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Oklahoma City, OK

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Research Manager for D. A. Carson,
Administrator of *Themelios*

“These booklets from Rob Plummer are a gift to the church of Jesus Christ. Few can take the fruits of faithful scholarship and serve them in an eminently accessible form for the benefit of the church. Rob Plummer succeeds admirably at this very point. These booklets have my highest recommendation.”

—Jason C. Meyer, Pastor for Preaching & Vision,
Bethlehem Baptist Church,
Minneapolis, MN

UNDERSTANDING
The BIBLE

A Guide to Reading
and Enjoying Scripture

ROBERT L.
PLUMMER

 Kregel
Publications

Understanding the Bible: A Guide to Reading and Enjoying Scripture
© 2013 by Robert L. Plummer

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4316-9

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

“**Y**ou’re ruining my preaching, Doc!”

So exclaimed a student in the front row of my Biblical Interpretation class. This cry of consternation was actually a great compliment to me. Through my instruction, the student had come to realize that he would have to leave behind his haphazard sermonizing in favor of “correctly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Indeed, if we would never distort a dear family member’s words, why would we be less careful with the words of the living God recorded in Scripture?

The purpose of this short book is to explain the essential ingredients of faithful biblical interpretation. This seven-chapter study was condensed from my larger work, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Kregel, 2010). For this new format, the material has been updated and reworked slightly. The main benefit of this condensed layout is to provide a brief, accurate, and affordable resource for individuals, churches, or small groups interested in foundational questions about the Bible.

For persons leading a study based on this book, additional free resources (PowerPoint files, answers to discussion questions, lesson plans, etc.) may be found under the “Resources” tab at www.robplummer.com.

I want to express thanks to Rod Elledge for proofreading and to my former professors, Robert Stein and Mark Seifrid, who obeyed 2 Timothy 2:2.

CHAPTER 1

The Importance of Biblical Interpretation

Appealing to the same Bible, Christians, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses can reach amazingly divergent conclusions. Christians, for example, believe there is only one God, a triune Being (Father, Son, and Spirit) who has existed and will exist forever. Mormons cite verses to assert that the God of the Bible is just one among countless deities and that we ourselves, if male, can also become gods. Jehovah's Witnesses claim it is blasphemy to say that Jesus or the Spirit is a divine person. Even people who claim the name of Christian disagree vehemently as to whether the Bible condemns homosexual behavior. On another level, believing Christians can be puzzled after reading an Old Testament text regulating infectious skin diseases or land redistribution in ancient Israel. How are such texts applicable today? Clearly, it is not enough to simply say, "I believe the Bible." Proper interpretation of the Bible is essential.

What Is Interpretation?

To interpret a document is to express its meaning through speaking or writing. To engage in interpretation assumes that there is, in fact, a proper and improper meaning of a text and that care must be taken to not misrepresent the meaning. When dealing with the Scriptures, to properly interpret a text is to faithfully convey the inspired human author's meaning of the text, while not neglecting divine intent.

The Scriptures Show the Need for Biblical Interpretation

Numerous texts in the Bible clearly demonstrate that there is both a correct and incorrect way to understand the Scriptures. A sampling of these texts with brief commentary appears below.

- *2 Timothy 2:15*: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” In this verse, Paul exhorts Timothy to “correctly handle,” or “rightly interpret” (*orthotomounta*), the word of truth, that is, the Scriptures. Such a warning implies that the Scriptures might be wrongly handled or wrongly interpreted.
- *Psalms 119:18*: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” Here the psalmist pleads that the Lord would allow him to understand and delight in the meaning of Scripture. This appeal shows that the experience of joyful understanding of Scripture is not universal or automatic.
- *2 Peter 3:15–16*: “Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” It is clear from Peter’s instructions that it is possible to distort the meaning of Scripture. And, far from countenancing such interpretive license, Peter says that perverting the meaning of Scripture is a sin of serious consequence.
- *Ephesians 4:11–13*: “It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” If the Scriptures were automatically properly understood by all, there would be no need for divinely gifted teachers to instruct and edify the church. God’s provision of a

teaching office in the church demonstrates the need for people who can properly understand and explain the Bible.

- *2 Timothy 4:2–3: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”* Paul’s instructions to Timothy show that there is a correct way to preach Scriptural revelation, and there will also be distorters of that revelation.

Language and Culture Show the Need for Biblical Interpretation

Most persons who received a document like this from Genesis 1:1:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

or this from Matthew 1:1:

Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ

would immediately recognize their need for a translation of the text. In some ways, translation is the most fundamental form of interpretation. The text in its original language is unintelligible to a new audience, so it must be put into a new language. Yet, the translation of a text is not like the repetition of mathematical rules simply with different symbols. All languages have cultural elements and assumed historical backgrounds that cannot be expressed with the same number of words or exactly parallel grammatical constructions. Thus there is the need for additional study, explanation, and interpretation of a text. For example, in Matthew 1:18, Mary and Joseph are described as engaged, yet in Matthew 1:19, Joseph ponders divorcing Mary. Unlike modern American engagement customs, ancient Jewish customs necessitated a divorce to break a betrothal. Certainly, this concept can be explained, but it is difficult to convey succinctly in a translation. Indeed, even when communicating in one’s native language, there is often need for additional clarification of ambiguous concepts.

A number of years ago, I read a report of a strange practice developing among some young Christians in China. These new believers

felt that it was a sign of true faith to carry with them a small wooden cross. Apparently, on the basis of Jesus' instructions in Luke 9:23 ("If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"), these Christians had come to think that putting a wooden cross in one's pocket was commanded by Christ. To "take up one's cross," however, is a figure of speech, meaning to deny one's own ambitions and desires in submission to the lordship of Christ.

If we are familiar with the different time periods, genres, and anticipations/fulfillments of Scripture, we are better able to confidently approach any individual part of the Bible. Assuming the unified nature of the Bible, as well as the progressive unfolding of God's plans (Heb. 1:1–3), it is clear that a person with an established understanding of God's overarching purposes will be better equipped to understand individual pieces of the story. Of course, time and study are required to attain such greater familiarity with the text.

It is sometimes said that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. This means that the broader biblical context will help one properly understand any individual passage. Without knowing the entire book of 1 John, for example, 1 John 5:6 seems hopelessly obscure ("This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth"). Knowing the broader context of the letter, assuming a unified message in the New Testament, and having some exposure to the cultural background of incipient Gnosticism, we can reasonably conclude that the verse affirms the divine-human nature of Christ, seen both in his baptism (water) and death/resurrection (blood).¹

A proper understanding of the author's original meaning is also fundamental for proper application of the text today. For example, Proverbs 22:28 says, "Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers." As boundary stones were used to mark ancient property lines, this proverb forbids the dishonest acquisition of a neighbor's land. Applied more broadly, the text points to divine displeasure at any sneaky stealing—whether moving ancient stones, engaging in e-mail phishing schemes, or any other surreptitious theft.

1. See John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, rev. ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 19 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 179–82.

The principle (“don’t steal in a sneaky way”) must be distilled from a culturally conditioned command (“do not move an ancient boundary stone”).

Careful interpretation is important because assumed theological presuppositions often can drive interpretations. Through careful biblical interpretation, the student of Scripture can become aware of others’ biases, as well as begin to acknowledge and assess his or her own hermeneutical predilections.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When reading the Bible, are you conscious of the danger of misinterpreting it—that is, of misunderstanding it and distorting its meaning in explaining it to others?
2. How is interpreting the Bible different from interpreting any other piece of literature?
3. Consider other Christians whose interpretations of the Bible you have either read or heard. Whom do you consider the most reliable? Why?
4. What would make you a more faithful biblical interpreter?
5. Are you aware of any theological or interpretive biases you have in approaching the Scriptures? Can you defend having such biases from the Bible itself?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Brown, Jeannine K. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007.

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