

# A basic list of important principles of interpretation

## The unity of scripture

### **The place of the New and Old Testaments.**

Understand that the OT illustrates and prepares the way for the NT. The NT explains and expounds the OT. [*The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed* attributed to Justin Martyr and Augustine.]

### **All interpretations must be Biblical.**

They must conform to what scripture says elsewhere. They must be in line with true Biblical doctrine (the 'analogy of faith'). See 'context'.

### **Observe the context.**

Perhaps the most important principle that summarizes all others.

- A verse must be interpreted in the light of surrounding verses.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the surrounding passage.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the whole book.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of all the writings by the same author.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the Testament it is found in.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of the whole Bible.
- A verse must be interpreted in the light of Biblical doctrine.

Thus, verses must not be made to contradict what the same author has said clearly elsewhere. For instance, since Paul clearly affirms the election of some by God's predestination (Rm 9:22-23; Eph 1:4-5; 2 Thess 2:13), he cannot also teach universalism in the Gospel message (1 Tim 2:4; Titus 2:11 etc.). These supposedly universalistic passages must be carefully interpreted in their context.

### **Interpret scripture by scripture.**

Do not lean on human methods from any source, especially rabbinical. Let the Bible interpret itself.

### **Interpret the difficult and obscure by means of the clear.**

For example, don't begin to develop a doctrine of eschatology by first making interpretations of apocalyptic prophecies. Rather start with the clear statements of Jesus and the apostles.

### **Interpret brief statements by means of fuller ones.**

A simple and short statement in one place can be given an entirely different meaning by comparing it with a fuller statement on the same subject elsewhere. The teaching on that topic is not regulated by the short ambiguous statement but by the fuller, more carefully written statement. The short statement may be written for entirely different reasons than explaining the topic; such as condemning a practice.

## The unity of doctrine

### **Understand the limits of the verse under consideration.**

What is the scope of the author's intention? What is he trying to teach? Is the verse limited by the writer's purpose in the book?

### **Doctrinal study must collate all the key scriptural mentions.**

When formulating a doctrine, it is vital to examine all the scriptural mentions of that

subject. This may mean evaluating different words that relate to that subject. Thus the doctrine of justification will also require looking at the words, pardon, righteousness, forgiveness, condemnation, judgment, holiness etc.

**Note any limitation.**

General statements are frequently limited in purpose (Prov 3:16, 10:27; Rm 3:10-11; Mk 16:17-18; 1 Cor 7:32). Words that seem to have a universal or eternal extent may well be limited. For instance, some things in the Old Covenant were said to be everlasting (*olam*) but have been cancelled under the New Covenant; e.g. the Levitical priesthood. The Hebrew word 'everlasting' can have set limits and refer to a given period or dispensation.

**Understand and identify progressive revelation.**

There is a development of ideas and doctrine in scripture as God makes them more clear over time. The fulness is usually in apostolic teaching – the final words of Jesus from heaven.

## **The use of special literary forms**

**Carefully note the use of figures of speech.**

For instance, do not take metaphors literally. Carefully observe the limitations of figures of speech. Note: personification, simile, irony, a part put for the whole or the whole for a part etc. The name 'Christ' frequently means Christian doctrine.

**Observe the special rules that apply to poetry and psalms.**

**Observe the special rules that apply to prophetic writings.**

**Observe the special rules that apply to apocalyptic literature.**

**Interpret typology, numbers and symbols with caution and with reference to the rest of scripture.**

Do not let your imagination run away with you. The types are all interpreted elsewhere in scripture, most often in the NT. In narratives, numbers are sometimes rounded up; while in typology and symbolism numbers are very definite.

**Interpret parables in a simple way.**

Most parables make a single point by means of an illustration or story.

**Interpret allegories within the limits of the text.**

Do not go further than the explanation given in scripture.

## **The use of words**

**Note the properties of words.**

Some words can have a different meaning in different passages, or even within the same verse (Lev 6:8; Matt 8:22; Rm 4:25). Some words can have several quite different meanings.

**Understand the meaning of the word(s) in the original language.**

Get sound help from recognised lexicons to do this. Discover the origin of the word. Do not read a modern understanding of a word into the original meaning.

### **Understand the grammar.**

The use of grammatical understanding is fundamental and often enables us to make sense of difficult passages. Grammar is the structure of a language, based upon morphology (forms of words) and syntax (arrangement of words and phrases). For example:-

- Tenses of verbs, or the use of prepositions, can be extremely important.
- Sometimes the definite article is omitted from the translation (e.g. Matt 1:23. the virgin). At other times it is wrongly inserted (Matt 1:20; Lk 2:9).
- Repetition often means superlative degree.
- Be careful to note parentheses (e.g. Gen 13:10; Isa 52:14; Rm 1:2-6).
- A relative pronoun often refers to a remote antecedent.
- When two nouns are coupled with a conjunction, the second = an adjective. E.g. Lk 21:15, mouth & wisdom = wise words; 2 Pt 1:3, life & godliness = godly living; Jer 29:10, future & a hope = a hopeful future.

### **Seek to find any special emphasis in the sentence.**

There is often an emphasis upon certain words in the Greek text.

### **Where is the word or doctrine first mentioned?**

The setting of the first mention of a word often gives important information about the Biblical use of that word.

### **Where is the word or doctrine fully mentioned?**

All words and doctrines have a full mention to explain the Biblical import at some point. Find it.

### **Note the use of idioms.**

There are very many, especially in Hebrew. Some include:

- The words of a messenger often glide into that of the sender.
- Opposite statements must be carefully compared.
- A definite number is sometimes given for an indefinite one.
- Threats are sometimes conditional.
- The order of events is sometimes ignored.
- A difficulty is often spoken of as an impossibility.
- Something is said to be done when it is only promised.
- Plural nouns are often used for the singular.
- 'Cannot' sometimes means 'will not'; 'some' and 'many' sometimes mean 'all'.
- 'Father' and 'mother' sometimes mean 'ancestor', while 'son' and 'daughter' sometimes mean 'descendant'.
- The word 'god' is sometimes used to refer to men, angels, prophets, judges, idols and leaders.
- There are many examples of play on words (e.g. Amos 5:5, 8:1-2) which are usually only noticed in the original language.

### **Understand the use of original language words.**

Hebraisms (e.g. *amen*, *acaldama*, *corban*, *ephphatha*), Latinisms (e.g. *praetorium*, *legion*, *forum*), Syriacisms (*Rabshakeh*, *Tartan*, *Rabsaris*) and Hellenisms (Greek: e.g. *Areopagus*, *ekklesia*, *paidagogos*) are often used in the original text without translation. E.g. *Rabshakeh* means a captain, vizier or chief cup-bearer; *Tartan* is the commander-in-chief or field marshal; *Rabsaris* is a chief eunuch.

### **Understand the use and limits of names.**

- Names often (especially in Hebrew) give an understanding of the person's character.
- Note especially name changes (Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul).
- Some persons have different names (Abiathar = Ahimelech, Abiu = Meshallum, Ahaziah = Azariah = Jehoahaz, Cephas = Peter = Simon = Simeon).
- Some people have the same name as others; do not confuse them. (E.g. there were three Herods, several named Abimelech, Agag, James, Mary.)
- Some places have different names (Sinai = Horeb, Caesarea = Dan = Laish, Jebus = Jerusalem).
- Sometimes there are two places that have the same name (Bethlehem, Cana).

## **The use of background information**

### **What is the cultural background?**

What cultural forms are used? What is the cultural setting that may affect interpretation? E.g. Jewish betrothal is not like an English engagement at all, but as much a commitment as an English marriage.

### **What is the historical background?**

Before starting an examination of any passage, seek to understand the setting in which it was written. E.g. the historical setting of Revelation is persecution by the Roman Empire, but that of the Gospels is toleration by it.

### **What is the theological background?**

For instance, the theological background and the purpose of the writer make a great difference in understanding difficult texts in the letter to the Hebrews.

### **What would the original hearers have understood by the verse?**

Their view is not conditioned by the same things as yours.

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