

Interpretation of the Bible: Historical Perspectives

1. What is Interpretation?
2. Why interpretation is important?
3. Clement of Alexandria's principles
4. Main "schools" of interpretation
5. Interpretation principles of early Protestant reformers

Interpretation of the Bible

We must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.....

...but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit

2 Peter 1:19-21

Interpretation

Are you already confused by interpretation?!

Dictionary Meaning (Longmans):

- To expound the meaning of (e.g., a dream)
- To conceive of in the light of one's beliefs, judgments or circumstances; to construe.
- To translate orally for a person speaking another language.
- To bring to realization e.g., by performance such as in the arts.

Why is Interpretation so Important?

- Reason 1: We need to ascertain what God has said in Scripture – the true meaning of God's Word. We want to hear God's voice, not man's.
- Reason 2: Human knowledge is relativistic and dubious – it is likely to misinterpret Scripture.

1 Corinthians 2:11-16

...we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.....we have the mind of Christ

Reason 3: Doctrinal differences are based in differing interpretations

Interpretations of the same passages exist between:

- between major groupings (Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox), but also within various protestant groups.
- between Christians and certain Sects (Christian scientists, Mormons, Christadelphians, Jehovah's witnesses—some of these have their own translations of the Bible to help “interpret” it).

Questions: At what point do differences in interpretation become so large that we cannot fellowship with the other groups? How do differences in interpretation of scripture affect our choice of local church?

Initial assumptions prior to tackling interpretation

- *Inspiration.* God is the author of the Bible.
- *Same Bible?* All Christians accept that the 66 books of the Bible are inspired by God's Spirit. Luther rejected books of Macabbees, since RC church used it for justifying praying for dead.
- *Source material -- manuscripts.* We should avail ourselves to the best manuscripts – the most authentic. Several modern translations of the Bible is best for full understanding.
- *Context.* Who was the author of text/passage? When was it written? In what context?

Principles for Interpretation are not new!

In 2nd century, **Clement of Alexandria** distinguished five possible meanings to a passage of (Old Testament) scripture:

- 1) ***Historical*** – an actual event in history
- 2) ***Doctrinal*** – the obvious moral and theological teaching
- 3) ***Prophetic*** – predictive aspects. Typology.
- 4) ***Philosophical*** – c.f. the Stoics, who saw cosmic and psychological meanings in natural objects and people.
- 5) ***Mystical*** – the deep moral and spiritual truth, which is symbolized by the people or events of the passage

Biblical interpretation is still mainly about the balance of these five aspects. Nothing has changed!

Interpretation “Schools”

- A. Literal Schools:** Believe that the real meaning is found by taking the words literally, unless by virtue of the phrase or sentence this is not possible.
- B. Allegorical Schools:** Believe that the real meaning lies beneath the letter or the obvious.
- C. Liberal Schools.** Rationalism, radical criticism, and “educated” views are most helpful for understanding “true” meaning.

C. Liberal Schools

- **Modern Mentality** should govern our approach to scripture, including the validity of the scientific method and ethical standards of “educated” people.
- **Inspiration is redefined.** The God-breathing into scriptures (2 Ti 3:16) is rejected. Rather, “*biblical inspiration is its power to inspire religious experience*”
- **Supernatural is redefined, too.** Liberal schools accept certain unexplainable processes, such as prayer, ethics, pure thought, immortality, but reject others, notably the miraculous and the extraordinary that is not attainable in human knowledge or power.

B. Allegorical Schools

- ***Early church Fathers***, allegorized the Old Testament, since they were seeking to make it a Christian document.
Problems: Ignores : (a) historical record; (b) God's continuous revelation.

Question: Do we do the same by interpreting “desert experiences” and “entry to promised land” to our 21st century experiences?

B. Allegorical Schools (cont'd)

Catholic church in middle ages

- The Scholastics divided the meaning of the Bible between “literal” and “spiritual” (or “mystical”).
- Influence of earlier church fathers -- allegorical interpretations, including meanings that lead to the “Church triumphant” view.
- **Aquinas** taught that scripture may have more than one sense, because God is the author.
- Today, Catholic church teaches that spiritual meaning must be based upon the literal and historical meaning (efforts being made to take away the arbitrariness of earlier teachings).

A. Literal Schools

- ***Jewish literalism.*** E.g., Ezra. After captivity, Jews spoke Aramaic and Ezra literally interpreted ancient Hebrew texts for them.
- ***Syrian School of Antioch*** (2nd century) countered the Alexandrian allegorical school, who were influenced by Greek philosophy (the latter accused the Syrians of interpreting literally “the eye of the Lord is upon you” -- God has actual eyes!)
- ***The Protestant Reformers.***

Luther's 6 Interpretation Principles

- 1) **Authority Principle.** Bible is supreme and the final authority. It is above ecclesiastical authority.
- 2) **Personal Faith Principle.** Faith and illumination are personal -- spiritual prerequisites for an interpreter. *“not by mere reason, but diligently, by prayer and meditation... to seek meaning”*
- 3) **Literal Principle.** *“the literal sense alone is the whole essence of faith”*. The allegorical method of the scholastics was rejected. Luther accepted the primacy of original languages (RC church had accepted the Vulgate—the Latin translation of original scriptures)

Luther's Interpretation Principles (continued)

- 4) ***Sufficiency Principle.*** The devout and competent Christian can understand the true meaning and does not need the official guides of the (Roman Catholic) church. The Bible itself is *sufficiently* clear.
- 5) ***The Christ-at-Center principle.*** The literal principle was not the end: the function of all interpretation is to find Christ.
- 6) ***Law-Grace principle.*** Interpretation requires sharp distinction between law and grace (Context: Catholic church was likened to the Judaizers in book of Galatians). The law was God's word about sin, whereas the Gospel reveals God's grace and power to save.

Calvin's Interpretation Principles

Calvin accepted Luther's principles, rejecting allegorical interpretations. He also added:

- ***Illumination of the Spirit*** – was the necessary spiritual preparation for the interpreter of God's word.
- ***Scripture interprets scripture principle.*** It means listening to scripture, not just reading, as well as: comparing scriptures and understanding context (especially for interpreting prophecy, where he was cautious)

Questions

1. In view of the “Protestant” principles that scripture, not the church, should interpret scripture, should we then discard the unanimous decisions of the Holy Fathers, the ancient Creeds, and the decisions of ecumenical councils?
2. Should we interpret the days in Genesis literally, e.g., accept the “gap theory”? If not, should we allegorize the entire passage in order to make it fit in with science? More generally, should we reinterpret scripture in the light of scientific discoveries (e.g., the earth is not the center of the universe)?