

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE And WHY WE BELIEVE IT IS GOD'S WORD

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

IT IS frequently remarked that most of our difficulties with the Bible are connected with its interpretation. For example, instead of saying, as is so often done, that Science and the Bible disagree, it would be more correct to say that interpretations of Science and interpretations of the Bible disagree, since Science and the Bible, coming from the same divine source, cannot possibly be discordant.

It is, therefore, of the first importance to give the most thorough consideration to certain principles which should guide us in our interpretation of Scripture.

1. In general the supreme need of the Holy Spirit must be emphasized.

As the Bible is a divine revelation it is essential that the readers should be in spiritual sympathy with its standpoint, accepting its authority and desiring to learn its meaning.

An irreligious man cannot possibly obtain the true idea of Scripture or appreciate the standpoint of the writers.

It is recorded of a well-known American Christian lady, Mrs. Margaret Bottome, that one Sunday afternoon she had been attending a Bible class in New York, and as she returned to her home she found a gentleman waiting for her, a professor in one of the colleges. When she expressed her regret at not having been at home on his arrival and explained that she had been attending the Bible class, a thinly veiled sneer came to her caller's face as he said: "Oh, you believe in the Bible, do you?" Her sensitive spirit at once felt the sneer and the plain inference from the words, and instantly she replied with a beautiful light on her face: "Oh, you know, I have the pleasure of a personal, intimate acquaintance with the Author of the Book!" It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this spiritual standpoint in our approach to the Bible.

2. Then follows the necessity of studying the Book like other books, because the divine revelation has been given to us in book form.

This will mean that we should give careful attention to matters of grammar, of history, and of words, both in regard to their etymology and to their usage. In all this the obvious and natural meaning of the words and phrases should come first.

3. Yet, as we give attention to the Bible from beginning to end, we must always bear in mind its relation to CHRIST, for both Old and New Testaments are so closely associated with Him that he constitutes the key to the interpretation of many of its vital passages.

In the Old Testament CHRIST is prepared for and anticipated in various ways, while in the New Testament he is seen to be manifested in Person, and the results of that manifestation are evident in the life and service of the Christian Church. It will be of real and constant value to keep in mind as we endeavor to interpret the Bible that its dominant note is "CHRIST in all the Scriptures."

4. And yet it is important to keep clear, what has already been emphasized in a former chapter, the progressiveness of the revelation of the Bible. This principle is the key which unlocks many of the difficulties, especially of the Old Testament.

5. In this connection it is also necessary to emphasize another point, which has already been considered, the differences of the dispensations which can be traced throughout Scripture. When we follow Augustine's advice to "distinguish the dispensations," many of our Bible problems find their solution.

6. Then, it is essential for us to distinguish rigidly between interpretation and application, between the primary and the secondary meanings of Scripture.

It will probably be found necessary to apply this principle almost everywhere. To take one instance, perhaps the most familiar: In the headings of the chapters from Isaiah 40 to 66 frequently refer to "the Church" as though the various messages found in that magnificent section had reference to the present dispensation, and to the body of CHRIST.

But when the chapters are considered, it will be found that they have no reference to the Church at all, but to Israel, and this shows the vital necessity of the primary interpretation to Israel being distinguished from the secondary and spiritual application to the Church.

The same principle obtains in the study of such passages as Isaiah 2:2 to 4 and Ezekiel 37.

Whatever spiritual teaching we may derive from these passages for our life today, it is essential to keep in mind that the primary reference cannot possibly be to anything in the Gospel dispensation, but to something that is still future. As before stated - while all Scripture is written for us, it is not all written to us.

The New Testament affords almost constant illustration of the same distinction. Thus, when we read Matthew 10:5 to 10 we see at once that the primary reference was purely local to the Jews, especially when we compare Luke 22:36. So also with Matthew 16:28.

Further, the reference to Joel, chapter 2, by the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) is a striking illustration of this principle, for it is obvious that the prophecy of Joel was not by any means completely fulfilled in what happened then.

See also the reference to John the Baptist in Malachi 4:5. While it is, of course, true as our Lord said, that the Baptist in relation to CHRIST was "**Elijah the prophet**" (Matthew 11:14), yet the text speaks of "**a great and terrible day of the Lord,**" which shows that there is a further and fuller realization to come.

Another illustration out of many is afforded by the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer. When CHRIST taught his disciples to pray to their Father in heaven, "**Thy Kingdom come,**" it seems clear that he was referring to a time beyond the mediatorial Kingdom of the Son, even to the end of all things, when the Son shall have delivered up the Kingdom to the Father (I Corinthians 15:24).

7. Another vital principle of interpretation is the need of distinguishing rigidly between the literal and symbolical views of passages.

The Bible is an Eastern Book and as such it is full of pictures and metaphors. We must take the literal meaning whenever it is possible.

One instance of this is in Luke 1:31-33, where eight statements are made concerning our Lord. As the first five of these are literally fulfilled in the first coming of CHRIST, it seems impossible to doubt that the other three are to be literally fulfilled when he comes again, for it is not natural to take the former literally and then to spiritualize the latter.

On the other hand, there are many obvious instances of the purely symbolical meaning, so illustrative of Eastern life.

Thus, in Psalm 68:16, the mountains are said to leap. In the book of Revelation we have an almost constant use of metaphor and symbol, like the "**sea of glass**" and many other instances. The use of allegory is found in Scripture, as in Galatians 4:22-31, though, as we know, this was based on the historical circumstances of Hagar and Ishmael. It will, no doubt, be difficult from time to time to express the distinction between what is literal and what is symbolical, and yet it is essential that the attempt be made.

8. Closely associated with the foregoing is the frequent use of figurative language in Scripture, and it is important to remember that this form of speech intensifies a fact and does not destroy it.

It means, as we know, that one thing is put for another.

Among the very many illustrations of this, which is peculiarly characteristic of Eastern life, may be adduced the following:

- "**My cup runneth over**" (Psalm 23:5);
- "**My grey hairs with sorrow**" (Genesis 42:38).

There is also the particular form of figurative language known as personification, as:

- "**The blood that speaketh**" (Hebrews 12:24);
- "**Let not thy left hand know**" (Matthew 6:3).

The use of exaggeration is found in the well-known phrase, "**hateth not . . . he cannot be my disciple**" (Luke 14:26).

Then, there are metaphors and parables in almost every part of the Scripture.

But the most important feature of the figurative language found in Scripture is known as type, which has long been described as "an illustration in a lower sphere of a truth belonging to a higher."

A type is a pictorial or personal representation of something that is to come, and the following distinctions have been drawn.

- A parable is an illustration in word, while a type is an illustration in deed.
- A prophecy is a prediction, while a type is an anticipation.
- An allegory is an illustration in the form of fancy, while a type is one in the form of fact.
- A symbol is an illustration which gives a hint, merely suggesting a truth, while a type is an illustration which is fuller and provides a completer view.

It is also said that a parable illustrates a truth that concerns the present, while a type deals with that which is still future, the object of the type being to prepare the mind for the true idea of the coming redemption.

The following principles have been set forth for the proper interpretation of the types.

- (1) Each type suggests some great truth, though the resemblance is internal rather than external.
- (2) Each type is necessarily imperfect in the conveyance of the truth.
- (3) The New Testament is our best guide to the meaning of types.

Beyond this it is essential to take great care, lest we regard as typical what was not intended by GOD so to be.

9. Not least of all in importance is the absolute necessity of studying the context when we are concerned with any particular passage.

It is well known that theological students are often advised when they take a text to

"study the context,
lest the text become a pretext."

Out of the many illustrations which show the necessity of this principle, the chapter divisions of the Authorized Version may be adduced. Thus, if we read John 3:1, only, it is probably difficult, if not impossible, to see precisely what sort of a man Nicodemus was, but if that verse is considered strictly in connection with the three preceding verses, it is not difficult to understand the man's true character at that time.

So, when the little word "**also**" in Luke 16:1 is carefully noted, it will be seen that the parable of the unjust steward is an application to the disciples of what our Lord had said to the Pharisees.

He had been blamed for making friends of the poor and outcast (Luke 15:1, 2), but he vindicated himself, in the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost silver, and the lost son, and then applied the lesson to his own disciples and urged them to make to themselves friends of these poor people.

Other illustrations of this vital principle can be found almost everywhere, but perhaps the most familiar, as it is in some respects the most important for many, is the statement of our Lord at the institution of the Last Supper.

The words, "**This is my body**," are often quoted in certain quarters, and yet CHRIST said more than this, for He did not speak of the bread but of his sacrifice on the Cross:

"This is my body which is broken for you" (I Corinthians 11:24).

These are not the only points to be remembered in connection with the interpretation of Scripture, but they will suffice to show how important it is to give careful attention to the circumstances of the Book, its Eastern origin, its spiritual meaning, and its practical message for daily life.

Note - A very helpful treatment of this subject will be found in a booklet, "*Principles of Interpretation*," by Todd.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the source of most of the difficulties of the Bible? Is it correct to say, "Science and the Bible disagree?" What would be a truer way of expressing it?
2. What is the supreme need to be emphasized in the study of the Bible? Why?
3. How should the Bible be studied? Explain fully. What key is given for the interpretation of the Bible?

4. What bearing has progressiveness of revelation on the interpretation of the Bible?
5. Distinguish between interpretation and application. Give two illustrations of what is meant by this.
6. Between what two views of a passage must there always be careful distinction? What rule may be safely followed? Illustrate.
7. How is figurative language to be interpreted? What is the force of a figure of speech? What is a figure of speech? Give three illustrations.
8. What is the most important example of figurative language? Define this.
9. What principles have been given for the interpretation of types?
10. What important rule is to be followed in all study of the Bible?

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