



Biblical Interpretation 101

SESSION 1

| *How can we interpret the Bible more faithfully?*

The Subtleties of Interpretation

In selecting real estate the rule is “Location, location, location!” In interpreting the Bible the rule is “Context, context, context!” Interpretation is not merely a fancy or a luxury; it is a necessity. Interpretation may not always be a conscious act, but it is always happening when we read the Bible—or anything else for that matter. And fundamental to responsible interpretation is knowledge of and respect for the context of each of the biblical writings.

Consider the simple request “Pass the salt.” There are several interpretative issues one has to settle in order to respond to that request correctly. Is the setting a dinner table, an icy sidewalk, or a barn? Is the intention to have someone literally *throw* the salt to another or merely *hand* it politely to another? Are you supposed to leave the salt in a shaker or a vessel of some sort or pour it out in your hand or into a spoon? Is the salt intended for humans or for livestock? Or, taking a whole new direction in interpretation, someone might respond to the request with “Why? Has someone fainted?”

To interpret any statement accurately the interpreter has to know the context: the social setting, the historical setting, and, of course, the language employed. One is usually able to apply such knowledge unconsciously and routinely in everyday situations because one knows all of the necessary information. Only infrequently will one hesitate when hearing an unfamiliar idiom—perhaps “Oh, that’s so ‘bad’” meaning “Oh, that’s so ‘good.’” Or a homonym: does the speaker mean “suite” or “sweet,” “bare” or “bear”? Most of the time, though, as long as



one is in a familiar setting and is communicating in one’s own native language, one can interpret with a fair degree of accuracy almost unconsciously.

But what if one travels to a different part of the world? Obviously the first problem is the language. For instance, in German (as in English, for that matter) there are several terms that can be translated “doctor.” Do you want a physician or a professor? Sometimes a dictionary-correct term may be heard as an insult because of the way it has come to be used. For example, in English *famous* and *notorious* mean practically the same thing according to the dictionary, but parents don’t want their children to grow up to be notorious! The particular term one uses can make a difference.

Then there is the matter of body language and custom. In Japan, when a person nods his or her head up and down while someone is speaking, it only indicates “I am listening to you” and not “I agree with you.” In Italy, waving goodbye takes the form of making a motion of the hand that looks, to Americans, like one is beckoning

someone to come near, not go away. In some cultures, it is polite to burp after a good meal. Sometimes one says a blessing after a meal rather than before. And so on and so on. The list is unending. To effectively communicate one must be able to interpret all these various nuances of language and custom.

The Challenge of an Ancient Text

When we open the Bible and begin to read, we have entered a radically different social and historical setting communicated to us in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) written across a span of at least a thousand years. The worldview of the Bible is not the modern worldview. Indeed, there is little similarity to life in the twenty-first century apart from the fact that the people of the Bible were humans as we are humans. When we enter the world of the Bible, most of us are in a foreign land without a map, with neither an etiquette book nor a dictionary, but we want to read and understand. We want to be able to translate, to interpret, and to communicate with the writers of the Bible because the Bible is central to whom we are as the people of God.

So what do we do? First, we acknowledge the difficulty of the task. Far too many people pick up the Bible and think they can easily understand this ancient book. They assume that they can find simple, direct answers to difficult contemporary issues by merely flipping open the Bible and dragging this verse or that out of context to settle some controversy. In Galatians 5:20, the King James Version of the Bible in citing some of the “works of the flesh” translates the Greek as “idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,” whereas the New Revised Standard Version has “idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions.” Now certainly both sets of terms describe undesirable behaviors, but they are not identical. And do these words actually mean the same thing now as their Greek counterparts did two thousand years ago? The task of interpretation is not easy, and we need to acknowledge that up front.

Second, we need to recognize and accept the discipline of patience. One cannot read the Bible in English once and even begin to comprehend it. The literature developed over a very long period of time and involved a

multitude of writers. The languages developed over a very long time as well, and there are differences in the usage of Hebrew and Greek terms at various points along the historical line. If understanding the Bible is the goal, then patience is an irreplaceable necessity.

Getting On with the Task

But though a challenge, the task of interpretation is not impossible. In fact, interpretation happens whether one likes it or not. So the real goal is *responsible* interpretation rather than *uninformed* interpretation. The prerequisites for reaching the goal are at least three. First, there is a need for curiosity. One needs to be interested in the task of interpretation. If there are no questions, then why study at all? Second, openness to new understanding is required. If one already knows it all, then there is certainly no need to read anything a second time. Third, humility will come in handy. Pride of knowledge is a sure way to prevent new insight or better interpretation. Sitting before an ancient text with the full awareness of how much one does not know is both humbling and refreshing.

The other necessary component for developing responsible interpretation is disciplined hard work. The task as already noted is not easy. Historical background must be filled in. Sensitivity to the differences in social setting reflected in the Bible has to be developed. We do not live in a tribal society or among people who assume as a matter of course that the earth is flat. Such things are obvious, but they do make a difference when one seeks to understand texts written by people who do live with such a worldview. The way men and women interact, the place of children, the kind of clothing one is allowed or expected to wear, the manner of sealing business and personal agreements, and the political as opposed to the familial use of the Hebrew term we translate “father” are but a few of the differences that we have to recognize and honor as we go about our task.

This new vocabulary of information and sensitivity can be built only by regular, disciplined, ongoing study. Finding your way around in the world of an ancient text is not easy, and it takes time. To be sure, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit we are granted sufficient understanding, but if the goal is to interpret the Bible ever more faithfully, then gaining the familiarity and depth necessary for the task will take time and effort.

Gaining Historical Perspective

The need for historical perspective is obvious and requires knowledge. If you want to understand Paul's letter to the Corinthians, you would do well to learn something about the history of the time. Who was in charge of the Roman Empire? Was there relative peace or not? How did one get around? How were messages transmitted? What kind of people lived there? How was the society structured? How was Corinth different from Thessalonica? Certainly one does not have to have a complete knowledge of the historical setting to gain insight into Paul's basic message, but the more one knows, the better the understanding is likely to be.

So, as part of the study of a biblical passage, it is good to step back from the particulars of the text to ask some of these historical questions. The answers will never be neat and absolute—history just isn't that way. But you can read books about the history of New Testament times. You can go to dictionaries and handbooks of the Bible or to an encyclopedia and read entries suggested by the passage under consideration. These resources will help you fill in the general background. Then you may be better able to utilize commentaries and more specific reference material. The aim is not only to gain insight into the particular passage you are studying but also to widen your perspective on the historical period in general, to gain more knowledge about the second half of the first century each time you study some portion of the Pauline literature.

Gaining perspective based on better awareness of any historical period—including our own—takes time and reflection. The views of several different historians and commentators are important to consider. They cannot interpret a passage for you, but they can offer helpful information and background so that you may go about your work more responsibly.

Understanding a Different Society

As with the history of an era, the structures and customs of a society are very important. Most of the time, if one is writing from within a culture, no explanation is necessary. But if you are trying to interpret a text from a different society, you may have to do some research to see what the assumptions are and the issues that are being



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addressed. For instance, in Hosea 11 a metaphor for God is drawn from family life. God is pictured as teaching the toddler Israel to walk, picking the child up from a fall, and offering comfort and assistance. This is a bold way to talk about who God is and what God does. But the metaphor is made even more striking when one realizes that each parental act described was, in Hosea's society, the work of the women. In a society where God was usually thought of in masculine terms, the prophet daringly likens God to a mother! That knowledge may not alter your understanding of the passage in any fundamental way, but it certainly can help in understanding the nuances of Hosea's meaning more effectively for our own time.

In the Gospel of Luke there is an interesting glimpse into some of the societal prejudices of the day. It is commonly recognized that the hero of Luke 10, the "good Samaritan," is doubly noteworthy, certainly for his good deed to the stricken traveler but also because he was a Samaritan, a member of a group that the Judeans shunned as inferior and heretical. But Luke suggests some other prejudices as well. In Luke 22, when Peter is waiting in the courtyard after Jesus has been arrested, he is singled out because he had a Galilean accent. He was recognized by the Judeans as a man from Galilee and thereby associated with Jesus, who was also from Galilee. That makes it all the more interesting to go to the beginning of the story when in Luke 2 Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea to be registered. Mary, by the custom of the day, would have been a young woman, probably no more than sixteen. Joseph, again by the customs of his time, could have been considerably older. At any rate, these Galileans are lodged in a stable because "there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Was an anti-Galilean prejudice at work? Were there actually rooms available, but not for a pair of outsiders from Galilee? Obviously there is no

way to answer that question with absolute certainty, but knowledge of the society certainly does raise an intriguing possibility.

As with gaining historical perspective, acquiring sufficient knowledge about the social settings from whence the Bible has come is not easy or accomplished quickly. But once you recognize the importance of the task, the more readily you will pursue the knowledge desired. Again, dictionaries of the Bible, commentaries, encyclopedias, and studies dealing with such topics as “family,” “business,” “government,” and so forth can help.

Tackling the Language Difficulty

Probably the most immediate and, in a way, confounding difficulty that any interpreter has is the matter of language. Trying to interpret something to someone in one’s native language can be difficult enough. The term “tank” brings one thing to mind to a West Texas rancher and something quite different to a West Point graduate. Examples of such difficulties can easily be multiplied. No wonder it is all the more difficult to understand something written in a language one does not know at all, something like the Bible for instance.

There are several challenges that the biblical languages present. First, the meaning of words can change over the course of time. Sometimes there is a change in terms used to designate something: for example, “for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer” (1 Sam. 9:9). Second, new information is continually being obtained that suggests a different translation of a term; for instance, Martin Luther chose a German word meaning “preacher” to translate the Hebrew term *qoheleth* in Ecclesiastes 1:1, but now the term is understood to indicate a “teacher” or a “convener.” Third, there are many terms in the Bible that occur only once and therefore are difficult to translate. By tradition the prophet Amos has come to be known as a “dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14), but the fact is we do not know with certainty what the Hebrew word means, for it appears only here in the Bible. Accurate translation requires the opportunity to consider the usage of a term in a variety of contexts. In this instance the earliest translation into Greek began a tradition of translation that may or may not be correct.

Just as the ancient languages developed and changed over the centuries they were used, so have the modern languages into which the Bible has been translated. The best way to compensate for the inability to read the ancient languages firsthand is to compare a number of translations, older and newer. By doing this one can begin to see how different translators have understood and interpreted the passage. It is especially helpful if one knows other modern languages (such as Spanish, German, French, or Korean), because a comparison of these translations can often suggest meanings that might have gone unrecognized in one’s native language.

Summary and Conclusion

The work of the interpreter is unavoidable and indispensable. Every communication necessarily requires some level of interpretation. Responsible interpretation rather than uninformed interpretation is the goal of every serious reader of the Bible.

Accomplishing the task demands patience, discipline, and humility. We can never know too much about the history, social setting, or the languages of the Bible. Developing the tools for faithful interpretation is a life-long undertaking. Ever-increasing familiarity with the Bible and the acquisition of greater understanding of the history and society from which the Bible comes are indispensable.

But one more point needs to be clearly made. God’s Spirit is finally the great interpreter! Even the untutored, by God’s grace, hear and respond to the gospel message. At each stage of faith, regardless of their capacity as interpreters, people can and do understand God’s challenge and call presented in the Bible. Thus, while each of us should seek to be the best interpreter we can be, none of us should think that by our efforts we control the power of God’s Word. Prayer and trust are two more—probably the most important—qualities required for faithful interpretation.

About the Writer

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