

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Biblical Interpretation

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Interpretation is the attempt to help readers and hearers of Scripture understand and apply the biblical text.

Some philosophers, such as Heidegger and Gadamer, have treated interpretation as a comprehensive epistemology—as a way of understanding all reality, not just verbal documents. These writers prefer the term “hermeneutics” to the term “interpretation,” but their program depends on an analogy between the interpretation of texts and human knowledge in general: the world is like a “text” that our knowledge seeks to interpret. But in the context of the doctrine of Scripture, interpretation usually has a more literal meaning: it is the attempt to help students of Scripture understand and apply biblical passages. “Passages” here include biblical language of all levels: words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, books, testaments, and the Bible as a whole.

It is wrong to think of *the* interpretation as a unified layer of meaning submerged beneath the actual text, which people can reach if they dig very deep. It is better to think of *interpretations*, in the plural: responses to readers’ perplexities about the meaning of the words. Interpretations are attempts to answer someone’s complaint that “I cannot understand this.” Note: the problem that necessitates interpretation is not a deficiency in Scripture; it is a deficiency in the reader or hearer.

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Misunderstandings are of many types. One kind is when English speakers, for example, confront the Greek text and say that they don't understand Greek. In response to this complaint, one might translate the text into English. In that case the interpretation is the translation. Another type of misunderstanding occurs when a reader misconstrues the grammar of a sentence. To remedy that, an interpreter might offer a paraphrase or give a lesson in grammar. In other cases, interpretations might describe the historical background of the problem text, or the logical relations between the text and other texts, or the systematic theological concepts joining the problem text to others, or the worldview presuppositions of the biblical author.

Sometimes interpretations can be very practical. A reader asks, "What does this text mean to me?" In response to this kind of question, the interpreter might cite various practical situations of human life in which the text could make a difference. We can see that the task of interpreting Scripture is very nearly identical with the work of teaching.

Though interpretations are responses to human perplexities, it is wrong to suggest that all meaning is in the eye of the beholder rather than being objectively present in the text. Problems of interpretation may not be resolved simply by reporting the reader's response. Rather, there must be engagement to find out what the text itself, as God's own word, requires the reader to think and to do.

In the history of the church, there have been controversies over how literally or how figuratively we should interpret the Bible. Some, as in the Alexandrian tradition, have sought to find multiple meanings in every passage: (1) the literal, (2) the "allegorical" (using the passage as a figure of something far removed from the original context), (3) the "tropological" (using the text to teach moral lessons that may or may not be based in the original context), and (4) the "anagogical" (the fulfillment of the passage in the consummation of history, the new heavens and new earth). Others, as in the Antiochene tradition, have sought to make interpretations as literal as possible so as to avoid importing meaning that is not in the text.

The rule, of course, is that the interpretation must be true to the original, to the possibilities of understanding and application warranted by the text in question. Interpretations should not all seek maximum literality since some texts clearly warrant nonliteral interpretations (for example, the allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21–31). The intentions of the divine and human authors and the actual context of the passage must be our guides in such questions. When a study of a "problem passage" cannot be solved from the original context, often a resolution can be found in other passages of Scripture that take up the same subject matter. Hence the Reformation slogan *Scriptura Ipsius Interpres*, "Scripture is its own interpreter."

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Thus, interpretation, as a form of teaching, must be sound (or “healthy,” 2 Tim 1:13), true to God’s revelation and therefore able to communicate spiritual health to its hearers.¹

¹ Frame, J. (2018). “Biblical Interpretation.” In M. Ward, J. Parks, B. Ellis, & T. Hains (Eds.), *Lexham Survey of Theology*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.