



HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE (CONTINUED)

6. Interpretation

After all of the first five steps have been completed – (1) God speaks (revelation), (2) original recipients write it down (Scripture), (3) it gets passed on (original language transmission), (4) collected with other inspired writings (canon), and (5) translation into other languages, there is still one final (and very important) step required to get God’s Word into the lives of individual people – “interpretation.” Once we have a Bible in our hands that is written in our own language, the last problem surfaces - understanding what we read! This is the “hermeneutical” (understanding) problem and every reader must wrestle with this problem – getting the meaning from the text that the author intended.

It won’t do to say that “we don’t interpret the Bible, we just believe it!” because every reader is an interpreter – to interpret means to “give the sense” of what is written. The choice is not whether or not to interpret, but whether one does it well or poorly. Most people who disagree about Biblical teaching think that they “believe and understand” it. However, confusion and disagreement about “what the Bible says” abound and Scripture itself declares that God is NOT the cause of the confusion that exists amongst believers (1Corinthians 14:33).

Philip and the Ethiopian demonstrated the need that people often have for help from others in understanding Scripture (Acts 8:30,31), which is why it is so important for Christian servants to be prepared and anxious to teach, “handle Scripture accurately” (2Timothy 2:15) and avoid “distorting” the message (2Peter 3:16). Just be careful who you ask for help – “fruit-checking” (Matthew 7:15-20) is still a necessity! Much of the division and confusion that exists amongst believers is due to the many ways that human teachers and leaders have misunderstood the Word and then taught their mistakes to their followers (cf. Acts 20:29,30; Rom. 16:17,18; 2Peter 2:1-3). All of us should take a note of warning from this sobering thought!

Simple Foundations – We will touch on a number of items in this last segment, but there are some very basic issues that apply to everyone who reads literature of any kind. First of all, seek to be a good “reader.” Every reader needs to be careful, accurate, insightful, and ready to be taught rather than biased and eager to prove/protect their own preconceived beliefs and inherited traditions. Second, readers must recognize and understand the various genres (types of literature) used (such as law, history, proverbs, riddles, figures of speech, Apocalyptic, etc.), the historical and cultural backgrounds, and the meaning of key words and phrases. Thus, to read well, you must be able to handle basic grammar issues – “who” is speaking, to whom, what action is involved, what is the “reality” of the action discussed (a wish, a command, a statement of current or past reality, a conditional statement dependent on some variable matter, etc.), when did/does this action

take place (past, present, future), is the action an event or an ongoing activity, etc. What is the meaning of key words according to the author's time and usage?

The beautiful thing about language is that it contains grammatical information to explain these issues, but readers must be sufficiently knowledgeable to "pick up" the signals. Without a good grasp of basic grammar and word meanings at the time of writing, later readers (employing their own current cultural background as their frame of reference) can badly distort the meaning of what they read. I have listened to people read Scripture and read a wrong word into it because they were not familiar with the word in the text, so they mentally replaced it with one they did know. How often have people read "immortality" with their eyes, but said "immorality" with their mouth – those two words differ in just one letter, but the meanings are miles apart. If you read a verse and leave out "not" or replace "not" with "now," you can really change the meaning of what you are reading. One printing of the King James Bible even came out with "not" missing from Exodus 20:14 – Words are important, read carefully!

Kinds of literature – The Bible is a library containing a number of different kinds of literature and understanding each of these "genres" can go a long way towards clearing up the message and meaning of the Bible.¹ The Bible begins with *Genesis*, largely a brief historical summary of major people and events stretching over 16+ centuries. Then comes *Exodus* – *Deuteronomy*, a mixture of law and historical narratives about God's revelation and covenant institution with Moses and Israel at Mt. Sinai. *Joshua* – *Esther* provides historical narratives covering Israel's conquest of the land, period of turmoil (Judges-Ruth), the rise of Saul, David, Solomon, the Divided Kingdom, Judah's exile and restoration (1Samuel – Esther). However, other types of literature (genealogies, proverbs, riddles, etc.) show up mixed in with the history.

In what is called the "wisdom/poetry" section of the Old Testament writings, *Job* is a discussion about the mystery of suffering, the *Psalms* are lyric poetry (much of it used in Israel's temple worship), *Proverbs* are observations about life (what to do/avoid, what is good/bad, etc.), *Ecclesiastes* examines life and its experiences to sift out basic lessons and truths. The *Song of Solomon* may be an allegory about the relationship of God and His people as they are tempted by the world and its delights.

The *Hebrew Prophets* called their own generations back to the Sinaitic Covenant, warned Israel and surrounding nations about approaching judgment, and foretold details about the coming Messiah. Prediction of future events is an element in the Prophets, but most of what they wrote was aimed at their own generations – to comfort those afflicted and afflict those who were comfortable. (to be continued)

¹ I would recommend Fee and Stuart's [How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth](#) (Zondervan Publishers) as a great place to start in understanding the types of literature in the Bible and how to approach each.