

Literary Forms and Biblical Interpretation

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The Bible is a box of treasure. It is full of things of great value, but it requires a key to unlock it. The key to unlock the Bible is within the reach of everyone and not just a special group of people with expert training—although training and experience certainly help us to use the key with greater ease and accuracy. This key is knowing the principles of interpreting the Bible, or hermeneutics. *Hermeneutics* comes from a Greek word meaning “interpreter.”

Many people forget that the Bible, like any other book, must be understood according to certain rules; most of these rules we are using every day when we read books, letters, or even a newspaper. When a friend tells us that she “cried all night,” or the radio claims that “the whole town was angry,” we do not seriously imagine that our friend sobbed without interruption for eight hours or that there was not even one person in the town who was not pleased with the news that annoyed most of the citizens. We have used the key of hermeneutics to unlock the statements made.

The Bible as a book must be interpreted sensibly, and as God’s book it must be interpreted spiritually. Many of the attacks made upon the Bible by its critics are due to a misunderstanding of proper interpretation. An obvious and simple example is when people criticize the Bible for being unscientific when it speaks of the sun rising and setting (for example, Genesis 15:12, 17; 19:23). We all know that this is a convenient expression that is used the world over, and it is not intended as a scientific description of the relationship of the sun to the earth. Even the weather forecasters refer to sunset and sunrise.

The interpretation of Scripture is a vital subject; it is as important as the doctrine of verbal inerrancy itself. There is no value in being able to say, “These are the words of God,” if we then proceed to interpret them in a way directly the opposite of God’s intention. We are answerable to God if we abuse His Word in this way.

In the history of the Christian church, there have been many leaders who have interpreted Scripture in a fanciful or even ridiculous fashion and, as a result, have completely missed its clear teaching. The Reformers looked first for the literal or historical meaning of Scripture and only for an allegorical interpretation where this was allowed by Scripture itself.

Hermeneutics is not a matter of theory; it always has a practical application. Hermeneutics follows exegesis. *Exegesis* comes from another Greek word meaning “to explain.” The preacher and Bible teacher must be an exegete in order to understand the meaning of the text before he can interpret it and apply it to the lives of those listening. But he cannot explain or apply the Scripture unless he has clear principles for interpreting it.

Much of the Bible is plain, and anyone with a little common sense can understand it, but some of it is hard to grasp; at times there is a fuller or deeper meaning that is not immediately obvious. Both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus himself reminded us that it is one thing to hear the Word of God, but quite another to understand it (Isaiah 6:9–10; Matthew 13:13–15).

What follows is only an introduction to the much wider issue of understanding the Bible, focusing primarily on the type of passage being examined. Perhaps the simplest way of dealing with this subject is to set out a number of basic questions that we should ask whenever we want to understand a passage, or even a single verse, of the Bible.

Is This Passage History?

If a passage of Scripture is clearly historical, then we must remember that its purpose is to describe things that actually happened. Generally, it is not difficult to know which passages are historical and which are not. For example, it could hardly be denied that the stories of the various kings of Israel and Judah are expected to be taken as actual accounts of their lives; if anyone wants to deny this, the responsibility is theirs to prove

that they are not intended as true stories. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the story told by Jotham in Judges 9:8–15 is in picture language, and it would be a foolish person who criticized the Bible, or Jotham, for thinking that the trees actually held a conversation.

We should always decide on the answer to this first question before we go any further; this could save a lot of problems later. When the reader turns to the first chapter of Genesis, or the book of Jonah, the first question must not be “How can I fit this into what some modern scientists say?” but “Is this written as history?” The answer to that last question must be “yes,” since the entire book of Genesis is written in the form of history. The Jews never doubted it, and neither did the Christian church until a century and a half ago. We cannot pick and choose to suit our convenience.

If someone says Genesis 1 and 2 are poetry or myth, then why not say the same about the story of Babel or the Flood or Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or, in the book of Exodus, the escape from Egypt or the manna in the wilderness? No one has yet shown where in Genesis it is clearly no longer poetic and certainly historic. The simple truth is that, like the book of Jonah, it is all written as history. We may choose not to believe its accuracy, but if we follow the rules of hermeneutics, we cannot seriously doubt its intention to be accepted as fact.

It is not our concern here to discuss the so-called scientific problems of biblical creation, or how a man could stay alive inside a great fish; that has nothing to do with hermeneutics. The evangelical who relies upon the argument that Genesis 1 and 2 (or 3 and 4) are poetic and not historical has abandoned sound principles of interpretation in order to avoid what appears to be a scientific problem; why then does he not abandon Jonah as well—or, more particularly, the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ?

This question, “Is the passage historical?” is one of the most important questions to answer.

Is It Poetry?

As we have already seen, some passages of the Bible are poetic, and we will not, therefore, look for detailed accuracy in matters of fact. If we turn to Psalm 104, Job 38, or Isaiah 40:12–15, for example, we have what are clearly poetic descriptions of creation. The words and phrases are very different from Genesis, and no one could seriously suggest that the Bible views God as riding on the clouds like a man in a chariot (Psalm 104:3) or stopping the oceans with immense doors (Job 38:8) or weighing the mountains in a gigantic pair of scales (Isaiah 40:12). This language is poetic, and nothing like it is found in the historical Genesis account.

In the sixteenth century, when Galileo discovered that the earth revolved around the sun, he was contradicted by church leaders, on the basis that Psalm 93:1 (see also Psalm 96:10; 104:5), claimed, “The world is firmly established, it will not be moved”! But this was a sad ignorance of the fact that these passages are written in poetic style and are intended only to imply the certainty of God’s plans and God’s laws both for man and His creation. Did the church authorities of his day really believe that God sits on a throne and that the oceans have a voice (verses 2–3)? We must always be ready to recognize poetry in the Bible.

Unlike our modern, Western ideas of poetry, where rhyming words and meter are used, Hebrew poetry uses different devices. One of the most common is parallelism. In many of the Psalms you will find ideas set in couplets or triplets—not rhyming phrases. Psalm 18:31–34 offers an example of this poetic device.

31 For who is God, except the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?

32 It is God who arms me with strength, And makes my way perfect.

33 He makes my feet like the feet of deer, And sets me on my high places.

34 He teaches my hands to make war, So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

Verse thirty-one presents a parallel idea, amplifying the strength of the one, true God. Verses 32–34 repeat the same basic idea three times—God does x that I might have y. Along with the parallelism, many figures of speech (see the section below) are used in Hebrew poetry. With a little common sense applied, poetry can be easily identified in the Bible.

Is It Prophecy?

Understanding prophecy is perhaps the most difficult part of Bible interpretation, and the moment we know that a passage is prophetic, we shall be looking out for certain things. Prophecy is not merely telling the future (fore-telling), but telling God’s Word for the day in which the prophet lived (forth-telling). Poetry played a large part in the language of the prophets, and we are wise not to take all their words as having a literal fulfillment.

We shall return to this later in the chapter, but there is another significant question to answer whenever we come to a passage of prophecy, and that is the matter of timing: when will this prophecy be fulfilled? The answer to this question must be considered carefully, and the fulfillment may be in the time of the prophet, at a near-future time, during the periods surrounding the return of Christ, or in heaven.

What Is the Plain Meaning?

This is really an obvious question, but many Christians are so busy looking for problems or hidden meanings that they forget to ask it. Sometimes the question is put in a different way: “What is the grammatical sense? What do the words mean?” To answer this question it is essential that we have an accurate translation in front of us and not a paraphrase. A translation attempts to give us what the original author actually wrote; it translates the words. But a paraphrase attempts to give us what the original author really meant; it translates thoughts—and sometimes not very accurately. It must be admitted that no translation is completely free from some paraphrasing; however, we must always distinguish between the translation and the paraphrase. We should never use a paraphrase—however readable it may be—for serious study, because hermeneutics is concerned with accuracy.

Figures of Speech

When we say that the Bible is literally true we do not mean that every word has a literal interpretation. Like any other book, the Bible uses forms of speech, and recognizing these forms of speech is essential to a proper understanding of Scripture.

1. Simile

A simile is a vivid yet simple comparison of one thing with another. Peter uses a simile in 1 Peter 5:8: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion.” The devil is not literally a lion; he is like a lion in his fierce attack upon believers.

2. Metaphor

A metaphor is the description of something by the use of words that do not literally apply to it. In a metaphor the words *like* and *as* are omitted and something is described as if it really was something else. For example, in Luke 13:32 our Lord does not say that Herod is *like* a fox, but, in order to make his description stronger, he uses a metaphor and says that Herod *is* a fox. Similarly, the reference to the “floodgates of the heavens” in Genesis 7:11 is a metaphor; it would be ridiculous to suggest Moses thought of heaven as having literal gates that could be shut and then opened to let the rain out. If you turn to Psalm 18:2 you will find five metaphors in this one verse.

3. Allegory

An allegory is a long metaphor in the form of a story; it describes one subject in words that more exactly belong to another. The passage we used earlier in this chapter from Judges 9:8–15 is an allegory. When we know this, we shall avoid thinking that Jotham really believed the trees talked together. When in John 10:1–16 our Lord spoke of Himself in terms of the Good Shepherd, He was using an allegory. Paul used an allegory in Galatians 4:21–31, where he writes about Sarah and Hagar; in fact in verse 24 he concludes, “These things may be taken figuratively,” and the Greek word he uses is the very word from which we get our word allegory. We are at liberty to use Bible stories as allegories, just as Paul did, but when we do, we must beware of using them to prove a point. Allegories are only illustrations; they are not our authority. The rule for the use of illustrations applies equally to allegories.

4. Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is made up from two Greek words, and it means “to give something the characteristics of a man.” When we are speaking of spiritual things, we have to use human language. We can only understand about God by using human words, and we frequently refer to God as if He had the ordinary characteristics of a human being. In fact, of course, He is far greater than that. Isaiah 59:1 provides us with a good illustration of anthropomorphism: “Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.” We would be ignorant of the rules of hermeneutics if we felt that from this verse we had to believe that a huge hand and ear are invisibly extended from heaven to earth!

5. Hyperbole

We all use hyperbole in our everyday speech; hyperbole is an exaggeration used to make our statement more forceful. When a child runs home and declares, “There were millions of people at church this morning,” we do not punish him for lying because we know he is using hyperbole. God used a hyperbole to Abraham when He promised that the Israelites would be as numerous “as the dust of the earth” (Genesis 13:16).

Another example of hyperbole is used by our Lord Himself in Matthew 24:2 (and Luke 19:44). He warned that the day would come when the great stones of Herod’s temple would be broken down and “not one stone

here will be left on another.” This prophecy was fulfilled by the Roman army in AD 70, but anyone may go to Jerusalem today and see the Wailing Wall, which is the only remaining part of Herod’s temple; to claim our Lord was in error because a few stones are still standing is to misunderstand His language. He used hyperbole to emphasize the complete and terrible destruction of the city.

6. Litotes

Litotes is not a well-known figure of speech, though it is well used. To recognize it can avoid misunderstanding the Bible. Litotes is a way of confirming the truth of something by denying its opposite. For example, if I am asked whether I plan to go out today, I may simply say “yes,” or I may use litotes and say, “I certainly will not stay indoors.” I have said “yes” by saying “no” to the opposite.

A useful example of how important it can be to recognize litotes is found in Revelation 3:5. Some Christians think that the expression, “I will never erase his name from the book of life,” implies that it is possible for a Christian to lose salvation and that God actually may blot out a name from the book of life; this interpretation is very hard to accept in the light of the clear statements in John 10:28 and Romans 8:33–39, and the equally clear emphasis of the whole of the Bible that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ. The book of Revelation is full of figures of speech and this phrase is simply an example of litotes: God is not saying that He ever would erase our names from the book of life; in fact, He is saying “no” to the opposite.

7. Apocalyptic language

Some of the pictures that are used in Bible books that particularly refer to the end of time, like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, are strange and often hard for us to understand. This is referred to as *apocalyptic* language. That word comes from a Greek verb meaning “to reveal” or “bring to light.” Actually, we may at times think the passage does anything but reveal or bring to light! However, we often complicate these Bible pictures. This is especially true in some of the visions of Daniel, where the explanation is given (see Daniel 7:23; 8:19, for example). But on other occasions we are left wondering. A wise principle is to accept that we do not have to understand every detail of these visions and dreams. It is best to think of them as flashcards that are intended to create an impression of power or glory, terror or judgment; our task is to decide first what that impression is.

8. Parables

A parable is another figure of speech, and parables, especially those taught by our Lord, are frequently misinterpreted. The Greek word for parable means “to throw or place by the side of something.”

From the early days of the Christian church, there was a desire to get as much out of the parables as possible, and the system of “allegorizing” them was popular; in fact, under the influence of Greek philosophy, it was not only the parables that were allegorized, but the whole Bible and especially the Old Testament. This meant, for example, reading spiritual lessons from every part of a parable.

The problem with treating the parables like this is that no two interpreters agree on the details, and it leaves us free to read anything we wish into the parables. Our danger in interpreting parables is always one of extremes: either we can look for a significance in every detail, forgetting that—as with any story used as an illustration—there have to be details that simply help the narrative along, or we can be so general that we claim there is one lesson alone to be learnt from every parable.

Here are a few important facts to remember when we read a parable:

Parables are simple stories, but have hidden meanings

We must not forget what our Lord Himself said about his parables in Mark 4:11–12, quoting from Isaiah 6: “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.’” Later we read,

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything (verses 33–34).

In other words, some things are hidden within parables that will only be plain to those with spiritual understanding. That is why our Lord expected his disciples to be able to understand them. This does not mean we can let our imagination run wild—which is what Augustine and many after him have done.

The context is important

To whom was Jesus speaking? Why? What was the result? Sometimes the context gives us the

explanation of the parable; this is true of the parable of the seeds in Luke 8:5–15, where our Lord gave his disciples a full interpretation and, at the same time, left us with some important guidelines as to how parables should be understood. Sometimes the context directs our attention to the exact purpose of the parable. This happens in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which answered the question raised in Luke 10:29. In each case we can assume that our Lord has given an explanation of those parts of the parable that matter most.

Generally there is one main point to each parable

This is a wise rule to start with, even though there may be secondary lessons in a parable. Some parables are simple and require little explanation. For example, the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3–7 teaches the one point that there is rejoicing in heaven over each sinner who repents (v 7). We may also see that there is care by the shepherd who comes looking for the lost sheep, but that is a subsidiary lesson. We cannot go further, or else we might complain at his neglect of the other ninety-nine!

There are more complex parables that are explained for us

The parable of the seed sown (Mark 4) is one example of this. We are unwise to go beyond the interpretation our Lord Himself gave, and we may assume that He has given us all we need to know. There are also complex parables that are not explained. An example of this is found in the parable of the talents in Luke 19:12–27, where we have a number of characters in the story, each of which has to be applied: the nobleman, the servants—some good and some bad—and the citizens, who were all bad. The context helps us here, since it was given just before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Do not try to press every point of a parable

The great danger of the popular way of spiritualizing (or allegorizing) every part of a parable is that we are left with some parts of the parables that are highly embarrassing if we try to apply them. Our Lord used everyday and familiar situations in His parables. When he referred to slavery or a dishonest steward, He was not commenting upon the morality of these situations; they were merely illustrations. Similarly our Lord does not commend the actions of an unjust judge—or compare him with God! The point of the story relates not to the judge, but to the woman who kept on and on with her request.

We have not covered all the figures of speech used in the Bible, but the subject is not as difficult as it may appear. Common sense solves most of our problems in interpreting figures of speech. But we must be aware of them.

Understanding the New Testament Letters

There are twenty-one letters (epistles) in the New Testament, and these are possibly the most used part of our Bible. It is from these letters that we draw most of our Christian doctrine.

Remember they are letters

God chose this way to teach us because they were written to real people, in real situations and often to deal with real problems. They are not books of theology disconnected with the reality of life. Paul wrote to be read (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; 2 Peter 3:16).

We need to ask, “Who were the people he was writing to? What kind of Christians were they? Where did they live? What kind of society was it? When did he write? Why did he write? What were the particular problems?” (See, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:3; 5:1–2; 7:1; 11:17; 15:12; 16:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 4:13; 5:1).

Letters are always meant to be understood, so we must go first for the obvious meaning, though there are “some things that are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16).

These letters were never meant to be dissected word by word, or even sentence by sentence. What was the writer saying to his day? What has this to say to us? Was there one, or more, big issue that concerned the writer? It is the writer’s theme that we must look for, not our interest, or theological hobby-horse.

Look for the different approaches

Just as Paul preached in different ways in Acts, so the New Testament writers wrote in different ways: Philemon is a personal letter to a friend. Romans is written to a church from a pagan background, dealing with fundamental Christian theology. Titus is written to a young pastor/preacher in Crete; Titus is teaching the theology, so Paul writes to advise on the organization of church life. Hebrews is written to converted Jews who were familiar with Old Testament ceremony.

Conclusion

The Bible is God's book, and it has his stamp of authority across it. His Word is authoritative—not our particular interpretation of it. God has given us rules by which we can rightly understand his Word; they are not hard to follow and they are within the reach of everyone who prayerfully and carefully uses them as a key to interpret this treasure box. Interpret the Bible sensibly and spiritually. Make it relevant, not ridiculous. Ask for the help of God's Holy Spirit because He is the reliable interpreter of His own book.