

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Interpretation of Scripture

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Once we receive the Bible, it is our task to understand it, and to do that we must interpret it correctly. So interpretation is the next event on the list I placed in chapter 33, though of course it occurs throughout the process by which Scripture reaches us. Certainly, interpretation is involved at every step along the way: in confessions, theology, teaching, translation, and even making copies (since many copyist errors result from misinterpretations).

The literature on interpretation is vast. Jews and Christians have been interpreting Bible passages for many centuries. But far beyond that, in the modern period, the idea of interpretation has been raised to a new level of philosophical sophistication and abstraction. Such thinkers as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricœur have expanded the notion of interpretation (or *hermeneutics*, as they prefer) to include the philosophy of language and communication. And because philosophy is an attempt to interpret the world, many have identified philosophy itself, indeed all forms of human knowledge, as hermeneutic.

I will not be able here to discuss hermeneutics in such an exalted way. My interest is in hermeneutics in the old, modest sense, the attempt to understand texts. And I limit that in turn, for purposes of this book, to the understanding of biblical language. Further, this discussion will be quite elementary. I only hope to send my readers along the right track.¹

What is interpretation, in this context? We often say that to interpret is to find the meaning of a text. But what is meaning?

We often think of meaning as translation (see chap. 34). Here, to find the meaning of a sentence is to put it in other words that are somewhat equivalent. But why do we do that? In the case of Bible interpretation, why aren't the original words adequate?

¹ For a much more elaborate treatment of interpretation, I recommend especially Vern Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999). Poythress has thought about these matters in great depth, and like me his chief interest is to be in accord with Scripture. Readers of my work will be especially interested in his threefold distinction between classificational, instantiatinal, and associational aspects of language, which leads to a view of meaning that balances sense, application, and import (72–74).

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In chapter 37, I asked a similar question about theology: why do we need theology when we have the Bible? The answer cannot be that the Bible is inadequate in some way. Rather, the inadequacy is in us: we need theology because *we* have a problem understanding Scripture. Theology is the teaching ministry of the church, addressing that need.

Human questions about Scripture are of various kinds: What does this Hebrew word mean? What does John 1:1 mean? What is a covenant? Why did Jesus have to die? Such questions expose in us a lack of ability to use Scripture as God intended. As I indicated in chapter 37, these questions can be understood as questions of *application*. We face a text, but we lack the ability to relate it to our own lives. We may lack the ability to say it in our language, or we may lack the ability to relate it to our business decisions. In all these situations, we are trying to understand how to *apply* Scripture. So I said in chapter 37 that theology is the application of Scripture. In that sense, theology is equivalent to teaching and preaching (chap. 35), and they, too, can be understood as the application of Scripture. We tend to use the term *theology* to refer to an academic discipline, and *teaching* to refer to the ministry of a church. But the two are essentially the same, though they may differ in emphasis and the kinds of questions they typically address.

So now I suggest that interpretation-hermeneutics is also application. As I asked earlier, when we look for the “meaning” of a passage, what are we looking for? I now answer that we are looking for an application.

Questions about meaning are of different kinds. When an English speaker asks, “What is the meaning of this Greek sentence?” a teacher often gives him an equivalent English sentence. John 1:1 begins, *En arche en ho logos*. The teacher tells the inquirer, “That means, ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ ” So we are tempted to say that the English sentence is “the meaning of” the Greek sentence. But that is odd, for in a similar way a French speaker might find the meaning of the Greek in a French sentence, and similarly for all the languages of the world. Is the meaning of John 1:1 to be identified with equivalent sentences from all the languages of the world?

Further, after a teacher gives the inquirer an equivalent English sentence, the inquirer may claim that he still does not know the meaning.² For the English itself may be as problematic as the Greek. After all, it is not obvious what it means for a *word* to exist in the “beginning.” Well, then, we seek another level of meaning: perhaps a theological explanation of the original sentence. We tell the inquirer that the “beginning” is the beginning of Genesis 1:1, the original creation. And we tell him that the “Word” is Jesus

² I’ve often noticed that expressions that are problematic in Greek tend to be equally problematic in English. So switching languages doesn’t necessarily help to clarify meaning.

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Christ (as John 1:14). So Jesus Christ was already present (*en*) when God created the world.

But even then, the inquirer might say something like this: “I understand intellectually what this means, but I don’t know how it is supposed to affect my life. What does it mean *to me*?” So we move to another level of meaning. The teacher may reply, “If Jesus Christ, this Jew of Galilee, existed at the very beginning of creation, he must be pretty special. We need to put our hearts into knowing more about him and understanding who he is and what he has done.”

So now we have three levels of meaning: (1) an equivalent English phrase, (2) a theological explanation of the terms, and (3) a program for our lives. I know of no term that better covers all these kinds of meaning (and more) than *application*. When we ask the “meaning” of a passage, we are simply confessing that we don’t know what to do with it. When we explain meaning in various ways, we are helping people learn what to do with the language, how to apply the language to themselves.³

Now, I used this correlation between interpretation and application in chapter 28 when I considered Bible problems. One problem was the apparent inappropriateness of NT citations of the OT. I argued there that we need to have a broader view of the purposes of such citations. They are not always citations of predictions being fulfilled in the NT age. Sometimes they have the purpose of underscoring narrative parallels (e.g., between the life of Jesus and the history of Israel), of noting verbal parallels of some importance, and so on. We can have a better understanding of these citations if we regard them as applications.

Now, the most common general question that people ask about biblical interpretation is how we can understand texts from times and cultures far removed from ours. At first glance, this task may seem terribly difficult. But some considerations mitigate the problem:

³ As I indicated in footnote 1, Poythress correlates application with sense and import. *Sense* is the meaning of an expression that remains constant through its use in multiple contexts. *Application* is “any instantiation of a passage in word or deed” (Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation*, 73). *Import* is the connection of an expression to other expressions (its contexts), and its distinctive function within that field of expressions. Poythress understands these as perspectively related, so it is possible (as in my discussion above) to understand all meaning as application, or as sense, or as import. My treatment thus simplifies that of Poythress. Of the categories *sense*, *import*, and *application*, I think the latter is the most “practical,” the easiest for most readers to follow.

NT New Testament

OT Old Testament

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1. In God's providence, human cultures are never sealed off from one another. We share with people in the ancient world our common humanity, and there are many ties between their languages and ours, their cultures and ours. There are differences between us and them, but also important similarities. These similarities are even greater between modern believers in Christ and ancient believers.
2. The greater cultural differences are bridged by the continuous existence of the church throughout the centuries. Since the time of Moses, God's people have studied Scripture and applied it to many of their own situations. We are part of that history, that interpretative process. We learn from the previous generation, and the generation before them, all the way back to Bible times. We are not, therefore, faced with a huge, empty cultural gap. That gap is filled with our own brothers and sisters in the Lord who have built bridges from the original composition of the Bible down to our own day. With their help, we can get back to the original cultural settings of Scripture by small steps.
3. Among the teachers whom God has provided to the church (chap. 35) are people gifted with expertise in these ancient cultures and languages. They are not infallible, but they can help us in a great many cases.
4. Scripture itself is the most important guide to its own interpretation, and it is an infallible guide. As WCF 1.9 says:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one⁴), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

WCF Westminster Confession of Faith

⁴ In this parenthetical, the Confession repudiates the "fourfold sense" of the medieval interpreters. These interpreters (and some in the early church) thought that most Bible passages contained a literal sense, an allegorical sense, a tropological (moral-ethical) sense, and an anagogical sense (anticipating heaven and the last days). Often those who distinguished these senses took little care to relate their interpretations to the original biblical contexts, and their nonliteral interpretations were often arbitrary. Actually, however, they weren't always, or entirely, wrong. It is often appropriate, of course, to understand texts literally. But it can also be helpful to draw parallels to apparently unrelated matters (allegory, as Paul in Galatians 4:21–31), to indicate ethical applications ("tropological," as often in the NT; see 1 Cor. 10:6–12) and to draw trajectories ("anagogical" — typology, prophecy) to the future.

While we're looking at WCF 1.9, we should also note the Confession's emphasis that each passage has one meaning, not many. This parenthetical observation is, I think, also a rejection of the "fourfold sense" type of interpretation. It does not imply that the meaning of a passage is never complex. One look

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Scripture interprets Scripture; *Scriptura ipsius interpres*. As believers live in the Word of God, they come to see how the later parts presuppose earlier parts and how the earlier anticipate the later. They see how the Scriptures are bound together in a common worldview, a common symbolic structure, a common ethic, a common history, a common gospel of salvation. The fact that God has inspired the Scriptures means that they are consistent with one another, that they tell a common story, though they are written by many human authors over many centuries. So each part illumines other parts. As we live in God's Word, cultural differences make less difference. The unity of Scripture makes more.⁵

5. Many times in this book I have argued that the ultimate identification of the word of God is supernatural. This was true for Abraham; as we saw in chapter 1, he knew that God was talking to him because God himself gave him the assurance that God was talking. This was true when God led the church to recognize his canon (chap. 22). So I have often noted through this book that our confidence in the word of God in any form is given by God himself. We will see (chap. 42) that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, also gives us grace to understand what God is saying to us. The Spirit illumines the Word and enables us to interpret.

So the difficulties of interpretation do not stand in the way of God's communicating his personal words to his people. We do not understand everything in Scripture,⁶ but we understand much, by God's grace. And what we understand becomes the foundation of our lives, our only comfort in life and death.^{7,8}

at the elaborate accounts of the Ten Commandments in the Larger Catechism makes it clear that the writers of the Confession often found very expansive levels of meaning in Scripture.

⁵ Compare our discussion in chapter 24 about the unity of Scripture.

⁶ See chapter 29, on the clarity of Scripture.

⁷ Alluding to the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1.

⁸ Frame, J. M. (2010). *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (pp. 292–296). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.