

The Rules of Interpreting the Bible

From From Biblical Research Study Group

The knowledge of certain rules of interpretation and the observance of these rules when studying the Scriptures is very important and helpful in arriving at a clear understanding of God's Word.

THE FIRST RULE OF INTERPRETATION

I. The first rule of interpretation is to DISCOVER THE AUTHOR THE PEOPLE ADDRESSED AND THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN A GIVEN CASE.

- A. Discover the author.
 - 1. Get acquainted with his home life and parental background.
 - 2. Get acquainted with his community life.
 - 3. Get acquainted with his occupational life.
 - 4. Get acquainted with his general outlook.

- B. Discover the people or object addressed.
 - 1. Discover to whom or to what the words of a given passage are spoken.
 - a. Moses and the prophets spoke directly to Israel, and their outlook as a rule was from the legal standpoint.
 - b. The New Testament writers wrote and spoke of Gods provision to govern the lives and activities of both Jew and Gentile through the grace and truth which He sent through Jesus Christ.
 - c. What was spoken to Israel nationally is not necessarily applicable to the church of God and vice versa. (What Moses and the prophets spoke to the nation of Israel as a people should not be applied to anyone else except Israel. If in a given passage a certain fundamental basic principle is set forth it may be applied to an analogous case. Be most certain that the analogy exists before an application of the principle is made. Compare Jer. 31:31 ff and Heb. 8. The book of Psalms expresses the national hopes of Israel and the spiritual relations of Israel with God. However there are certain Psalms that are of the individual nature-Psalm 1, 23,25, etc.
 - d. Though all wrote of the same (one and only gospel--Gal. 1:8,9) the writers of each Of the four gospels wrote to a different group of people:
 - 1. Matthew wrote to the Jew;
 - 2. Mark to the Roman;

3. Luke to the Greek;
4. John to the Gnostics.
- e. The account of the Acts of the Apostles may have been written to one person Theophilus but the messages of the book are of inestimable value to the church today.
- f. There are some portions of the Scriptures which were not spoke infallibly by the Spirit of God.
 1. Any quotation in chapter 1,2 and 38 - 42 of Job may be handled as the inspired revelation of God but the material found in chapters 3-37 of the book of Job are not to be lifted to the level of a revelation from God. These chapters are simply the inspired record of what men said and did (Job 38:2).
 2. What is said about the book of Job is true with reference to the book of Ecclesiastes, which is the spiritual biography of a man from chapter 1:1 through 12:12.
2. In addition, note particularly whether or not a specific promise or promises given in the Scriptures are made to specific people under specific conditions. (Anyone standing before God on the same ground as the one to whom a specific promise has been made may claim the same promise upon the principle that the Lord is no respecter of persons.)

- C. Discover the life and times of the people involved in a given case.
 1. Note the spiritual conditions that prevail.
 2. Note the political economic and social conditions.
 3. Note the world situation.
 4. Note particularly the laws and customs of the times for these vary in order to suit the lives of certain individuals, under specific circumstances at specific times.
 - a. (for example) New York requires laws to govern traffic at water fronts, Arizona does not need such laws.
 - b. Jews celebrate Passover: Christians celebrate Easter to commemorate the liberty God set in motion in the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

II. The second rule of interpretation is to DISCOVER THE FACTS AND TRUTHS PRESENTED IN A GIVEN PASSAGE AND NOTE THE EXACT WORDING OF THE TEXT.

- A. Note carefully every statement that is made and every fact that is stated in any given passage.

1. "Facts" defined: A fact is that which has been done, a reality, truth (Facts always overthrow theories that are not in harmony with truth.)
2. Collect the facts under the following headings:
 - a. Historical Facts
 - b. Scientific Facts
 - c. Physical Facts
 - d. Spiritual Status
3. Classify the facts which are presented by any text of Scripture under rules of grammar.
 - a. Analyze every sentence for every part of speech used.
 - b. Take note of type of sentence used.
 - c. Note the theme of the paragraph or passage.
 - d. Note whether or not the subject is acting or being acted upon.
 - e. Note the motive if any, which prompted the act.
 - f. Note whether or not anyone is affected by what is said or done.

B. Discover the truths in every passage and analyze them in the light of the great and fundamental principles or truths which control man in every sphere of his activity.

1. The physical world is controlled by laws.
2. The mind is controlled by unbreakable laws and principles.
3. In the field of ethics and religion there are inflexible truths and principles.
4. In the spiritual realm also unchangeable and unvarying principles and truth are operating.

C. Note the exact wording of the text.

1. Words are symbols of ideas.
2. Every word and every group of words sets forth a definite, specific meaning. This is especially true of the Scriptures, which are the profoundest of writings and which are more than the writings of uninspired men.
3. Analyze every word for its true meaning in any given text.

D. The following is a limited application of this rule:

1. The text: Genesis 1:1:2 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

2. Analysis of the text:
 - a. "In the beginning." This is a prepositional phrase referring to that part of eternity which antedated time (time began with creation).
 - b. "God" is the subject and He did the acting.
 - c. The verb "created" denotes to bring into being that which had no prior form or substance.
 - d. "Heavens and earth" constitute the object upon which God acted. (It would take Glenn or Carpenter 13,743 years to travel to the nearest star at the speed of 17,500 mph).
 - e. In the light of Isa. 45:18, "And the earth was waste and void" may be understood as follows: "But the earth became a desolation and a waste."
 - f. "And darkness was upon the face of the deep" implies that there was light here first, but that after a catastrophe darkness enveloped the earth.
 - g. In the light of fundamental truths of the Bible the clause "and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" reveals that the Third Person of the Trinity moved or brooded upon the face of the waters.
3. Exercise: Analyze Psalm 2:1-3.

The Golden Rule of Interpretation

III. The third rule of interpretation is as follows: WHEN THE PLAIN SENSE OF SCRIPTURE MAKES COMMON SENSE, SEEK NO OTHER SENSE; THEREFORE, TAKE EVERY WORD AT ITS PRIMARY, ORDINARY, USUAL, LITERAL MEANING UNLESS THE FACTS OF THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT, STUDIED IN THE LIGHT OF RELATED PASSAGES AND AXIOMATIC AND FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS INDICATE CLEARLY OTHERWISE.

- A. Seek the plain, literal meaning of the Scriptures.
 1. The sum and substance of this most important rule is that one should take every statement of the Scriptures at its face value, if possible.
 2. The following is an analysis of the adjectives "primary," "ordinary," and "usual."
 3. "Primary" emphasizes the original, inherent idea in the term.
 4. "Ordinary" and "usual" are practically synonyms, especially in this definition, "usual" being employed for the sake of emphasis.
 5. "Literal" is used to emphasize the thought that every word must first be taken literally as expressing the exact thought of the author at the time when it was used; and one is not to go beyond the literal meaning of the Scriptures unless the facts of the context indicate a deeper, hidden or symbolic meaning.

- B. Seek the figurative meaning only when the facts demand such an interpretation.
1. Modernism and rationalism are the logical outgrowth of forcing a figurative meaning upon a passage that is clearly literal, or vice versa.
- C. Study every statement of the Scriptures in context. ("A TEXT APART FROM ITS CONTEXT IS A PRETEXT.") Then study the facts of the context in the light of related passages and axiomatic fundamental truths. "...No prophecy of scripture is of private (special) interpretation" (II Peter 1:20); "The sum of thy word is truth" (Psalm 119:160).
- D. Study the following texts and apply the Golden Rule of Interpretation:
1. Zech. 9:9,10;
 2. Jer. 29:9-14;
 3. Ezek. 34:20-24 (Will David be king over Israel?)

(The Golden Rule of Interpretation is one of the most important principles governing us in our interpretation of the Scriptures. If we follow this rule, we shall never go very far wrong; but if we fail to follow it, we shall never go right.)

IV. The fourth rule of interpretation is **THE LAW OF FIRST MENTION.**

- A. The meaning of the law of First Mention: The Law of First Mention may be said to be the principle that requires one to go to that portion of the Scriptures where a doctrine is mentioned for the first time and to study the first occurrence of the same in order to get the fundamental inherent meaning of that doctrine.
- B. When this law is applied the simple precedes the complex.
1. A history of the development of anything will show that it sprang from something in the very simplest form (for example the steamship; airplane; automobile).
 2. In the Scriptures the growth and development of ideas and doctrine might be illustrated by some simple word.
 - a. Throughout the history of a term it may have increased its meaning and undergone certain changes, yet the basic, original, fundamental thought is seldom lost.
 - b. The fundamental concept usually controls or is dominant in coloring every shade of idea expressed by a term in its current usage.

C. Exercises--

1. Trace how the writer of Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2 related their messages to the doctrines which are mentioned for the first time in Genesis 1:2-2:3. These doctrines are as follows:
 - a. The original creation;
 - b. Disaster which overtook the primitive earth;
 - c. The reconstruction and repairing of this damage;
 - d. The beginning of the present human race.
2. Study the doctrine concerning man in his original state and his fall given in Genesis 2 and 3.
3. The first mention of the doctrine of sin is given in chapter 3 of Genesis. Study how the writer of Romans 7:17 developed his message upon the doctrines given in Genesis 3.
4. Study the doctrine concerning sacrifices.
 - a. When man first disobeyed God and tried to cover his nakedness with fig leaves the Lord gave him a covering made from the skins of animals. Why the skins of animals? Why couldn't He have used another material? No answer is given in Genesis
 - b. The account of Cain and Abel bringing their offerings to the Lord reveals that Abel by faith brought his flock and placed such on the altar to atone for sin. This pleased the Lord. See Genesis 4 and Hebrews 11:4.
 - c. Animal sacrifices in the beginning of the history of man were typical of the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary's tree.
5. Study Bible chronology.
 - a. Chronology is to the story of redemption given in the Bible what the skeleton is to the rest of our body.
 1. If all the bones of our body were removed our flesh would be a pile of jumbled matter.
 2. If chronology were removed from the Scriptures, the Scriptures would be a mass of jumble facts.
 - b. Biblical chronology had its beginnings in the book Of Genesis, and God was very careful to give hundreds of dates here and there throughout the Scriptures to show the orderly development of events recorded in the Bible.
 1. Study the six days of creation recorded in Genesis 1.
 2. Study the genealogies of the theocratic line given in Genesis 11.
 3. Observe how God dated events in the Bible from the time of the creation of man, "Anno Homonis" (A.H.).
6. Study the doctrine concerning the wrath of God and His judgments.

- a. Observe how God has dealt with the sinfulness of man on an international scale (Gen 6 to 8).
 - b. Observe how God must deal with the sinfulness of mankind yet in the future (Luke 17:26-30; Rev 19:15).
- 7. Study the Rainbow Covenant which God made with man (Gen 9:1-16) and observe the following:
 - a. The Rainbow Covenant is an everlasting covenant.
 - b. God entered into this covenant with all humanity.
 - c. God's obligation under this covenant, "the everlasting covenant" is never again to destroy the earth water.
 - d. Man's obligation under this covenant is to obey the four provisions of the covenant God laid down for man's benefit (Genesis 9:3-7). (Read Isa. 24:5; Rev 4:3).
- 8. Study the beginning of Hebrew history.
 - a. God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3).
 - b. To confirm the fact that God chose Israel, read Deut. 32:8,9.

NOTE: The Book of Genesis is the seed plot of every doctrine found in the Scriptures for every doctrine is found there in simple form

V. The fifth law of interpretation is **THE LAW OF DOUBLE REFERENCE**

- A. The Law of Double Reference is the principle of associating similar or related ideas which are usually separated from one another by long period of times, and which are blended into a single picture like the blending of pictures by a stereopticon.
- B. Study the following passages of Scripture and determine where the Law of Double Reference was employed:
 - 1. Psalm 16:1-11;
 - 2. Psalm 22:1-31;
 - 3. Psalm 40:1-10;
 - 4. Isaiah 11:1-5;
 - 5. Jeremiah 29:10-14

VI. The sixth rule of interpretation is **THE LAW OF RECURRENCE**

- A. The Law of Recurrence involves the recording of an event and the repetition of the account which gives added details. This principle may be illustrated by the artist who "blocks out the portrait" of a person at the first sitting and adds detail at subsequent sittings.

- B. Study the following passages and determine where Isaiah and Ezekiel employed the Law of Recurrence:
1. Isaiah 11:1-10; 11:11-12:6
 2. Ezekiel 38:1-39:16
 3. Matthew chapters 24 and 25

VII. The seventh law of interpretation is the **LAW OF PARANOMASIA** or A **PLAY ON WORDS.**

- A. Paronomasia consists of our laying down beside one word or idea that has been used a similar one with a little variation.
- B. The following are example of paronomasia:
1. In Amos 8:1,2 there is a play on the Hebrew word "kayits" (translated "summer fruit") and "kets" (translated "the end"). The radicals of each word are the same, with the exception of the "y."
 2. In Micah 2:1-3 there is a play upon the word "evil." Daniel 9:24 has a play upon the words "seventy sevens."
 3. There is a play upon ideas in Daniel 11:36 ff-- "the desire of women" (Messiah God in human flesh), vs. 37; and the "god of fortresses" (military power pictured as idol), vs. 38.
- C. Exercises. Find the paronomasia in the following passages:
1. Isaiah 28:1-8;
 2. John 3:5;
 3. John 6:28,29