

Appendix 21: Rules of Interpretation

In the modern era there's widespread disagreement on nearly every doctrine that's found in the Bible. I believe that one of the reasons for this is because people don't know how to properly interpret the Bible. There *is* a right way and a wrong way, and those who interpret the Bible incorrectly will run into serious problems. It should be obvious that if people interpreted the Scriptures 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 a piece of putty that could be molded into any shape imaginable.

Think of it this way. When people read a contract they interpret it in a standard way. No one believes that they have the right to interpret the contract however they want. If six people interpret one clause of the contract in six different ways then that's a problem, not a feature. Likewise, there's a right way and a wrong way to interpret the Scriptures. Each verse means something specific. 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.

I believe there are four rules that, if followed, will make it much easier to discover what the Bible actually teaches. Let's take a look at those and see what they are.

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

This means 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 8:28-29: “And Joshua burnt Ai, and made it an heap forever, even a desolation unto this day. 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 mean anything. For example, someone could say “This passage is an allegory. Joshua represents the forces of good and Ai represents the forces of evil. Since Joshua defeated Ai, that means the forces of good will ultimately defeat the forces of evil. Since Ai was burned, that means the forces of evil will be judged by God. This passage therefore teaches that good will triumph over evil.”

That style of Biblical interpretation isn't very different from rejecting the Bible altogether and writing your own! If you take this allegorical approach (which has been a common practice throughout history) then you can force any passage to

mean anything you want. At that point the verses no longer have an objective meaning; instead all that matters is what each person *wants* the passage to mean. One person could say that the man Joshua represents limited government and Ai represents tyranny. Someone else could claim that Joshua represents communism and Ai represents capitalism. Another person could say that Joshua represents Martin Luther and Ai represents the Pope. Once you turn the Bible into an allegory, people can claim that it means anything they want and there's no way to prove that they're wrong.

That 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're interpreting a verse in such a way that the verse can mean anything then you are interpreting it incorrectly.

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's *never* acceptable to decide for yourself what that symbol must mean! The Bible interprets symbols consistently, so if a symbol has a certain meaning in one passage then it has that same meaning in other passages as well. For example, oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit and leaven is symbolic of sin.

For an example of how to interpret Biblical symbolism, take a look at this passage:

Revelation 1:12-13: “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; 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 candlesticks represent light shining in the darkness, or a beacon of hope in a sea of despair. They may say any number of things. However, *the Bible defines its own terms!* If you want to find out the true meaning of the candlesticks then you must search the Word of God for their definition. It's always wrong to assign your own meaning to Biblical symbols, because when you do that you're ignoring what the Bible says about the symbols that it uses.

In this case, the definition of the candlestick symbol is found a few verses further down in the same 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.”

This verse tells us that the seven candlesticks represent seven churches. As you can see, it's very simple! This wasn't hard at all.

I believe that one of the reasons there's so much disagreement about Revelation is because people don't use other Bible passages to interpret its symbolism. It's true that

Revelation has a lot of symbolic language, but the symbols that it uses are explained in other passages! Sadly, people often don't do their homework when it comes to interpreting the Bible. Instead they assign their own private meanings to the symbols that they find, and the result is error.

3. Context is key

When reading the Bible it's very important to keep the context in mind. Verses in the Bible do not exist in isolation. They are found in specific passages and specific books, which were written by specific people at specific times. In order to understand what a passage is teaching you must know both the textual context and the historical context.

The context is *extremely* important to understanding what's actually going on. For example, take this passage from 2 Kings. In this chapter an Assyrian by the name of Rab-shakeh is talking to the Israelites and urging them to surrender. During his speech he says 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 was actually wrong. The high places and altars that Hezekiah had destroyed were an abomination to God and had been used to serve the false gods of the Canaanites! It was a *good* thing that Hezekiah destroyed them. However, in order to find that out you need to read other parts of the Bible, because this chapter doesn't mention it. In this verse the Bible is

accurately reporting the *lies* that Rab-shakeh told – and the only way to know that is to be familiar with the whole story.

Another example can be found in the book of John. In chapter 7 of that book the chief priests and Pharisees are arguing with Nicodemus about Jesus. During their 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 made two mistakes. First of all, Jesus didn't come from Galilee. He was born in Bethlehem. Second, there was indeed a prophet that came out of Galilee: the prophet Jonah, who is quite famous. However, in order to know these facts you have to be familiar with other portions of the Scripture. If you only look at this one verse then you'll come away with the mistaken impression that Jesus was from Galilee and that no prophets had ever come from that area. This verse must be taken in context in order to understand what's actually going on. It's true that this takes a lot of work, but no one said that it was going to be easy. If you truly want to understand what the Bible *actually* means then you're going to have to invest a lot of time into it.

The cultural context is also important. The Bible was written to specific people who lived at a specific time, and in order to understand what it's saying we need to know a few things about its original audience. For instance, the book of Ephesians was written to a specific group of people who lived in Ephesus. There are some things in the Bible that aren't explained because the original audience already understood what was going on and didn't need lengthy explanations.

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. This was very obvious and clear to people who lived back in the first century, which is why the text doesn't explain it. The entire meaning of the white stone becomes lost if we don't understand the cultural background of the times.

There's a third type of context to consider as well. When the Bible talks about a subject it doesn't stop and repeat everything there is to know about that subject. Instead it expects you to do the work of piecing together everything the Bible has to say. For example, the book of 1 John says this:

1 John 5:1: “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.”

This verse seems to be saying that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is a genuine Christian. However, if you read the book of Galatians you'll find Paul addressing a group of people who *did* believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but who were not saved. The problem is that this group believed that they were saved by their works, not by faith. Although they believed

that Jesus was the Messiah, the fact that they trusted in their works to save them meant that they were actually lost.

Did the apostle John mention this in his letter? No. This is because he was addressing a different topic: he was rebuking a heresy that taught that Jesus was not divine, that God did not come into this world and become a man, and that Jesus was not the Messiah. The apostle John addressed that in his letter. He didn't address every other possible heresy as well because the Bible doesn't do that. (Can you imagine how long the Bible would have to be if it *did* do that?)

If you want to know what the Bible has to say about a topic then you'll need to study it from beginning to end. There's no one place you can go to find everything the Bible has to say about Jesus, or salvation, or Heaven, or end-times prophecy, or whatever the topic is that you're interested in. Those who don't do that, and just study one passage and call it a day, will come away with some very wrong ideas.

4. Mind the gaps

One of the factors that make it challenging to study Biblical prophecy is that sometimes there are gaps. A single verse may cover two entirely different periods of time, but the verse won't mention the fact that there's a gap between the first and second part of the prophecy.

For example, take this passage in Luke:

Luke 4:16-21: "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. 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, 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, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. 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. And he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your years.”

Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah. However, if you look up the passage that Jesus quoted you will find something interesting. There's a gap:

Isaiah 61:1-2: “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; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;”

If we read 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's no hint that a *vast* amount of time separates the “acceptable year of the Lord” and the “day of vengeance of our God”, but that is the case.

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