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Eight Key Questions for Interpreting the Bible - Part 1

By Tal Davis

"So, what does that verse mean to you?"

"That's not what I get out of that passage!

"Let's all listen carefully to what Dr. Pasgnosko says on his tapes. He is the only teacher who really understands the Bible."

Ever been in a Bible study or church service where the leader or people in the group made statements like those above? When I was in high school and college, I recall sitting in groups where the Scripture study approach was very much like that. Sometimes the leader, after reading a random verse, just went around the circle asking what each person thought, or what it said to them.

In other cases, I have known Christians who depended almost entirely on the writings of audio messages of a specific Bible teacher to determine its meanings and applications for their lives. In some cases, the teacher made the audacious claim that only he really could accurately translate or interpret the Bible, and that all other scholars had missed the deeper meaning or the hidden key to Scriptural understanding.

Therefore, even after fifty years in Christian ministry, it remains my great concern that believers know how to discover the best translation and interpretation of any given passage of the Bible. As Paul advised his young protégé Timothy:

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed,

accurately handling the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15 NASB)

We sometimes hear people declare: "The Bible says what it means, and means what it says." That is true, but the thing we must be sure of is knowing just exactly what it says and what it means. Interpretation (the science of hermeneutics) is the process of carefully studying the words and grammar of the Scriptures to determine as closely as possible their meanings as written by the original authors. That's how we can know. So how can we do that?

In this two-part series we will explore eight key questions we need to ask when we seek to know the accurate interpretation of any Scriptural passage. In part one, we will examine the first four principles, and in part two the other four.

1. Where does the passage occur in the history of God's revelation?

I recently heard a minister in an unorthodox cult state that you must always interpret the New Testament in light of what was taught in the Old Testament. He was arguing that the Old Testament only taught the oneness of God, and thus the Trinity, with God as Three Persons, as found in the New Testament, could not be true.

That argument is flawed in that ignores the fact that God, in His providential plan, gave greater revelation about Himself and His will over the centuries as recorded in Scripture. This principle is what is known as "progressive revelation." Thus, passages in the Old Testament must be looked at in light of the fuller revelation in the New Testament. In any case, all of

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Scripture must be read in light of the person of Jesus Christ, God's ultimate revelation of Himself.

"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power." (Hebrews 1:1-3a NASB)

Thus, to get an accurate grasp of a particular passage's meaning, we must look first at its place in God's revelation history. Doing otherwise will lead us to a distorted view of the nature of God Himself and His will for our lives.

2. What does the passage say in its original language?

Most of us, even those of us who have been to theological seminary, must admit we do not have a thorough knowledge of the Biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek. Nonetheless, it is incumbent on all of us, when doing biblical interpretation, to determine as close as is possible just exactly what the writers of Scripture actually said and meant in their own language. So, for those of us who lack the skills to read from the Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek New Testament, we need to be sure of two things.

First, we need to make certain that whatever translations of the Bible we prefer are sufficiently faithful to the original authors' words. All Bible translations are not created equal. That is why when choosing a translation for study, we should be careful to select one that has a solid background in textual and linguistic scholarship. In other words, we need to know that the translators

were adequately trained to do an accurate and unbiased job. For that reason, if possible, we should investigate who the translators were along with their credentials.

In any case, we should use only those versions that are widely endorsed by credible evangelical scholars, and be wary of those that are of questionable quality and publishers. For example, The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (NWT) was translated and is published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses). Jehovah's Witnesses are told that the NWT is the most accurate English translation ever made. Greek and Hebrew scholars almost universally agree that it is the most biased and wooden version now available.

Also, we can utilize the tools available to look for ourselves at the Hebrew and Greek texts and see how the writers used the words they did. Two excellent free resources available online for just that purpose are Bible Hub (biblehub.com) and BibleGateway (www.biblegateway.com). They contain comparisons of translations, interlinear Hebrew/English and Greek/English texts, and a detailed grammatical analysis of each of the specific words used.

3. What type of literature is the particular book or passage?

Muslim apologists sometimes argue that the Qur'an is the true revelation of God because it is only one concise prose volume dictated in one language to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel. Of course, there is no independent evidence that it was created that way. The fact that only one man wrote it actually diminishes its claim for validity. Also, there is no way to test it historically since it really does not deal with specific historical events not already mentioned in the Bible (though it does deny one of the best attested facts of ancient history: the death of Jesus). However, principles three and four

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demonstrate why the Bible is superior on both of these counts.

The Bible was written over the course of 1500 years by as many as forty different authors. The theological consistency it demonstrates considering its diverse origins is amazing. One important aspect of the Bible is that it contains a variety of types of literature. The Bible books include historical texts, poetry, wisdom, epistles (or letters), apocalyptic writings, and so on. This is of great importance for scriptural interpretation because the kind of literature of any specific passage directly determines how we understand its meaning.

Historical books, like 1 and 2 Chronicles, are very different than, say, a collection of poems like the Psalms. History tends to deal with objective facts. Poetry often uses metaphorical and anthropomorphic language. Furthermore, epistles or letters, like 1 and 2 Corinthians, would be read differently than the four Gospels. Further, Daniel and Revelation are apocalyptic books which often use symbols to describe heavenly and prophetic events.

Thus, the sort of literature a book represents determines how we understand the writer's purpose and intended meaning as he wrote it. This diversity of literary milieu enhances the value and credibility of the Bible. The scriptural writers, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, created a rich collection of writings expressing the truth of God in many different ways. Like a mosaic creates a beautiful picture from many smaller shards of glass carefully pieced together, God has pieced together the scriptural texts to form a beautiful picture of who He is and His way of salvation.

4. What is the book's, and specific passage's, historical and geographical setting?

The Bible books were not written in a vacuum. A book written around 1200 BC and set in ancient Israel has a very different historical perspective than one written in the First Century AD in Rome. The writer's words and meanings can be best known by understanding when, where, and who he was addressing, and the issues they were facing at that time and place. For instance, most of the Old Testament prophetic books were written in the midst of specific historical events of the people of Israel and Judah. In contrast, when Peter wrote his letters (1 and 2 Peter), he was writing to First Century AD churches in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) to encourage them in the prospect of imminent persecution.

So we must take into consideration the Scriptures' historical settings. Likewise, the geographical locations are helpful for understanding this principle. It is always good to have an accurate Bible atlas, or a Bible version with maps, of different periods of Bible history. This allows us to pinpoint where the various events described actually occurred, and to see them in relationship to current geographical locations. As archaeologists have confirmed, these geographical locations provide empirical evidence for the historicity of the biblical stories.

But, as significant as the ancient historical and geographical settings of passages may be, that does not mean they have no relevance for the present. We can always discern theological and moral principles from the texts that have application for us today. Human nature is still the same, and the God who worked in those situations and in those places is the same God we worship today.

This concludes the first of this two-part series on interpreting the Bible. We answered the first four of eight important questions we must ask to

succeed in the quest. In the next installment we will look at the other four principles, including how we make the Scriptures practical for our lives.

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