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## How to Interpret Your Bible

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Topic: Interpret the Text - What does the Text Mean?

Date: September 2, 2018 - Week 4

Memory Verse: Proverbs 30:5-6

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### Class Outline:

#### I. Helpful Definitions

- a. **Interpretation** - the process one undertakes to understand the author's intended meaning for his text.
- b. **Meaning** - the content of a communication which a writer (or speaker) consciously willed to convey by the words (sharable symbols) and grammar (sharable structures) he used.
- c. **Hermeneutics** - the principles or rules of interpretation.
- d. **Exegesis** - the leading out of a text its meaning.<sup>1</sup>
- e. **Exposition** - the act of expounding, setting forth, or explaining.<sup>2</sup>

*"But Scripture is not the Word of God merely because the Church says it is. Scripture's authority is derived from its intrinsic nature as a communication from God to man - it has an authority independent of the Church."<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> For occurrences of this verb in the NT, see Luke 24:35; John 1:18; Acts 10:8; 15:12, 14; 21:19.

<sup>2</sup> *Webster's Universal College Dictionary* (1997), 282.

<sup>3</sup> William David Webster, *Church of Rome at the Bar of History*, New ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 1.

## II. The Purpose of Interpretation



### a. The Aim of Interpretation

1. Arriving at the **meaning** of a biblical text is the focus of Bible interpretation. The student of Scripture applies hermeneutics during the process of exegesis in order to discover the meaning of the text.

### b. The Source of Meaning

1. **“Meaning”** is originated by the author, and therefore, to be considered with his intent in his act of communication.

**“Meaning” = authorial intent**

2. The student must constantly ask one important question: **“What did the writer intend by what he wrote?”** Because the writer was aiming his communication at a specific target audience and their need, another helpful question to ask is, **“How would the original readers understand what the author was saying?”**

### c. Who Controls the Meaning?

1. **the Author?** - Since the meaning of a text is what the author intended the text to say, **there is only one meaning found in each text—the author’s.**

**The author is the only final authority on the meaning of his words.**

- Since there is only *one* intent in a text, there cannot be *multiple, hidden, or unknown meanings* in a text. The author was and remains the authority for the text. Fee and Stuart state this well when they write:

- *“A text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers. Or to put it in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken or written.”<sup>4</sup>*

- The Implication of Single Intent/Meaning- If authorial intent is rejected and the author loses his authority over the text, the basis for evaluating interpretations is undermined. Subjectivity and nihilism (the denial of truth, meaning, and authority) supplants objectivity. If there is not one, unified divine-human intent, but as many intents as there are readers, all then will set adrift “upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2014), 34-35.

<sup>5</sup> Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1883), 205.

Single intent—authorial intent—is the essential component for *objective evaluation* of interpretations. The singularity of intent implies that *objectivity* in Bible interpretation is a necessary pursuit. **Attention must constantly be devoted to identifying and eliminating pre understandings, while submitting wholly to the authority of the author.**

**2. or the Reader ?** - meaning is determined by the reader.

- This is known as the "reader response"

- In this method, the reader now is the main character to which meaning is derived by whatever means the reader uses to assign meaning, ie. imagination, creativity

- This is also been called the "New Hermeneutic", where Dr. Thomas lists one of the current definitions as " seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts." <sup>6</sup>

### III. The Principles of Interpretation



#### a. Submit To Scripture's Authority

1. Depend on Divine Assistance.

2. Submission to the Bible as the Word of God, and prayer for His assistance to understand it appropriately, are the starting points of true Bible interpretation.

3. Isaiah 66:2 – “For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,’ declares the LORD. **‘But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.’**”

#### b. Seek Authorial Intent

1. Abandon Pre-understandings.

2. *The author is the only authority over his words.*

3. Note the apostle Paul’s expectation and confidence in his ability to communicate his intention through his own words:

- **1 Corinthians 14:37** – “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize [ἐπιγινώσκέτω] that the things which I write [ἃ γράφω] to you are the Lord’s commandment.”

- **2 Corinthians 1:11-13** – “For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not

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<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: the New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 20.

in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end.”

- **Ephesians 3:4** – “By referring to this, when you read you can understand [νοῦσαι] my insight [τὴν σύνεσίν] into the mystery of Christ.”
- **2 Timothy 2:7** – “Consider [νόει] what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding [σύνεσιν] in everything.”
- The following observations can be made from these texts: (1) the focus of consideration is what Paul has written; (2) what Paul has written is the faithful expression of his understanding; and (3) Paul’s readers must align themselves mentally with Paul’s understanding.

### c. Interpret Literally

1. Interpret in the Light of Context

2. In the words of Luther,

*“we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man.”*<sup>7</sup>

3. Or in the words of Paul Tan,

*“Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means explaining the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary uses of its language.”*<sup>8</sup>

4. But what about figures of speech?

Remember, however, that literal interpretation *does not* ignore the use of figures of speech. Rather, it is literal interpretation—correctly applied—which *identifies* figures of speech and leads to their proper understanding. Ramm is correct when he writes,

*“Whenever we read a book, an essay, or a poem we presume the literal sense in the document until the nature of the*

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S Watson, LCC XVII (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 221.

<sup>8</sup> Tan, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible*, 15.

*literature may force us to another level. This is the only conceivable method of beginning or commencing to understand literature of all kinds.<sup>9</sup>"*

Why Are Figures of Speech Used?
They add color or vividness.
They attract attention.
They make abstract or intellectual ideas more concrete.
They aid in retention.
They abbreviate an idea.
They encourage reflection.

#### d. Pursue Single Meaning

1. *There is one coherent, unified meaning to every text which never changes.*

2. Consequently, to reject the principle of single meaning is to plunge the process of interpretation into subjectivism and confusion. How many meanings of the text then are there?

**A text can never mean what it never meant.**

3. There is only *one* correct interpretation, and it is the interpreter's responsibility to seek and discover that interpretation. As Puritan theologian William Ames (1576-1633) wrote,

*"There is only one meaning for every place in Scripture. Otherwise the meaning of Scripture would not only be unclear and uncertain, but there would be no meaning at all—for anything which does not mean one thing surely means nothing."<sup>10</sup>*

#### e. Let Scripture Interpret Scripture

1. Always seek the full counsel of the Word of God

2. Interpret Texts in the Light of Antecedent Revelation

3. **Example:** "Day of the Lord" in the Major and Minor Prophets, and its use in 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10.

<sup>9</sup> Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 123.

<sup>10</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 188.

## IV. The Practice of Interpretation



How do we interpret? Ask these 4 Questions:

**a. What did the text mean to the biblical audience?**

1. Be able to write out what the meaning of the passage to the original audience.
2. Every Passage has a point. What is the author saying about God's character, God's plans, Redemption, Man, Sin
3. Example: Paul exhorted the Ephesians to.....

**b. What is the difference between the biblical audience and us?**

1. Look for significant differences between our situation today and theirs.
2. Example: Joshua 1:1-9

**c. What is the theological (timeless) principle in this text?**

1. Most Challenging step.
2. Hint: Instead of looking for significant differences, now look for the similarities between the biblical audience and us today.
3. Example : Joshua1:1-9; or God is Holy

**d. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?**

1. Reflect back and forth between the text and the teachings of the rest of Scripture.
2. Your principle or meaning should fit or agree with the rest of Scripture.
3. You may have to work on your results and always let scripture interpret scripture ( *Item e. from list of Principles*)
4. Example Joshua 1:1-9, or 2 Chronicles 15:2

## What do we call this Method of Interpretation?

### V. The Grammatico - Historical Method of Interpretation

- a. The Principles of Grammar
- b. The Facts of History
- c. It implies the study of the culture, geography, and history of the biblical writer and his original audience.

The Grammatico-Historical Method		
1.	The Principles of Grammar	Literary Context
		Type of Literature
		Words (Lexica)
		Grammar (Syntax)
2.	The Facts of History	Language
		Culture
		Geography
		History

### VI. Put This Method to Work

- a. Homework : Ephesians 1:7-12

Overall Theme: Introduction (1:1-14)

Immediate Theme: Doxology on Saving Grace (1:3-14)

Text Theme: Redeemed by the Son (1:7-12)

Scripture:

Ephesians 1:7-12 NASB

(7) In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

(8) which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight

(9) He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him

(10) with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him

(11) also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

(12) to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

How do we interpret? Ask these 4 Questions:

1. What did the text mean to the biblical audience?
2. What is the difference between the biblical audience and us?
3. What is the theological (timeless) principle in this text?
4. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

*"The more complete and accurate the understanding, the more complete and accurate the obedience, the more complete and accurate the obedience, the more complete and full the joy." - Dr. William Barrick*

we have redemption <sup>(In Him)</sup>  
 through His blood,  
 the forgiveness  
 of our trespasses,  
 according to the riches  
 of His grace  
 which He lavished  
 on us.

In all wisdom and insight  
 He made known to us the mystery  
 of His will,  
 according to His kind intention  
 which He purposed <sup>(in Him)</sup>  
 with a view to an administration  
 suitable to the fullness of the times,

that is,  
 the summing up of all things <sup>(in Christ,</sup>  
 things  
 in the heavens  
 and  
 things  
 on the earth.

↓ (In Him) also

we have obtained an inheritance,

↑ having been predestined

↑ according to

His purpose

who works all things

↑ after the counsel of His will,

to the end that

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# The Originalist Perspective

Written constitutionalism implies that those who make, interpret, and enforce the law ought to be guided by the meaning of the United States Constitution—the supreme law of the land—as it was originally written. This view came to be seriously eroded over the course of the last century with the rise of the theory of the Constitution as a "living document" with no fixed meaning, subject to changing interpretations according to the spirit of the times.

In 1985, Attorney General Edwin Meese III delivered a series of speeches challenging the then-dominant view of constitutional jurisprudence and calling for judges to embrace a "jurisprudence of original intention." There ensued a vigorous debate in the academy, as well as in the popular press, and in Congress itself over the prospect of an "originalist" interpretation of the Constitution. Some critics found the idea too vague to be pinned down; others believed that it was impossible to find the original intent that lay behind the text of the Constitution. Some rejected originalism in principle, as undemocratic (though it is clear that the Constitution was built upon republican rather than democratic principles), unfairly binding the present to the choices of the past.

As is often the case, the debate was not completely black and white. Some nonoriginalists do not think that the Framers intended anything but the text of the Constitution to be authoritative, and they hold that straying beyond the text to the intentions of various Framers is not an appropriate method of interpretation. In that, one strain of originalism agrees. On the other hand, many prominent nonoriginalists think that it is not the text of the Constitution per se that ought to be controlling but rather the principles behind the text that can be brought to bear on contemporary issues in an evolving manner.

Originalism, in its various and sometimes conflicting versions, is today the dominant theory of constitutional interpretation. On the one hand, as complex as an originalist jurisprudence may be, the attempt to build a coherent nonoriginalist justification of Supreme Court decisions (excepting the desideratum of following *stare decisis*, even if the legal principle had been wrongly begun) seems to have failed. At the same time, those espousing originalism have profited from the criticism of nonoriginalists, and the originalist enterprise has become more nuanced and self-critical as research into the Founding period continues to flourish. Indeed, it is fair to say that this generation of scholars knows more about what went into the Constitution than any other since the time of the Founding. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, in a significant sense "we are all originalists" now.

This is true of both "liberal" and "conservative" judges. For example, in *United States Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton* (1995), Justices John Paul Stevens and Clarence Thomas engaged in a debate over whether the Framers intended the Qualifications Clauses (Article I, Section 2, Clause 2 and Article I, Section 3, Clause 3) to be the upper limit of what could be required of a person running for Congress. In *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985), Justice William H. Rehnquist expounded on the original understanding of the Establishment Clause (Amendment I), which Justice David Souter sought to rebut in *Lee v. Weisman* (1992). Even among avowed originalists, fruitful debate takes place. In *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission* (1995), Justices Thomas and Antonin Scalia disputed whether the anonymous pamphleteering of the Founding generation was evidence that the free speech guarantee of the First Amendment was meant to protect such a practice.

Originalism is championed for a number of fundamental reasons. First, it comports with the nature of a constitution, which binds and limits any one generation from ruling according to the passion of the times. The Framers of the Constitution of 1787 knew what they were about, forming a frame of government for "ourselves and our Posterity." They did not understand "We the people" to be merely an assemblage of individuals at any one point in time but a "people" as an association, indeed a number of overlapping associations, over the course of many generations, including our own. In the end, the Constitution of 1787 is as much a constitution for us as it was for the Founding generation.

Second, originalism supports legitimate popular government that is accountable. The Framers believed that a form of government accountable to the people, leaving them fundamentally in charge of their own destinies, best protected human liberty. If liberty is a fundamental aspect of human nature, then the Constitution of 1787 should be defended as a successful champion of human freedom. Originalism sits in frank gratitude for the political, economic, and spiritual prosperity mid-wifed by the Constitution and the trust the Constitution places in the people to correct their own errors.

Third, originalism accords with the constitutional purpose of limiting government. It understands the several parts of the federal government to be creatures of the Constitution, and to have no legitimate existence outside of the Constitution. The authority of these various entities extends no further than what was devolved upon them by the Constitution. "[I]n all free States the Constitution is fixed," Samuel Adams wrote, "& as the supreme Legislative derives its Power & Authority from the Constitution, it cannot overleap the Bounds of it without destroying its own foundation."

Fourth, it follows that originalism limits the judiciary. It prevents the Supreme Court from asserting its will over the careful mix of institutional arrangements that are charged with making policy, each accountable in various ways to the people. Chief Justice John Marshall, overtly deferring to the intention of the Framers, insisted that "that the framers of the constitution contemplated that instrument, as a rule for the government of courts, as well as of the legislature." In words that judges and academics might well contemplate today, Marshall said,

*Why otherwise does it direct the judges to take an oath to support it? This oath certainly applies, in an especial manner, to their conduct in their official character. How immoral to impose it on them, if they were to be used as the instruments, and the knowing instruments, for violating what they swear to support! (Marbury v. Madison)*

Fifth, supported by recent research, originalism comports with the understanding of what our Constitution was to be by the people who formed and ratified that document. It affirms that the Constitution is a coherent and interrelated document, with subtle balances incorporated throughout. Reflecting the Founders' understanding of the self-motivated impulses of human nature, the Constitution erected devices that work to frustrate those impulses while leaving open channels for effective and mutually supporting collaboration. It is, in short, a remarkable historical achievement, and unbalancing part of it could dismantle the sophisticated devices it erected to protect the people's liberty.

Sixth, originalism, properly pursued, is not result-oriented, whereas much nonoriginalist writing is patently so. If evidence demonstrates that the Framers understood the commerce power, for example, to be broader than we might wish, then the originalist ethically must accept the conclusion. If evidence

shows that the commerce power was to be more limited than it is permitted to be today, then the originalist can legitimately criticize governmental institutions for neglecting their constitutional duty. In either case, the originalist is called to be humble in the face of facts. The concept of the Constitution of 1787 as a good first draft in need of constant revision and updating—encapsulated in vague phrases such as the "living Constitution"—merely turns the Constitution into an unwritten charter to be developed by the contemporary values of sitting judges.

Discerning the Founders' original understanding is not a simple task. There are the problems of the availability of evidence; the reliability of the data; the relative weight of authority to be given to different events, personalities, and organizations of the era; the relevance of subsequent history; and the conceptual apparatus needed to interpret the data. Originalists differ among themselves on all these points and sometimes come to widely divergent conclusions. Nevertheless, the values underlying originalism do mean that the quest, as best as we can accomplish it, is a moral imperative.

How does one go about ascertaining the original meaning of the Constitution? All originalists begin with the text of the Constitution, the words of a particular clause. In the search for the meaning of the text and its legal effect, originalist researchers variously look to the following:

- The evident meaning of the words.
- The meaning according to the lexicon of the times.
- The meaning in context with other sections of the Constitution.
- The meaning according to the words by the Framers suggesting the language.
- The elucidation of the meaning by debate within the Constitutional Convention.
- The historical provenance of the words, particularly their legal history.
- The words in the context of the contemporaneous social, economic, and political events.
- The words in the context of the revolutionary struggle.
- The words in the context of the political philosophy shared by the Founding generation, or by the particular interlocutors at the Convention.
- Historical, religious, and philosophical authority put forward by the Framers.
- The commentary in the ratification debates.
- The commentary by contemporaneous interpreters, such as Publius in *The Federalist*.
- The subsequent historical practice by the Founding generation to exemplify the understood meaning (e.g., the actions of President Washington, the First Congress, and Chief Justice Marshall).
- Early judicial interpretations.
- Evidence of long-standing traditions that demonstrate the people's understanding of the words.

As passed down by William Blackstone and later summarized by Joseph Story, similar interpretive principles guided the Framing generation itself. It is the legal effect of the words in the text that matters, and its meaning is to be determined by well-known and refined rules of interpretation supplemented, where helpful, by the understanding of those who drafted the text and the legal culture within which they operated. As Chief Justice Marshall put it,

*To say that the intention of the instrument must prevail; that this intention must be collected from its words; that its words are to be understood in that sense in which they are generally used by those for whom the instrument was intended; that its provisions are neither to be restricted into insignificance, nor extended*

*to objects not comprehended in them, nor contemplated by its framers; — is to repeat what has been already said more at large, and is all that can be necessary. (Ogden v. Saunders, Marshall, C. J., dissenting, 1827)*

Marshall's dialectical manner of parsing a text, seeking its place in the coherent context of the document, buttressed by the understanding of those who drafted it and the generally applicable legal principles of the time are exemplified by his classic opinions in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824), and *Barron v. Baltimore* (1833). Both Marshall's ideological allies and enemies, such as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, utilized the same method of understanding.

Originalism does not remove controversy, or disagreement, but it does cabin it within a principled constitutional tradition that makes real the Rule of Law. Without that, we are destined, as Aristotle warned long ago, to fall into the "rule of men."

With its format of brief didactic essays, the work that follows does not seek to be a thorough defense of originalism against its critics, nor does it choose which strains of originalism or which authorities are to be accorded greater legitimacy than others. But it does respect the originalist endeavor. Each contributor was asked to include a description of the original understanding of the meaning of the clause, as far as it can be determined, and to note and explain any credible and differing originalist interpretations.

It is within this tradition that this volume is respectfully offered to the consideration of the reader.

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