

What About... Interpretation

By Dave DeWitt



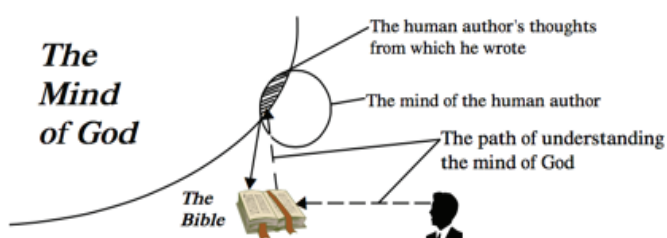
Thesis: Interpretation of any communication is understanding the author's intended meaning. It is simply the way we understand anything any author has ever spoken or written. Nothing spoken or written in words is ever understood any other way.

Eight Principles of Interpretation

1. The correct interpretation is found in the words of the author. Jesus even used the present tense of the "to be" verb to make a significant theological point. When talking to the Sadducees he said, "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I AM the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Matthew 22:31-32).

2. What the author meant is the only correct interpretation. There is only one right interpretation, and it's exclusively that of the author. There are many possible right applications of a passage, but there is only one right interpretation. The Bible is not abstract art where everyone comes away with their own meaning. So don't say, "This is what it means to me."

3. Even though the Bible has a dual (human and Divine) authorship, the understanding is in the mind of the human author. For example, we only know Isaiah 7:14 refers to the birth of Christ because Matthew 1:23 says so. We should not interpret the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 as a type of the death of Christ, because there is no author who says so.



4. The purpose does not determine the meaning. For example, why did the Law command the Israelites to *not breed together two kinds of cattle* (Leviticus 19:19), or not shave their beards (Leviticus 19:27)? I suggest we don't know why, but it doesn't matter because we know what was commanded.

5. Understanding must begin with what is known and proceed to what is unknown. We move from what is biblically clear to the biblically obscure, and as we do, we take the clear along with us as a tool to understand the obscure.

6. The historical culture provides a relevant context if, and only if, it is revealed by the author. The Bible is full of cultural information. For example, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman took on special significance when John told us *Jews have no dealings with Samaritans* (John 4:9). But cultural information from outside the Bible should never be used to determine the meaning, or worse, change the meaning, of a text. For example, there is no basis for saying the eye of a needle is a small door in the city gate of Jerusalem or there was an amazon woman cult in Ephesus which accounts for Paul's comments against women leadership.

7. "Scripture interprets Scripture" is an invalid concept. We should never use one passage to determine the meaning of another. One passage gives direction to and puts boundaries on the possible meaning of another. But the meaning of each passage must be determined from its own context. Context interprets Scripture not other Scripture. For example, it is illegitimate to impose the gospel on passages where the author did not have the gospel in mind.

8. The more immediate the context, the more significant it is for understanding. The final arbiter for all interpretation decisions is the immediate context. The whole context is relevant but the nearer the context is, the more relevant it is. For example, in John 1:4 we read, *In Him was life*. Does John, in this verse, mean "in Him was eternal life"? The problem with that interpretation is, the immediate context deals with Jesus being the Creator. The previous verse says, *All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being* (John 1:3). So our thoughts of eternal life are eclipsed by the immediate context, about Jesus as the source of physical life.

Twelve Implications of Literal Interpretation

Literal interpretation means taking the Scriptures at face value. Here are a few implications of that:

1. The author's intended meaning has the idea of what is in front of the author's mind (what he is thinking about what he wrote), not what is in the back of his mind. Interpretation is not a psycho-analysis of the author's entire thought process.

2. Details of a passage must be taken as literally as the rest of the passage. If details are not literal, why are they there? Details are only figurative if the author means them to be figurative, in which case the literal meaning (the author's intention) is that they are figurative.

3. God's commands were always meant to be taken literally. For example, when God spoke to Moses through a burning bush, He used Moses' language with its grammar to communicate a straightforward message. He did not expect Moses to allegorize His message to find some hidden meaning (Numbers 20:10-11). God always spoke to people in words, never mental telepathy.

4. All biblical prophecy, which has been fulfilled so far, has been fulfilled literally.

5. Intentions and inferences can also be determined from the author. For example, when Moses tells us Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice of Genesis 22, it implies he was not a little boy, but a young man old enough to carry the wood.

6. All literature, including the Bible, is written in different genres (style categories): narrative, poetry, prose, parables, etc. It includes normal figures of speech, metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and symbols. Just follow the form being clearly (most obviously) used in the text. Don't change the method of interpretation just because the genre changes.

7. Never let later Scripture interpret prior Scripture. The New Testament should not be used to interpret the Old Testament. The epistles should not interpret the gospels. The Mosaic Law should not interpret Genesis.

8. Later revelation, or our distance from it chronologically, may enhance our application of a passage. But the meaning can only come from the context of the passage itself.

9. Using the Bible, like any literature, should move from observation to interpretation to application. For example, the commands and promises to Israel (like the Mosaic Law and God healing their land) are not for us, but they can be applied to us, in that obedience yields blessings.

10. The New Testament may quote, refer to, or get principles from the Old Testament, but it never nullifies the Old Testament author's meaning.

11. God created communication. He also created the ability to understand communication. So it would be reasonable to assume that He would have us understand His communication the way He gave us the ability to understand all communication. And that's always the author's intention.

12. Special revelation (what we learn from the Bible) always has priority over general revelation (or conscience and what we learn from scientific observations). It's not good to say "All truth is God's truth" because, though that's technically correct, it does not tell us how we know something from general revelation is true. "Science" is only the best guess at the time.

Conclusion

Literal interpretation is the author's intended meaning. It is simply the way we understand anything any author has ever spoken or written. Nothing spoken or written in words is ever understood any other way.