

Biblical Interpretation

When it comes to the Bible, differing interpretations aren't the fault of the text or even the entire Bible; they're due to differing methods of approach to any given text or even to an entire theological-system.

There are two primary methods of biblical interpretation today: The Contemporary-Literal Approach and The Historical-Grammatical Approach.

The Contemporary-Literal Approach: By this I mean what D. R. Dungan said in his book simply called Hermeneutics which refers to "the science of interpretation":

The literal interpretation "is most commonly employed by dogmatists in order to maintain a view that cannot be supported in any other way. It makes [practically] all the language of the Bible literal. It treats the Word of God as if it were an essay on chemistry or mechanics" (p. 79).

If these literalists "would read Oriental writings on any other subject, they would be convinced that much of it is highly figurative; but, coming to the Bible, it must be made to bow to a gross materialism [i.e. literalism] and take a yoke upon its neck that will make it the merest slave of the merciless task-master who allots the tale [i.e. a specific number] of bricks, and will be satisfied with nothing else. These exegetes don't pretend that [according to Psalm 22:6, 14, & 17] David's heart melted within him like wax; that all his bones were out of joint, and were staring at him in the face; that he was a worm, and no man; for they have no theory dependent upon the literal use of these figures. **But let their theory be involved for a moment, and then, if the literal meaning will avail them anything, they will use it and deny that any other is possible**" (p. 80, emp. mine). The question should be, "What does the writer mean? Not, What can we *make* him mean?" (p. 81).

"Much of the Bible is written in language highly figurative. And not to recognize this fact and treat the language according to the figures employed is to fail entirely in the exegesis. This, of course, does not imply that God has said one thing while He means another, but simply that He has spoken in the language of men and *in the style of those to whom the revelations were made*. No one reading the Prophecies or the Psalms without recognizing this fact will be able to arrive at any reliable conclusions whatever as to their meaning" (p. 82, emp. mine).

*The prime example of this mode of interpretation is the premillennialist, who, like the Jews, construes numerous biblical statements in a materialistic manner, believing that Jesus will come back and set up a kingdom in Jerusalem and physically reign from there for exactly 1,000 years. Furthermore, the premillennialist will beat the amillennialist over the head with Cooper's Golden Rule of Interpretation. Why? Because the amil claims to adhere to it just as does the premil, but he isn't as "consistent" in its application as the premil. (The amil is he who doesn't construe the 1,000 years of **Revelation 20** literally.)

Here's Cooper's Golden Rule of Interpretation: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, *studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths* [emp. mine] clearly indicate otherwise" (Dr. David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated*, p. 11; Cooper [1886—1965] studied biblical languages under the celebrated A. T. Robertson).

An abridged and dangerous form of this very beneficial rule is this: "If the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest it result in nonsense." Why is this dangerous? Obviously because it leaves off the critical exception to his rule; and, sadly, not knowing any better, this condensed form is all that most interpreters seem to desire and adhere to.

Another writer, while expounding on Cooper's rule, wrote that "'Literal' is used to emphasize the thought that every word must first be taken literally *as expressing the exact thought of the author at the time when it was used*" (Andre Widodo, online; emp. mine), which brings up an important thought about the word "literal" itself: The word "literal" comes from the same root as "literature" and "literary," implying that to take any word, clause, or sentence *truly* "literally" would be to interpret it according to its literary context, i.e. in harmony with the type of literature it is with regard to its time and place, which leads us to the following interpretive approach.

The Historical-Grammatical Approach: By this I mean what Milton S. Terry said in his renowned and most highly respected 19th century treatise on Biblical Hermeneutics.

Terry wrote that the grammatical-historical approach is the one "which most fully commends itself to the judgment and conscience of Christian scholars. Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. ... [The exegete] will inquire into *the circumstances* under which [the author] wrote, *the manners and customs of his age*, and *the purpose or object which he had in view*" (p. 173, emp. mine). In other words...

Not only does this approach take the first part of Cooper's rule to heart (i.e. when the plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense), but it also takes the second part to heart (i.e. [as when judging an individual in a courtroom] it gathers and studies all related evidence from the entirety of God's revelation before making a hard and fast ruling on any given passage). As Terry appropriately wrote, "The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are a world by themselves. Although written at various times and devoted to many different themes, taken together they constitute a self-interpreting book. The old rule, therefore, that '**Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture**' *is a most important principle of sacred hermeneutics*" (emp. mine, p. 222). Why else would the inspired apostle Paul himself allude to the Old Testament 50 times and quote from it 30 times in his letter to the Hebrews?

In an earlier section of his book Terry wrote that a "most important method of ascertaining the *usus loquendi* [i.e. the usage of a word or phrase in the writer's time] is an extensive and careful comparison of similar or parallel passages of Scripture. When a writer has treated a given subject in different parts of his writings, or when different writers have treated the same subject, it is both justice to the writers and important in interpretation to collect and compare all that is written. The obscure or doubtful passages are to be explained by what is plain and simple. A subject may be only incidentally noticed in one place, but be treated with extensive fullness in another" (p. 186). In still another even earlier section, Terry said that "The whole Bible is a divinely constructed unity, and there is danger that, in studying one part to the comparative neglect of the other, we may fall into one-sided and erroneous methods of exposition" (p. 18). Besides using the Bible to interpret the Bible whenever possible...

Terry also wrote that "The interpreter should ... transport himself into the historical position of the author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion" (p. 231); and after speaking at length about Paul's writings, he said, "The situation and condition of the churches and persons addressed ... should also be carefully sought out" (p. 236). John Wycliffe likewise wrote, "It will greatly help us to understand Scripture if we take notice of not only what is spoken or written, but also *of whom and to whom, with what words, at what time, where, to what intent, in what circumstances*, considering what goes before and what follows after" (emp. mine). We simply must keep in mind that, while all the Bible is FOR us, it was *not* written TO us, making it crucial that we not only put ourselves in the places of its authors, but also of its recipients, noting especially such things as their culture and the meanings of any and all their unique idiomatic sayings.

Even as far back as the writing of First Samuel 9:9 it was recognized that languages change: "FORMERLY IN ISRAEL, WHEN A MAN WENT TO INQUIRE OF GOD, HE SPOKE THUS: 'COME, LET US GO TO THE SEER'; FOR HE WHO IS NOW CALLED A PROPHET WAS FORMERLY CALLED A SEER." So interpreters are obligated to strive in their discovery of what was meant by non-contemporary literature by, as Terry said, transporting themselves.

In Conclusion:

Whereas the contemporary-literal method is subjective and therefore relative in nature, the historical-grammatical method is objective in nature because the context & content of Scripture does not change.

Taking a mere literalistic position sounds very pious and conservative, but it often creates *modernistic* interpretations of Scripture. Shouldn't our principal goal actually be to find the *biblical* interpretation, not the *literal* interpretation?

Some Rules of Interpretation by Clinton Lockhart from His Book Principles of Interpretation:

The true object of interpretation is to apprehend the exact thought of the author (p. 19).

Let the author's own explanation of his meaning take precedence over any other interpretation (p. 74).

The interpretation of a passage must accord with the author's purpose (p. 79).

In interpreting, the etymological meaning of a word must give place to its current usage (p. 119).

Choose the broad meaning of a term unless it is restricted (p. 134).

An expression in any given connection should yield but one meaning (p. 139).

Parallel Passages May Include (pp. 140-142)...

An important word recurring in different contexts.

The same or similar thought, but different words.

Similar language referring to the same thought.

Quotations or matters from a common source.

The more explicit/definite of two or more parallels should explain the more general/indefinite (p. 149).

The extent of the meaning of any figure must be determined by the nature of the subject and intent of the author as well as by the figure itself (p. 189). And...

A prediction ... should be interpreted in harmony with its fulfillment if that be known (p. 205).

Milton Terry wrote, "When a writer says that an event will shortly and speedily come to pass, or is about to take place, it is contrary to all propriety to declare that his statements allow us to believe the event is in the far future. It is a reprehensible abuse of language to say that the words *immediately*, or *near at hand*, mean *ages hence*, or *after a long time*."

Fee & Stuart wrote, "**A verse can never mean what it never meant**" (from How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, by Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart).

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BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION by Tony E. Denton

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