

# Our Bible Interpretation Should Always Be the Author's Intended Meaning, a One-Way Not a Two-Way Street

By David DeWitt

This is how every communication from any author is understood. Whether we read a newspaper or a novel, a magazine, a text, an email, or a letter from a friend, everybody reads with the question, "What is the author's intended meaning?" Sometimes it is called Literal Grammatical Historical (LGH). Sometimes it is called plain, ordinary, normal, or regular. Sometimes it is called taking it at face-value. Whatever it is called, the point is, we look to author's intent for the meaning of any text. If some progressive teacher tells the class they should take their own meaning to a text, the students should ask the teacher if they should do that with the teacher's assignments and exams.

The Bible is the only literature I know of where people try to conjure up some other way of understanding the text. Nobody attempts to study Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton, Voltaire, Tolstoy, or any other author, allegorically. Nobody attempts to interpret anything else with a TIS (Theological Interpretation of Scripture) inspired view, a two-way street view, or by reading later writings back into earlier ones. For example, to interpret Plato's discussion of democracy in the "Republic," it would not be legitimate to take what we know about democracy today and use it to understand Plato. We could use what we learn from Plato in discussing our democracy, but not use our understanding of democracy to interpret Plato. Everybody who intends to understand any written text always, without exception, asks the foundational question, "What is the author's intended meaning?" There is no logical reason to interpret the Bible any other way.

## What About "Scripture Interprets Scripture"?

This is always a bad idea because it allows us to go beyond the author for the meaning. Other texts written by the same author might help determine the author's meaning, but the "Scripture interprets Scripture" concept allows us to ignore the author altogether. Other Scripture, outside of the passage being studied, can add to our theological understanding, but it should never be used in interpreting the passage being studied.

For example, suppose I asked a knowledgeable Christian, "What is the correct interpretation of Genesis 1:1, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*? Scripture interprets Scripture might bring in John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:16 and say that Jesus was the agent doing the creating in Genesis 1:1. This is theologically correct. But did Moses know about Jesus? Did Moses know about the Trinity? I can find nothing in Genesis, or any of the Pentateuch, which tells me Moses knew anything about Jesus or the Trinity. If we use John 1 and Colossians 1 to interpret Genesis 1, we have ignored what Moses had to say in Genesis 1.

## What Is the Role of the Progress of Revelation In Interpretation?

God did not reveal everything at once. Most of what we know about God was not revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden. We can use what Adam knew, recorded in Genesis 1-3, to interpret a later passage, if it is likely the later author knew about Genesis 1-3. But we cannot use what we know about later passages to interpret Genesis 1-3. If the author of a text of Scripture did not know your theology, even if it is a good theology, then you should not use it to interpret a text. We can sometimes project meaning forward but never backward.

For example, consider Genesis 3. Who tempted Eve in Genesis 3? It is theologically correct to say Satan tempted Eve in Genesis 3. But that is not a legitimate interpretation of Genesis 3. Interpretation must

follow the author's intended meaning, and there is no indication that Moses knew anything about Satan. Moses never mentioned Satan anywhere in the five books of the Pentateuch. When teaching Genesis 3, we should clearly teach that the tempter was Satan because Revelation 12 says so. But when interpreting Genesis 3, we should never say it means Satan tempted Eve, because there is no way to understand Moses had Satan in mind.

#### Why Should I Interpret a Passage Using Less than I Know?

We should develop a theology from everything we know and teach from everything we know, but we should not bring everything we know to interpret a passage. Interpretation must be confined to the author because:

- (1) This is the only way to guard against imposing false doctrine on a passage.
- (2) If we impose a theological concept from another biblical author, we are denying the input of the author we are studying.
- (3) Each passage has something to add to our theology and that can easily be missed if we simply impose our existing theology on the passage.

As mentioned above, we all have the tendency to bring our theology to the text of Scripture. There is no miraculous tool to absolutely prevent us from doing that. But we have an objective way to help ourselves to keep from warping the Scripture into saying what we already believe. We can force ourselves to doggedly, persistently, continually ask nothing more and nothing less than what the author intended to say.

#### The Author's Intended Meaning Must Govern Our Application

[I shall here only mention application in its relationship to interpretation.]

Once we determine what an author intended to say, we can then ask how we should apply that to our lives. But it is a common mistake to read a text of Scripture and jump from observation to application without interpretation. Here is an example:

Jeremiah 29:11 says, "*For I know the plans that I have for you,*" declares the LORD, "*plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.*" It is common to say this is God indicating He has plans for our future and a hope for us believers, today. But what is the author's intended meaning? Jeremiah had no knowledge of our church age, so he cannot possibly be referring to God's future for us. Jeremiah is talking about Israel as a nation. The previous verse says, *For thus says the LORD, "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place"* (Jeremiah 29:10). In this passage, God is telling Jeremiah that the southern kingdom of Israel will be taken captive in Babylon where they will be held for 70 years. But after that, He will return them to the Land which He has given them because He has a future planned for the nation Israel.

#### Conclusion

Observation, interpretation, and application are essential in studying any text of Scripture. The interpretation part of that process should only ask the question, "What is the author's intended meaning?" Other significant questions, like the context, the kind of literature or the progress of revelation, can all be answered by asking the author's intended meaning. That meaning can only be determined by looking at the text itself, not from the text of some other author, and not from our theology brought to the text. The only all-inclusive question for interpretation is:

**"What is the author's intended meaning?"**