, however, does not guarantee that a person will discover it. There are several important factors involved in coming to a correct interpretation of a passage of the Bible and in judging between competing interpretations. Let's briefly look at some of the more important factors.

GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

You may have heard a preacher or read a Bible commentator talk about using the *grammatical-historical method* of interpretation. This descriptive title means that we interpret the Bible according to its normal, grammatical, historical significance. In other words, we understand the words and sentences according to the way they were normally used by the speakers of the language. It also means that we understand the words and sentences in their historical context. Using the grammatical-historical method means we interpret the Bible in light of:

1. *The original languages of the Bible.* The Bible was not originally written in English. We must understand the meaning of the words and sentences in the languages in which they were originally written.
2. *The historical/cultural settings of the Bible.* The various authors of the books of the Bible lived at a time in history and in a culture that was, in many respects, quite different from our modern technoculture. Communication is highly influenced by one's culture and place in history.
3. *The literary genres of the Bible.* The word *genre* means *kind*. Literary genre simply means different kinds of literature. Poetry, for example, is a different kind of literature than historical narrative, and there are different principles for understanding it. Since the Bible contains different kinds of literature, we must take into consideration how meaning is expressed differently in each kind.
4. *The universal and particular principles of communication and understanding.* There are certain principles that govern the way people communicate. Some of these principles are universal: they are the same for all people at all times regardless of their language, ethnic background, culture, or point of view. All people who want to communicate, for example, assume that the claim they are making cannot be both true and false in the same sense. This is called the *principle of non-contradiction*. Everyone who communicates does so on the basis of this principle. Some principles are peculiar to the fact that we are interpreting the Word of God. If the Bible is inspired (God-breathed) and inerrant then our interpretation must take this into consideration.
5. *The preunderstanding and presuppositions of the interpreter.* These words, *preunderstanding* and *presuppositions*, refer to the points of view, the perspectives, the background, and the assumptions of the reader. A person who assumes that God does not exist, for example, will interpret the Bible quite differently from a person who believes that God does exist. Our assumptions and perspectives play a significant role when we try to understand the meaning of the text.

These are some of the basic factors that are important in good Bible study. Part one of this series will cover points one, two, and three listed above, and part two will cover points four and five. I hope this brief overview of the basic principles of interpretation will whet your appetite to learn more about how to interpret the Bible correctly.

The Original Languages of the Bible

Don't let this one scare you. It's not necessary for everyone who wants to study the Bible to be a scholar in the original languages of the Bible. It is important, however, to understand how to do some basic study in the biblical languages. This makes a critical difference in interpretation.

I like to compare the study of the Bible to watching a football game. If you watch a game on a black-and-white TV, you can see all the plays, and you know who wins the game. Suppose, however, that some time during the course of the game there is a crucial play. When you watch the instant replay on a black-and-white TV, you can't tell where the player's knee ends and the turf begins, or where exactly the ball is, because everything is gray. It's difficult to distinguish between the gray of the pants, the gray of the turf, and the gray of the ball, so you may not be able to tell what actually happened. If you watch the same replay on a color TV, however, it's much easier to see what happened. The color of the pants is different from the color of the turf, which are both different from the color of the ball. The different colors make it much easier to tell what really happened. Even though you can see the plays and understand the outcome by watching the game on a black-and-white TV, sometimes it is difficult to call the close ones. Similarly, even though you can read the Bible in the English translation, and you can understand the main points, and you know the message of salvation, without some basic knowledge of the original languages, it is very difficult to call the close ones.

Meaning and Use of Words in Context. Doing word studies is an important part of good Bible study. Word studies involve more than simply looking up the meaning of a word in the dictionary. It involves understanding how a word fits into its immediate context and how an author used a word throughout his writings. Consider for example Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"

(NASB). The word translated “earth” in English versions of the Bible is the Hebrew word *ha’arets*. This word is usually translated “land.” In fact, this is precisely the word that is used when the Bible talks about the Promised Land (e.g., Gen. 50:24; Exod. 12:25). Genesis 1:1, therefore, could be translated like this: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the land.” This creates a problem, however: does this mean that God didn’t create the whole earth, but only the Promised Land? If Moses wanted to tell us that God created the whole earth and not just the Promised Land, why didn’t he use a word that literally means “earth”?

We may be able to discover why Moses used this word if we consider the immediate context as well as the way Moses used the word throughout the rest of his writings. Genesis 1:2 says that the land was “uninhabitable and empty.” The translation “formless and void” in some versions is unfortunate. The Hebrew terms indicate that earth was a place on which nothing could live (“uninhabitable”) and that there was nothing there except the deep waters (“empty”). The Creation account (Gen. 1:3–31) chronicles the work of God in forming the earth into a place that could be inhabited (days 1–3), and then filling it up (days 4–6). God brought order out of the chaos, and made the earth (*the land*) a place that could be inhabited, and then He filled it up with sea creatures, birds of the heavens, beasts of the field, and finally the human race. Days 1–3, therefore, address the condition of the land being uninhabitable, while days 4–6 address the condition of the land being empty.

Moses used the word “land” in order to make a connection for his audience between the fact that God was the Creator of the earth (*the land*) and the fact that God was going to bring Israel into *the land* that He promised to give them. Since God was able to bring order out of the chaos when He created the earth (*the land*) out of nothing, then He would certainly be able to bring order out of the chaos in *the land* that He promised to give Israel.

The Promised Land was a place of chaos. It was, in a sense, uninhabitable and empty. Wicked people covered the land, and it was a place in which Israel could not live. God promised to make the land a place where His people could live and where He would dwell with them. God, therefore, brought order out of the chaos by driving out the unbelievers and preparing the land for the entrance of His people, then He filled the empty land with His chosen people. Moses used his words to strengthen the faith of Israel to trust God to bring order out of the chaos and to bring them into the land successfully. The context and use of this word by Moses elsewhere in his writings helps us to understand its meaning in Genesis chapter 1.

Grammar and Syntax of the Biblical Languages. Another important factor in interpretation is the *grammar* and *syntax* of language. Grammar is concerned with the rules that govern the proper uses of a language. Syntax is concerned with the arrangement of words in a meaningful sentence. It is the relationship of words in a sentence — the syntax — that an author employs to communicate his meaning. The statement in Luke 2:14 about Jesus’ birth, for example, is translated in the King James Version as follows: “...and on earth peace, good will toward men.” This translation, however, results in a conflict with another statement in Matthew 10:34: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (NASB). If we went to a Greek dictionary (called a *lexicon*) and looked up the Greek word translated “good will,” we would find the definition; but finding the definition does not resolve the conflict in this instance.

The problem is solved when we discover that the verse in Luke could be translated to better reflect the Greek syntax. The solution is to understand the relationship of the word translated “good will” with the rest of the sentence. In the Greek syntax of Luke, this word is used to attribute a quality, and in this instance it is qualifying the word “men.” The peace that the angels announced is not among everyone, but only among those who are “men of good will.” (Here the word “men” is a generic reference to both men and women.) A better translation of this verse, therefore, would be something like this: “Glory to God in the highest, and upon earth, peace *among men of good will*.” The difference is the correct translation of the word rendered “good will” based on an understanding of the Greek syntax — how the word relates to the other words in the sentence. Syntax is very important in understanding the meaning of words in a sentence.

Serious Bible study requires some study in the original languages. There are a multitude of reference materials that can help you do this even if you don't know a thing about Hebrew or Greek. Printed reference materials, computer programs, and even online and correspondence courses that you can take entirely at home are available to help you understand the original languages of the Bible and interpret it accurately. You can learn how to use various language tools without investing the years of study necessary to become a language scholar. Learning the basics of language, how to do word studies, and how to consider the way a word functions in a sentence, helps you to understand what the Bible is saying.

The Historical-Cultural Settings of the Bible

Another very important aspect of Bible study is understanding the historical and/or cultural background behind the statements and events the Bible records. The events in the Bible were real historical circumstances experienced by real historical persons who lived and communicated in their own cultural framework. Their language, their mode of communication, their understanding of the world around them, their manners and customs were all, to some degree, products of their culture.

Historical Background. Consider, for example, the incident of the construction of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The significance of the tower generally escapes the modern reader. Why did these people begin to build a tower "with a top whose head is in the heavens" (v.4, author's translation)? Some have proposed that they were trying to build a tower with which they could escape another flood. The historical background, however, suggests a better explanation. First, by investigating ancient religious practices and beliefs, we discover that it was generally held to be true that a person's god dwelled on a mountain. The mountain was symbolic of the separation between someone's god and himself or herself as a worshiper. Gods were high and lifted up, while the worshipers were on the ground below looking up. Since there were no mountains in the "plains of Shinar," as verse 2 indicates, the people decided to construct a mountain in which their god(s) could dwell.

Second, in Genesis 4:26 we find the statement that a son was born to Seth whose name was Enosh, and at that time "men began to *call upon the name of the LORD.*" The next few chapters deal with the Flood story and the Babel story. Then in Genesis 12:8 we find the statement, "And there he [Abram] built an altar to the LORD and *called upon the name of the LORD.*" These two statements surround the intervening stories like bookends. They also contrast the practices of the victims of the Flood and the participants in the Babel incident with Enosh and Abram. The idea of "calling upon the name" indicated the worship of the one on whose name a person would call. Enosh and Abram worshiped the true God, and they called upon His name. The people at Shinar, on the other hand, had gathered together to make a "name" for themselves so that they might not be scattered over the earth, even though God had commanded them to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28).

An understanding of the culture of the day, the general religious practices and beliefs of the people — in this instance the belief that the one who was worshiped dwelled on a mountain, and the practice of *calling upon the name* of the one who was worshiped — help us to understand the significance of what the people were trying to accomplish by building a tower in the plains of Shinar. They were building a mountain on which the god of their own creation would dwell — a temple built to themselves in which they would become the unifying center for the world. By making a name for themselves on which people could call, they were attempting to exalt themselves and set themselves up to be gods. They were trying to unite all of humanity under one name — their own. God frustrated their efforts by confusing their language and scattering them over the earth. Pentecost (Acts 2) was a reversal of this event. At Pentecost, God overcame the language barrier, which He instigated at Babel, and united all of humanity under one name, the name of Jesus, the God-man. It is Jesus who brings us up to where God is and makes it possible for us to call upon God's name and dwell with Him.

Cultural Background. In John 2:6 we find the statement, "Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each" (NASB). When a biblical author provides background information, it is very important for the reader to understand its

importance. John points out that these water pots were for the Jewish custom of purification. The importance of this statement becomes clear once the reader discovers that these water pots would never have been used for any other purpose than cleansing. They would never have contained anything but clean water.

The importance of this point is that there would have been no wine residue in these pots left over from some previous use. When Jesus turned the water into wine, what had been in these pots was water, and only water. John wants his readers to understand that this was not a case of simply pouring water into pots that had previously contained wine, so that the water mixed with the dried wine on the insides of the pots giving the impression that Jesus turned water into wine; rather, this was a miracle. These pots would never have contained wine, so when Jesus turned the water into wine, it clearly was a miracle. There can be no mistake about that. The Jewish custom, to which John makes reference in the text, becomes very important in understanding the significance of what Jesus did.

The Literary Genres of the Bible

There is perhaps no more important principle in Bible study than understanding a passage in its context. Many problems and errors have been caused by taking biblical passages out of context. Context, however, includes more than simply reading a few verses before and a few verses after the passage you are trying to interpret. Context also includes understanding the literary *genre* of a passage — the kind of literature it is. The Bible contains different kinds of literature — stories, letters, proverbs, poems, and prophecy to name a few — and we must be aware of the different ways each of these communicates.

The Bible includes a lot of poetry, for example, and in order to understand a poem we must have a basic awareness of how poetry communicates. It is not possible to get into the intricacies of Hebrew poetry in this article, but a simple example illustrates the importance of understanding the nature of particular kinds of literature.

The basic characteristic of Hebrew poetry is *parallelism*. A line of Hebrew poetry is usually made of two parts, and each part is called a *colon*. A colon may be a complete sentence or a phrase. Isaiah 1:3, for example, says, “An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master’s manger, [But] Israel does not know, My people do not understand” (NASB). Your English version of the Bible may format this verse something like this:

An ox knows its owner,
And a donkey its master’s manger,
[But] Israel does not know,
My people do not understand.

Whereas the English Bible lays out the text in four lines, the Hebrew text is actually composed of two lines, each line having two *cola* (the plural of *colon*). The Hebrew text looks more like (Figure 01).

Figure 01

| | 1st colon | 2nd colon |
|--------|-------------------------------|--|
| Line 1 | <i>An ox knows its owner,</i> | <i>And a donkey its master’s manger.</i> |
| Line 2 | <i>Israel does not know,</i> | <i>My people do not understand.</i> |

In these two lines, “ox” is parallel to “Israel,” and “donkey” is parallel to “My people.” The question that must be asked is, How is an ox parallel to Israel? The primary characterization of an ox is that it is stupid. You are probably familiar with the expression, “dumb as an ox.” The first colon of the first line tells us that an ox is not so dumb that it doesn’t know its owner. The first colon of the second line tells us that Israel was dumber than an ox. Israel had rejected the Lord from being her God and had turned to idols. An ox knows its owner, but Israel did not know her God.

The same kind of parallelism is present between “donkey” and “My people.” The principal characterization of a donkey is that it is stubborn; but, a donkey is not so stubborn that it doesn’t know where to go to get its food. The “manger” (also translated “crib”) is the place where the donkey would go to eat. Israel had begun to believe that it was her idols who made her prosperous. Hosea 2:8 says, “She [Israel] does not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil, And lavished on her silver and gold” (NASB). Israel was more stubborn than a donkey because she would not return to the Lord who had given her life and abundance. Understanding the nature of poetry helps us to understand the meaning of this verse in Isaiah.

The two remaining aspects of interpretation listed above — *the universal and particular principles of communication and understanding* and *the preunderstanding and presuppositions of the interpreter* — will be briefly discussed in part two of this series.