

Chapter One

Basic Principles of Biblical Interpretation

There are three fundamental questions that have claimed the attention of thinking people for centuries: Is there a God? If there is, has he made himself known, has he spoken? If he has, what has he said? Conventional answers to these questions are that God does exist and that his existence is evident through what he has said, i.e. by how he has revealed himself. This he has done through the process of revelation, meaning that he has revealed himself through the 'Word', in biblical terms through Christ, the living Word (John 1:1, 14) and through the Bible, the written word. Since nearly all that is known about the living Word comes to us from the written word, it is self-evident that a correct understanding of that word and of the process of revelation itself is imperative. While a more thorough explanation of revelation will be found in a later chapter of this book, it may be noted here that the ultimate intention of revelation is to make known God's purposes for mankind as revealed in Christ. This core belief has been fundamental to Christianity from the beginning and, it might be said, is central to the development of Western civilisation.

At a more practical level the question to be asked is not so much 'Can we still believe the Bible, the written word?',¹ important though

1. A more comprehensive investigation of this seminal question can be found in my book, *Can We Still Believe the Bible? And Does It Really Matter?* (Warburton, VIC, Australia: Signs Pub. Co., 2007; rev. edn., 2011).

that is to contemporary society, but rather ‘Can we understand it?’ The answer to this basic question, which I shall attempt to explain in what follows, is that God’s revelation in Scripture can be understood, but that to be understood correctly the accepted principles of biblical interpretation must be followed. Without the application of these principles, the task of interpreting the Bible may well end in misunderstanding, confusion and error.

It should be remembered that the Bible itself makes it quite clear that correct interpretation is both necessary and possible. The apostle Paul’s injunction to Timothy to ‘rightly divide the word of truth’ is still good advice, since it clearly implies the possibility that the word can be incorrectly ‘divided’. The resulting chaos and division which Paul describes here as being the outcome of incorrect interpretation of the word is further argument for rightly dividing it in the first place (2 Timothy 2:15-18).

The New Testament records the experience of an important Ethiopian government official who, while on his way home to Jerusalem, was reading the book of Isaiah. As the journey progressed, he was joined by the apostle Philip, who enquired whether this man understood what he was reading. ‘How can I’, he replied, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ (Acts 8:26-31, NIV). Commenting on this passage, Barclay says that, according to tradition, the man went home and evangelised Ethiopia. ‘We can at least be sure’, Barclay concludes, ‘that he who went on his way rejoicing would not be able to keep his new-found joy to himself.’²

We might also note the experience of two disillusioned disciples on the road to Damascus after the crucifixion of their leader. It is recorded that Christ himself caught up with them as they walked and talked, chiding them for their disbelief and lack of understanding. Luke’s account of the incident says, ‘He opened to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself’ (Luke 24:27). Barclay regards this as one of ‘the immortal short stories of the world’, describing the ‘bewildered regret of these two disciples . . . men whose hopes were dead and buried’, but then pointing out that when Christ joined them on the road to Damascus the truth became clear ‘and

2. William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, rev. edn (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1976, rev. edn.), p. 69.

the darkness became light'.³ These biblical accounts underline the necessity for clear and competent explanation of Scripture and the application of basic principles of interpretation.

It must not be assumed, however, that the Bible can be understood just as it stands, although this is how it is often read. In his book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* Bernard Ramm emphasises the necessity for interpreting the text rather than merely reading it. Ramm's book begins with a strong apology for hermeneutics, which he calls 'the science and art of biblical interpretation', saying that it is a science because it is guided by certain rules and an art because the application of those rules requires skill.⁴ He further argues that there are two basic necessities for hermeneutics, the first being to ascertain what God has said in Scripture, i.e. 'to determine the meaning of the Word of God'.⁵ The second pressing need for interpretation is 'to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the biblical writers'.⁶

Ramm also warns of the consequences of incorrect interpretation, saying: 'The result of erratic hermeneutics is that the Bible has been made the source of confusion rather than light.' He cites Shakespeare's comment in *The Merchant of Venice*, 'In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it, and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament.'⁷ It seems that the attempt to interpret the Bible and to do so without reference to basic principles both have a long and sometimes undistinguished history. Examples of incorrect biblical interpretation and their misleading consequences include:

- Because the Old Testament Patriarchs practised polygamy (Exodus 21:10; Deuteronomy 21:15-17), it may legitimately be practised today.

3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pp. 244-45.

4. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 1.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 3. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 2.

- Because the Old Testament prohibited usury (Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19), it is not permissible now to earn interest on financial investments.
- Because the Bible comments unfavourably on the suffering of women in childbirth (Genesis 3:16),⁸ it is not proper now for any woman to use medication or any medical procedure to alleviate the pain.

The message is clear, and Ramm says: ‘Sound hermeneutics would have prevented all this.’⁹

Presuppositions in Biblical Interpretation

There are at least four presuppositions that influence the Christian interpretation of the Bible: the belief that God exists, that he has revealed himself, that his purposes for mankind are good and redemptive, and that sin exists and that it has affected the ability of man to think clearly and objectively. Frank Hasel’s examination of presuppositions is essential reading for those who want to understand how preconceived ideas affect biblical interpretation. He has much to say that will help the would-be interpreter from the outset, saying ‘No one is able to approach the biblical text with a blank mind.’¹⁰ Whether we recognise it or not, we are all affected in one way or another by these inherent presuppositions. Hasel further states, ‘Interpreters of the Bible cannot divest themselves from their own past, their experiences, resident ideas and preconceived notions and opinions.’¹¹ Simply being human prevents neutrality and objectivity, a limitation which is difficult for most of us to concede under any circumstances. Hasel’s arguments demonstrate that, in the task of

8. In context, this text has been understood traditionally to mean that Eve’s punishment was a result of her sin and that as the ‘mother of all living’ (Genesis 3:20) she brought the penalty on all future women.

9. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 3.

10. Frank M. Hasel, ‘Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture’, in George W. Reid, *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), p. 27.

11. *Ibid.*

what may be termed presuppositional interpretation, it is impossible to be completely detached from the text under consideration.

Another source of help in clarifying these issues is an article by Graham Stanton in Howard Marshall's scholarly work, *New Testament Interpretation*. Marshall was formerly professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of Aberdeen and introduces his collection of works on interpretation with the following explanation:

The aim of this symposium is to establish the principles and methods involved in understanding the New Testament. The problem of interpreting a passage from the Bible is one to which we would all like to find the key, some simple and easy formula that will enable us to approach any text of Scripture and quickly establish its meaning. Alas, there is no such simple answer, but it is possible to indicate some general principles and types of approach which will enable us to wrestle with the text and come to an understanding of it.¹²

Stanton, professor of New Testament studies at the University of London, entitled his chapter 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism'. It is a thorough examination of the existence and nature of presuppositions and acknowledges that they undergird 'every aspect of the relationship of the interpreter to his text', adding 'An interpreter's work is always affected by human foibles and fallibility.'¹³ Stanton is also justly critical of the way in which the Scriptures have often been interpreted in the past, particularly the older 'proof text' method of attempting to determine the meaning of the Bible. He complains that 'interpretation of the Bible has often involved little more than production of proof texts to support an already existing doctrinal framework',¹⁴ which frequently cites texts taken out of context, having no relationship to the wider text under consideration or to their relationship to each other. Unfortunately, as many older readers of this book will recall, traces of this now outdated method of interpretation still linger in some places and in some minds.

12. I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979), p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Stanton also has much to say about the necessity for correct exegesis of the biblical text, the word 'exegesis' being derived from the Greek *exegeomai*, literally meaning 'to interpret' or 'to declare' and commonly held to mean 'to draw out' or 'to lead out'.¹⁵ Hence exegesis is the interpretive process of drawing out of the text its true meaning, which is already there, as opposed to eisegesis, reading into the text that which is not there. Obviously, there is no place in honest interpretation for eisegesis even though it is not difficult to find evidence of it, particularly among those who, in the interests of maintaining a preconceived view, want to make the Bible say what it does not say.

Presuppositions, then, cannot be avoided. Those wanting to know the true meaning of the biblical text must come to terms with this reality, bearing in mind that presuppositions are not the same as preconceived ideas, and that they are an aid rather than a hindrance to understanding the Bible. In light of what has been said above, we give the last word to Stanton:

The exegete cannot allow either his own personal bias or prejudice or his pre-understanding to dominate the text. They cannot be avoided completely, but they must be no more than a door through which the text is approached. The text is prior: the interpreter stands before it humbly and prays that through the scholarly methods and the questions with which he comes to the text, God's word will be heard afresh. This is the exciting task to which the interpreter is called.¹⁶

This is good and relevant advice and without doubt will stand the tests of time and evaluation.

15. Ibid., pp. 63-68. On the meaning of the original Greek, see Robert Young's *Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible*, 8th edition thoroughly revised, 1939 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), p. 239, no. 19, s.v. *exegeomai*.

16. Graham N. Stanton, 'Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism', in Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation*, (Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1979), p. 69.