

Rules of Interpretation

These days people interpret the Bible in many different ways. The reason for this is because people come up with their own methods for interpreting the Scriptures. Unfortunately, many of these methods are wrong. There actually *is* a right way and a wrong way to interpret the Bible. After all, if people were allowed to interpret it however they wanted then any verse could be interpreted to say anything. At that point the Bible would become utterly meaningless – it would be like putty that could be pushed into any shape imaginable.

When people read a contract they interpret it in a fixed, standard way. No one believes that they have the right to interpret the contract however they think best. If six people interpret one clause of the contract in six different ways then that is seen as a serious problem, not a feature. Likewise, there is a right way and a wrong way to interpret the Scriptures. Each verse means something in particular. It does *not* mean whatever you want it to mean. Our job as Christians is to understand what the Bible *actually* means, not to reinterpret it to say what *we* want it to say.

A complete discussion on how to interpret the Bible is more than I want to tackle at this time. However, I do want to offer four rules that, if followed, will make it much easier to discover what the Bible actually teaches.

The rules are:

1. If plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.

What this means is that if the Scripture can be taken literally then it *should* be taken literally. A symbolic or “spiritual” interpretation should *only* be used when a literal interpretation makes no sense, or when the passage is clearly symbolic.

For example, Joshua 8:28 says this:

Joshua 8:28: “And Joshua burnt Ai, and made it an heap forever, even a desolation unto this day.

29 And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until eventide: and as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his carcass down from the tree, and cast it at the entering of the gate of the city, and raise thereon a great heap of stones, that remaineth unto this day.”

If this passage is interpreted literally then it makes a great deal of sense: it records the destruction of the city of Ai and the death of its king. Since the passage makes sense when interpreted literally then it *should* be interpreted literally.

If this rule is ignored and these verses are interpreted “spiritually” (or allegorically) then the passage can literally mean anything. For example, someone could say “Well, Joshua is an allegory that represents the forces of good, and Ai symbolically represents the forces of evil. Since Joshua defeated Ai, that means the forces of good will defeat the forces of evil. Since Ai was burned, that means the forces of evil will be burned by the judgment of God. This passage therefore teaches that good will triumph over evil.”

That kind of Biblical interpretation is total nonsense. If you take that approach then you can force any passage of the Bible to mean anything that you want it to mean. At that point the verses lose all meaning; they become a blank slate. This violates one of the prime directives of Scripture:

2 Peter 1:20: “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.”

Scripture does *not* mean arbitrarily different things to different people. *It has the same meaning for everyone.* If you are interpreting a verse in such a way that the verse can mean anything then you are interpreting it wrong.

2. Interpret Scripture with Scripture

When the Bible does speak symbolically, the symbols that it uses *must* be interpreted by *other passages within the Bible*. It is *never* acceptable to just assign one's own meaning to the symbol. Moreover, the Scripture usually interprets a given symbol consistently, so if a symbol has a certain meaning in one passage then it almost always has that same meaning in all other passages as well. For example, oil is usually symbolic of the Holy Spirit and leaven is usually symbolic of sin. If the symbol is being used in a different way then the Bible will note the difference and offer an explanation.

For an example of how to interpret Biblical symbolism, take a look at Revelation 1:12-13:

Revelation 1:12: “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.”

This passage mentions seven golden candlesticks. Some people might assign their own definition to that symbol and say that, to them, candlesticks represent light shining in the darkness, or a beacon of hope in a sea of despair, or any number of things. However, *the Bible defines its own terms*. If you want to find out what it means then you must search the Word of God for the definition. It is wrong to arbitrarily assign your own meaning to Biblical symbols, because doing so ignores the Bible's own definitions and leads to incorrect interpretations.

In this case, the definition of the candlestick symbol is found just a few verses further down in the chapter:

Revelation 1:20: “The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”

So then, we can see that the seven candlesticks represent seven churches. If we had interpreted that symbol to suit ourselves then we would have been in error. A great many people interpret Revelation incorrectly because *they do not use other Bible passages to interpret its symbolism*. Revelation does have a lot of symbolic language, but the language it uses is explained in other passages. Instead of doing their homework, though, people are content to assign their own meanings to

the symbols that they find, and the result is chaos and error.

3. Context is everything

When reading the Bible it is very important to keep the context in mind. Verses in the Bible do not float in space all by themselves; they are found in passages and in books and were given to specific people at specific times. In order to understand what the verse is teaching you must know both the textual context and the historical context.

The textual context is *extremely* important to understanding what is going on. For example, take this passage in 2 Kings. In this passage an Assyrian by the name of Rab-shakeh was talking to the Israelites and urging them to surrender. During his speech he said this:

2 Kings 18:22: “But if ye say unto me, We trust in the Lord our God: is not that he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and hath said to Judah and Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem?”

Rab-shakeh is wrong: the high places and altars Hezekiah had destroyed were an abomination to God and had been used to serve the false gods of the Canaanites. However, to understand that you have to have read other parts of the Bible and understand what it means when it talks about high places. In this verse the Bible is accurately reporting Rab-shakeh *lies*. However, the only way to discover this is to be familiar with the whole story.

Another example can be found in the book of John. In the seventh chapter the chief priests and Pharisees are arguing with Nicodemus about Jesus. During this discussion one of the Pharisees says this:

John 7:52: “They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.”

In this passage the Pharisees make two mistakes. First, Jesus did not come from Galilee; He was born in Bethlehem. Second, there was indeed a prophet that came out of Galilee: Jonah, who is actually quite famous. However, in order to know this you have to be familiar with other portions of the Scripture. If you only look at this one verse you will come away with the mistaken interpretation that Jesus was from Galilee and that no prophets had ever come from that area. The verse must be taken in context in order to understand what is going on. This does take a lot of work – but no one ever said it was going to be easy. If you want to understand what the Bible *actually* means then you are going to have to invest a lot of time into it.

The **cultural context** is also very important. The Bible was written to specific people who lived at a specific time, and it assumes that those who are reading it have the knowledge of its original intended audience. The book of Ephesians, for example, was written to a specific group of people that lived in Ephesus. Some pieces of knowledge were taken for granted; after all, if you lived there then you would know what was going on, so there was no need for big explanations. If we do not understand the culture then we will form erroneous conclusions.

For example, take this passage in Revelation:

Revelation 2:17: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

To us the gift of a white stone has no particular meaning. However, in ancient times if you were tried for a crime and found not guilty you were given a white stone. The stone signified that the charges against you had been dropped. When Christ offers to give “him that overcometh” a white stone, He is saying that He will find them *not guilty* of their sins and will declare them innocent. The entire meaning of the white stone becomes lost if we do not understand the cultural background.

4. Mind the gaps

Sometimes in Scripture, especially in prophecies, there are gaps. A single verse may cover two entirely different periods of time, but the verse itself will not indicate that there is a gap between the first and second part of the prophecy.

For example, take this passage in Luke:

Luke 4:16: “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.

17 And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,

18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.

21 And he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your years.”

Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah. However, if we look at the passage that Jesus quoted we will find something interesting:

Isaiah 61:1: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;”

In Isaiah we can see that Christ stopped at a comma in verse two. Only the first part of the prophecy – up to the comma – was fulfilled. The rest of the prophecy is still in the future. In Isaiah 61

there is no hint that a vast amount of time separates the “acceptable year of the Lord” and the “day of vengeance of our God”, but yet that is the case.

In order to find these gaps we must be very careful with the Scripture. The gaps can be found by taking passages that deal with the same subject and comparing them with each other. As the pieces of the puzzle are fit together, it will become obvious that there are gaps, or that one passage includes details that are omitted in the other. In order to get a complete picture we must use all of the pieces.