Interpretation

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Hermeneutics: How to Read and Understand the Bible

What Is Interpretation?

I. Reading gives us words. But the words must come together in a meaningful way for us to understand and know the message of the words. Interpretation is the process that gives us the sense or meaning of the words. Interpretation is the work of producing understanding from the reading of words, whether this is with your self or in explaining a reading to others.

II. Let us look at the word "interpret." **Interpret.** To expound the meaning of (something abstruse or mysterious); to render (words, writings, an author, etc.) clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain. **Expound.** To set forth, declare, state in detail. To explain, interpret.

III. Let us look at the word "hermeneutics." **Hermeneutics.** The art or science of interpretation, *esp.* of Scripture. Commonly distinguished from *exegesis* or practical exposition. **Exposition.** The action of expounding or explaining; interpretation, explanation.

IV. We must steer between extremes of interpretation being a mystical art or a mechanical science.
   A. The personal qualifications required to understand the Bible make interpretation of Scripture more an art than a science, for the Lord must bless the student to see anything.
   B. No matter how well the rules of hermeneutics are learned and applied, God's blessings are upon those who personally qualify (Matthew 11:25-27; I Corinthians 3:18-20).
   C. Yet assuming God to directly inspire your understanding is to tempt Him against the commandment to search and study the Scriptures (Acts 17:11; II Timothy 2:15).
   D. If God blesses men to understand His Word, then hermeneutics cannot be used with any great degree of profit apart from this blessing (Job 32:8; Ps 119:18).

V. The Scriptures sometimes provide their own interpretation for our benefit without any labor.
   A. Some words from dead languages the Lord chose to keep are defined for us (Matt 1:23; 27:46; Mark 7:11; 15:22; John 1:38,41-42; 20:16; Hebrews 7:1-2). This is properly the work of translation, not interpretation; and we are thankful He translated them for us.
   B. Some expressions we might or certainly would miss are explained for us (Mark 7:2; Hebrews 9:11; I Samuel 17:40; II Kings 10:29; Ezekiel 13:16; Esther 2:12).
   C. From these two examples, we learn about interpretation – the work of explaining words.

VI. Interpretation is necessary for understanding and knowledge, or words remain mere sounds.
   A. Israel's fathers were to explain the meaning of Moses' law to their sons (Deut 6:20).
   B. Solomon taught knowledge by proverbs with interpretation (Eccl 12:9-10 cp Prov 1:6).
   C. The disciples knew the words of Malachi 4, but they did not see John (Matthew 11:14).

D. If Jesus had not explained His parables, not a man would have understood (Matt 13:18).

E. Jesus opened the Scriptures – gave the sense to words that could not be otherwise known – to men who had read and preached it without understanding (Luke 24:27-32).

F. He had to give understanding to know the Bible: reading was not enough (Luke 24:45).

G. It takes a workman in the Word of God to explain Joel in light of Pentecost (Acts 2:16).

H. Paul had to interpret and explain the meaning of his preaching to the most intelligent and educated men in the world, as primary definitions certainly failed (Acts 17:16-22).

I. Paul sat the Jews down and expounded – gave the sense or interpretation – their Scriptures to them, though they had read them thoroughly all their lives (Acts 28:23).

VII. The Bible emphasizes the right interpretation, or explanation, as being key to its understanding.

A. A minister must rightly divide Scripture to avoid shame and rejection (II Timothy 2:15).

1. Unless there are differences in Scripture, there would be no command to divide.
2. To divide something is to separate it into different categories of their own kind.
3. The Bible is full of words and concepts with varying meanings and applications.
    a. Many pacifists reject capital punishment because of Exodus 20:13.
    b. Many compromisers condemn all judgment because of Matthew 7:1.
    c. Just try to understand salvation or Israel without doing serious dividing.

B. Jehoshaphat appointed priests, Levites, and chiefs of Israel for settling controversies, and some of these controversies were within the law of God itself (II Chronicles 19:10).

C. Peter interpreted Psalm 16:8-11 by using logic, comparisons, and deductive reasoning to prove that David's personal pronouns referred to Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22-36).

D. Our more sure word of prophecy needs the right interpretation to profit (II Pet 1:19-21).

E. Paul interpreted the O.T. by showing its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 17:2-3).

1. There is no place in the O.T. where Jesus of Nazareth is identified by words.
2. He opened (introduced arguments) and alleged (proved arguments) the truth by distinctly reading their Scriptures and giving the glorious fulfillment in Christ.
3. The Jews did not and would not have figured this news out by merely reading.
4. Paul caused them to understand their own Scriptures by interpreting the prophetic and highly figurative passages in light of recent history about Jesus.

F. If the eunuch had not met Philip to interpret and give him the sense of Isaiah 53, he would have gone back to Ethiopia with a sincere but ignorant heart (Acts 8:26-35).

G. Paul explained that ordinary reading of words naturally would not get the truth communicated, as the spiritual things of God were expressed spiritually (I Cor 2:13).

H. Who would figure out God's care for oxen in Deuteronomy 25:4 applied to the ministry without Paul interpreting the passage for us in I Corinthians 9:8-10?

I. Nicodemus did not believe in interpretation; he loved primary definitions; so he asked our dear Lord how he could get back in his mother's womb as an old man (John 3:4).

J. The gospel contains many mysteries, which are only learned by God blessing ministers to make these hidden, spiritual facts plain (I Cor 2:7; Col 4:2-4; Rom 16:25-27).

K. Paul wrote things hard to be understood, especially for simple readers, who wrested the words to their own destruction; his epistles need careful interpretation (II Peter 3:16).

L. How can the Word of God be corrupted, as it was by many during Paul's time, if it only requires reading and primary definitions (II Cor 2:17; 4:2)? Who could be deceived?

M. Did Paul exaggerate the difficulty of things about Melchisedec and Jesus, since all they had to do was read and know them by primary definitions (Hebrews 5:10-11)? Shame!

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