

2 How to interpret it

Do we have any choice?

Hobson was a man who hired out horses in Cambridge. When someone came to hire a horse, the only one they could have was the one with which Hobson presented them—‘Hobson’s choice’. Henry Ford said, ‘Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black.’ Do we have any choice in interpreting the Bible, or is there only one way?

We certainly don’t have the option of interpreting the Bible according to our personal whim. Peter tells us (2 Peter 1:20) that scripture prophecy is not a matter of one’s own interpretation. The original writers of the scripture, the prophets, did not use their own interpretation of what was being revealed to them. At the present time we are not to interpret what we read in our own private, individual way. Neither the one who sends out the message nor the one who receives it are to put their own personal interpretation on the information.

Perhaps we have no choice at all in the way we interpret the scriptures. A Jehovah’s Witness came to my door one day, and was fervent in quoting the scriptures to support her cause. When I suggested to her that right principles were needed for interpreting the Bible, she was dismissive. Her view was that the Bible interprets itself. It says what it says.

Of course, she was oblivious to the fact that she was interpreting the Bible her way, and could not consider anyone interpreting it any other way. You know what she meant, though, don’t you? She meant that all the Bible should be interpreted *literally*.

Literal?

Unfortunately, the word ‘literally’ is one which has undergone a devaluation in recent years. It has been so overused that its meaning has been debased. In some circles it is now equivalent to ‘very much’. ‘I was literally walking on air,’ someone may say. Or, feeling that this could do with even more emphasis, ‘I was quite literally walking on air.’ Such people have to be brought down to earth with a bump.

The term ‘literal’ is derived from ‘letter’. You can see the connection when we talk about ‘the letter of the law’. ‘Literal’ means ‘according to the basic meaning of the letters and the words’. The word ‘literally’ may be paraphrased as ‘physically’ or ‘in material fact’. The opposite to ‘literal’ is ‘figurative’, ‘spiritual’, ‘metaphorical’ or ‘allegorical’.

We all know what a gate is like. It usually has hinges (unless it is a sliding gate), and it opens up. This is the literal meaning of the word ‘gate’. However, when we speak of Gibraltar as the gate of the Mediterranean, we are using the word outside its basic meaning. Gibraltar neither has hinges nor does it slide. It does not open up.

This is not literal, but is a metaphor. Does that mean that what we have said is untrue? No, not at all. There is literal truth and there is metaphorical truth.

The regular formula which is used when the media wish to pour scorn on evangelicals is to describe them as ‘fundamentalist Christians who believe the Bible to be literally true.’ Some Christians seem to think that the highest tribute one can give to the Bible is to interpret it all literally. To do so is to be the most evangelical of evangelicals, they reckon. This is certainly the easiest rule to follow when interpreting the Bible, but is it valid?

Should we take the whole of the Bible to be literally true? Let us try it and see where it leads us.

1. When it says that Jesus was walking on the water (John 6:19) it means that he was literally and physically walking on top of the water.
2. When Jesus said of the bread, ‘This is my body’ (Matthew 26:26), then this bread was literally and physically his body.
3. When God told the people of Israel that he had carried them on eagles’ wings (Exodus 19:4), then he had literally and physically transported them on the wings of eagles.

What do you think of this method of interpretation? No doubt you were happy with number 1 (I hope you were!) but number 2 perhaps made you think. What about number 3, though? Are such statements really to be taken literally?

There are undoubtedly times when the Bible must be interpreted literally. If you do not accept that Jesus did literally walk on water, then you make a nonsense of the rest of the passages which describe it. For instance, why did those in the boat worship him as the Son of God (Matthew 14:32)? But this does not mean that Biblical statements must always be taken literally.

Jesus corrected those who wrongly interpreted his words in a literal fashion. Some were offended at the idea of eating his flesh, because they took his words literally. To them he says, ‘The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life’ (John 6:63).

Some speak of interpretations in spiritual terms as ‘spiritualising away’ the words of the Bible. Jesus was not afraid to tell us when his words needed to be interpreted spiritually. Such treatment takes nothing away from the meaning, but rather can transform it into the most profitable form for us. The desire for literalness when the scriptures call out to be figuratively interpreted has perhaps caused even more harm than the desire to interpret figuratively those parts which need to be interpreted literally. The tragedy is that by being over-literal we may actually miss what God is saying to us through his word.

There is no doubt that the simplest rule for interpreting the Bible is ‘Interpret it literally.’ The only trouble is that this rule sometimes comes up with the wrong answer. It is impossible to interpret the whole of the Bible literally. The Bible itself cries out against such treatment. Simple the rule may be, but it leaves us in the

position of the drunk who searched for his house keys under the light, not because he dropped them there but because it was easier to see there.

So the rule has now become, ‘Interpret the Bible literally except for those times when you shouldn’t.’ Everyone can subscribe to this. The big problem is deciding when to take it literally and when not.

Work at it

Although we may not interpret the Bible in personal, oddball ways, we must personally seek how to arrive at that universal truth which God intends to convey. Paul himself exhorts Timothy to be ‘a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth’ (2 Timothy 2:15). So it is not always a simple task to understand the scriptures, and we need to work at it.

If personalized interpretation is out, we ought to pay attention to how other Christians have interpreted the scriptures. This does not mean that we must always follow the traditional interpretations held by major denominations. For one thing, church groupings often differ in their teachings, and it may be that they sometimes (perhaps unwittingly) interpret the scriptures so as to back up their own teachings, rather than trying first and foremost to see what the scriptures say. Furthermore, some leaders in the denominations no longer give emphasis to the supreme authority of the Bible, so we can hardly trust their interpretations.

Should we always follow the interpretations advanced by other evangelicals? We should certainly consider what such people have proposed, but here again, they differ amongst themselves. The principle of always following where others have led is the principle used by sheep. Until recently it was believed lemmings acted like this on their regular excursions over cliff faces!

Whilst it is valuable to consider interpretations advanced by other believers and groups of believers, we cannot escape the fact that we need to evaluate these views for ourselves, using God’s gifts of reason in dependence upon the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment. So we are faced with a paradox. Personalized interpretation is out, but personal evaluation and discernment of interpretations is vital. This is similar to the state of affairs with regard to salvation. There is only one, universal, narrow gate which leads to life, but it is a personal responsibility for each one to enter in by it (Matthew 7:13–14).

Verses and themes

There are two separate but related matters to be considered here. We may be attempting to interpret particular verses (or passages), or we may be trying to discover what the Bible as a whole says about a particular theme (or topic or doctrine).

A theme depends on the interpretation of verses which are apparently on that theme. A verse is interpreted most reliably when the interpretation fits in with well-established Biblical themes.

This is not as circular as it sounds. Skyscrapers have historically been constructed on a framework of girders. It is vital that each girder is strong and so can play its part in the strength of the whole framework. On the other hand, the framework keeps each girder securely in place and gives it strength.

In the same way, Bible verses which have a clear interpretation can lend strength to the themes for which they form part. Clearly-defined themes can help us in being sure of the interpretation of isolated verses. Verses and themes are inter-related, and serve to confirm one another.

A secure foundation

The skyscrapers on Manhattan Island, New York, depend on the rock of the island for their stability. Though the buildings may rise scores of floors in the air, it is necessary to fix the foundations several floors into the rock. When building in London, which has clay where Manhattan has rock, it is necessary to bore very deeply to insert reinforced concrete piles.

Any suggested Bible theme depends for its strength on the key verses and passages which underpin it. Most of the strange ideas about what the Bible says have arisen because they are based on an insecure foundation.

For a strong foundation, it is important to *start with what is clear*. This is the first of our principles. Interpret what is hard to understand in the light of what is easy to understand, not the other way round.

The clearest statements are for the most part in the New Testament, excluding Revelation. (I am not in any way saying that Revelation is not inspired; simply that it is harder to understand.) See what the New Testament says about any theme, and interpret the Old Testament accordingly.

This approach has the advantage of learning from the experts. Christ and his apostles were the ones best fitted to know the nature of God's revelation. If we follow their interpretation of the scriptures, we cannot go far wrong.

This principle is surely not earth-shattering. It is only common-sense. When I am working on a jigsaw puzzle, I go for the easiest parts first. I will separate out the edge pieces, and fit them together. If there is a clearly-identifiable feature (a ship's hull, or a distinctively-coloured dress), I look for parts of these. Then other less easily identified parts may be fitted into what has been constructed.

Imagine what it was like for the pilot of a plane before electronic aids came into being. He would look at the landscape below him for recognisable features. What was that small town down there? It could be one of several. Features that were clear beyond doubt were the key. A railway line, or a lake with a characteristic outline, could be his starting point. Once these were identified, less clear features would fall

into place. Only one of the small towns would then fit the bill. Start with what is clear, and interpret less clear items so that they line up with the clear ones.

The Bible context

When interpreting passages, *examine the context of the rest of the Bible* (second principle). It has been said 'A text without a context is a pretext'. When national leaders find some of their less fortunate assertions appearing in the media, their common defence is, 'Oh, but you are taking my words out of their context.' Bible verses can certainly be found to support whatever you like if you ignore their surroundings. We should pay attention to:

(a) Surrounding material

The clue to the right interpretation may be not far away, in nearby verses or chapters, or in the rest of the book. An example has been touched on already. In John 6:48-58 Jesus speaks of the need for people to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Not surprisingly, the Jews and even his own disciples had problems with this teaching. Is he advocating cannibalism? If we look a little further on in the chapter we find Jesus saying, 'The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life' (v. 63). The context shows that Jesus is speaking in spiritual terms, not in terms of literal flesh and blood.

(b) Other books

We may discern the right interpretation by comparing how the subject is treated in other books of the Bible. For example, are the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God different? If you compare corresponding passages in the gospels, you will find that Matthew uses 'the kingdom of heaven' where the other gospel writers use 'the kingdom of God', so there can be no difference between them. (Compare Matthew 13:11 with Luke 8:10, for instance; but there are many other instances.)

(c) The whole Bible

The ultimate context is, of course, the whole Bible. If the Bible is indeed God's word, then we should expect it to give a unified message. The test of our interpretation of one passage is whether our ideas fit in with the whole flow of the scriptures. The test of any teaching supposed to come from the Bible is whether it matches what the whole of the Bible says.

What we are saying here is simply that our interpretation of single verses or passages should fit in with the themes which have been securely established.

The world context

God's word has come to us in our present world. We should *consider the context of the world around us* (third principle). Just as Jesus, the Son of God, came to us in

physical form like other people, so the Bible, the word of God, makes use of the natural facilities in our world. In interpreting the Bible, we need to pay attention to:

(a) The words

A word in any language will seldom correspond exactly to a word in another language (such as *pneuma* in Greek corresponding to ‘wind’ or ‘spirit’ in English).

To interpret a passage, it is helpful if you know what the words in the original language are, and the variety of meanings these words may take. Even if you are not able to cope with such matters, it helps if you realise that few if any words have a fixed meaning.

Sometimes we may not be sure whether certain words were in the original, or whether they had to be inserted to make proper English sentences. It is as if we are making our way through the loft of a house. Whilst we tread on rafters, we are on safe ground, but if we tread on the plaster between, expect trouble!

The lesson is, beware of interpretations (or sermons!) which depend solely on particular words (unless you can be sure that these words are genuinely in the original). Not many of us can cope with Greek or Hebrew, but help is often at hand from the footnotes in our Bibles or from commentaries.

Some help may be gained from comparing different translations. The story is told of the lady whose favourite verse which had helped her through many trials was, ‘And it came to pass . . .’ Her reason was, ‘It didn’t come to stay!’ If she had looked at other versions apart from the King James (Authorised) Version, she would not have found these words. The Hebrew simply means ‘and it was . . .’ or ‘and then . . .’

(b) Idioms

‘The English language is full of idioms,’ a foreigner is supposed to have exclaimed. All languages have their idioms, i.e. sayings where the sum of meanings of the words does not correspond to the meaning of the whole (‘She has it in for him’).

Hebrew has a common idiom, ‘son of . . .’ This means ‘characterised by . . .’ or ‘partaking of the nature of . . .’ For example, ‘sons of worthlessness’ (Judges 19:22) and ‘sons of thunder’ (Mark 3:17). ‘Son of man’ is used by God many times when addressing Ezekiel. It is also used by Jesus to refer to himself. The meaning is essentially ‘human being’, and when used by Jesus it implies his true humanity.

(c) The style of writing

One should consider whether the passage is intended as a historical record, in which case it would be normal to take its words as a literal description of events. Alternatively, it might be poetic, even cast in lines of poetry, in which case one should be prepared for instances of poetic licence, symbolism and allegory.

(d) The culture

Every nation has its own culture. Sometimes we may fail to understand parts of the

Bible because we do not understand what the culture was like then.

For instance, there was the custom of taking off someone’s sandal. This was done when someone did not fulfil their proper responsibilities, and was a means of shaming them. It is mentioned in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, and was carried out in Ruth 4:7–8.

Sometimes contemporary writings or archeological discoveries may help us bridge the gap. Commentaries will often give helpful information about cultural practices.

(e) The world

The same God who inspired the Bible is the God who made the universe, and who decreed the way it works. Scripture should not clash with the real world, and the real world should not clash with scripture. It is true that God can suspend natural laws to work miracles. But it is also true that the laws are God’s laws, and generally these laws are not suspended. It is this fact which makes miracles different from ordinary daily life.

Some interpreters of the Bible give you the impression that they resent those who study the universe in order to discern the laws on which it is based. They seem to be constantly apprehensive lest any more be discovered, since they will only have to ridicule and deny it. Such people are generally motivated by a desire to interpret all the Bible literally, and as we have seen, such a standpoint is not feasible. However, the world is God’s world as much as the Bible is God’s word.

If we interpret the Bible and the observable world in such a way as to make them contradict one another, then there must be something wrong with our interpretation. More will be said about this in a later chapter.

A broad foundation

What strikes you when you see a photo of the Eiffel tower in Paris? Your eye may be drawn to the height of the structure and its viewing platforms near the top. Look down at the bottom and you will see that for stability the tower spreads very wide.

Each verse needs a broad foundation when you interpret it. You need to consider it in the light of the contexts we have mentioned.

A theme needs to have a broad foundation. It should be supported by an adequate number of verses, each of which can be securely interpreted.

When considering a particular interpretation, *examine how broad the foundation is* (fourth principle). It all comes down to the issue of evidence. How much evidence do you have for your interpretation, and how strong is the evidence? As in a court of law, lack of evidence may even count as contrary evidence. You could imagine Sherlock Holmes saying to Dr Watson, ‘But why were there so few footprints?’

There is something which we may call ‘The desert island test’. Suppose you are marooned on a desert island. You have never heard anything about the Bible before,

yet on the island you find a copy of it, without any marginal notes or section headings. (Such things have been reported from time to time.) Through reading the Bible alone, without preconceived ideas, would you inevitably come to see that a particular theme is plainly taught?

Does it matter?

There may be times when you have to admit that you do not know how to interpret a certain verse. Others may seem to be quite certain, but somehow you cannot share their certainty. There are occasions when you should *be prepared to admit your ignorance* (fifth principle).

For me, this is the case with a prophecy in Zechariah which appears to be about the end time. ‘On that day [the Lord’s] feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley; with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south’ (Zechariah 14:4).

Is this to be fulfilled literally or does it have a figurative meaning? I must confess that the matter is not clear to me. I can find few if any clear verses to which it can be related. Nothing seems to be said in the gospels or epistles about the Mount of Olives being split.

How much does it matter? (Sixth principle.) It does not seem to be of great importance how you interpret this verse. I know from passages which are much clearer that Christ will indeed return to earth in glory and power. The precise details of his appearance on earth remain unknown to me, but that does not change my responsibility to live for him here in the light of his future appearing.

It is important that we assess the relevance of Bible material to our present living for the Lord. There are themes which are of vital importance. This is not to say that these minor matters should never be considered, but first things first.

Later in this book we will look at some themes of dubious validity which are current in some evangelical circles. First, however, we need to examine some basic truths which emerge from an application of these principles and which form a strong Biblical framework.

Summary of principles

In this chapter several principles for right interpretation have been proposed. For convenience, these are listed here.

- 1 Start with what is clear.
- 2 Examine the context of the rest of the Bible.
- 3 Consider the context of the world around us.
- 4 Examine how broad the foundation is.
- 5 Be prepared to admit your ignorance.
- 6 How much does it matter?