



Echo Zoe's Systematic Method of Biblical Interpretation

By Andrew Olson

As Christians, our personal Bible study time is perhaps the most fruitful experience we can engage in in our walk with the Lord. Church sermons, Bible commentaries, fellowship with other believers, and small group Bible studies all work together to help us better understand the Truth of God's word, but ultimately it is our own quiet time in the Scriptures that have the most impact on our understanding of the faith that is given to us.

It is for this reason that it is important for us to consider how we go about reading the scriptures. A systematic method of interpretation that is consistent and logical will guide us in understanding the Scriptures more fully, and aid us in avoiding faulty doctrine that is the direct result of bad interpretation.

While having been a Christian for over eight years now, I am very new to world of Biblical Hermeneutics, and have as yet an elementary understanding of the subject. Nevertheless, I would like to share my own method of considering the Scriptures during my own study time in an effort to assist those who may not even have considered the subject themselves, and also to provide my brothers and sisters in Christ the opportunity to assist me, and anyone else reading this, in improving upon this method so that I (we) may be even more fruitful in our understanding of the Bible.

There are many things that are necessary to consider in order to interpret a given passage of scripture correctly. The following are the various considerations I use when reading scripture so as to best practice proper Biblical exegesis (reading what the scripture says) and avoid Biblical eisegesis (reading what I want the scripture to say).

Consider the Genre - Traditional Evangelical Christians are often criticized by their more liberal counterparts for "taking the Bible literally". Many Evangelicals counter with the question "If we aren't supposed to take it literally, how are we supposed to take it?" The criticism and the responsive question imply that the issue is a matter of all or nothing. The Fundamentalists of the early 20th century fell into problems of bad doctrine because they insisted on always taking the Bible literally; and likewise the contemporary, post-modern, liberals fall into bad doctrine by following the opposite principle, and insisting that scripture is never to be taken literally, that it is a collection of metaphors.

The simple answer to both is that one must begin their system of interpretation by considering the genre of the passage in question. For the most part, historical narrative should be taken literally. Noah really did build an ark to survive a global flood, Jonah really did spend three days in the belly of a giant fish, Abraham really did attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac to God, David really did kill Goliath, and Jesus really did die on the cross and raise on the third day. Parables are stories told in order to hide Biblical truth from the immediate audience (those present when they were originally told), and yet reveal Biblical truth to the followers of Christ (see Mark 4:11-12), such passages clearly should not be taken in the most literal way. Poetry is another genre that is prevalent in the Scriptures, which sometimes should be read literally, and sometimes should be read figuratively. The same can be said of Songs. Prophecy, in my experience, is given literally in the majority of instances, but has it's share of passages that should be taken figuratively (Much of the book of Revelation). Fortunately for us as readers, if a verse is figurative, proper interpretation can be found elsewhere in Scripture (The beauty of Revelation is that proper exegesis will take the reader into every other book of the Bible in order to correctly understand the passages of the Bible's final book.

In some of these instances, we haven't yet answered the question of literal vs. figurative text, but considering the genre is only the consideration in interpretation. If we haven't answered the question yet, we will with further consideration.

Consider the Primary Audience - Another way to word this is to consider the *Historical Context*. Every book of the Bible was written with a primary audience in mind. Much of the Old Testament was written to the nation of Israel (the Jews). The Gospels were written to the Church (as a whole). The Epistles were written to specific churches, with the understanding that they would be spread throughout the Christian world.

Quite often in the Old Testament, God makes promises to a specific group of people. For instance the land grant of Genesis 17, which promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his physical descendants (v. 8); the promise to regather the nation of Israel to the land after the 70 year Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 29:10); and the promise to the wayward sons of Israel to restore their land if they abide by God's requirements of them (2

Chronicles 7:14). Often Christians disregard both the historical context and the literary context in order to claim these promises for themselves. Such readings rob the original audience by diluting the promises made, and lead to disappointment when these promises aren't fulfilled in their own lives.

Likewise, the Epistles were written with a specific primary audience in mind. Often they were written to commend specific church communities for correctly carrying on in the Faith, or to reprove them for falling into bad doctrine or practice. Understanding who that audience was, what the issues they faced were, and why the author stressed specific points is very important in considering the implications of the text and how we are to apply them in our own lives and in our own Biblical understanding. For instance, Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians to address the issue of Judaizers coming into that church and teaching that they must abide by the Jewish Ceremonial Laws in order to approach God properly. Paul exhorted them that they were under a New Covenant, and that the Judaizers were teaching a different Gospel. One example of a teaching that Paul was rebuking was the necessity of circumcision, and says in 5:2 "*Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.*" It would be proper understanding of this scripture to disregard circumcision in regards to believing it necessary to approach God, but improper to create from this a new law forbidding circumcision altogether.

Consider the Literary Context - Perhaps the most obvious consideration we should engage in when reading any text, Biblical or otherwise, is to consider the passage in question in relation to the text around it. Quite often, we can resolve issues raised by dishonest use of scripture by reading the paragraph that it is contained in, and secondarily the paragraphs before and after the verse in question. Often bad doctrine arises from the practice of "proof texting" scripture in order to justify one's position on a given issue. Cults and sects do this all of the time to justify bad doctrine, and good Christians don't let them get away with it. It is important that we do not criticize the cults for doing so while at the same time being guilty of it ourselves. Typically, when believers do it, it is with the best of intentions, or is done because we become so familiar with a verse through its common use in group settings or Christian pop culture, but it is an incorrect interpretation nonetheless.

Consider Whether the passage is Normative or Unique - Another common mistake in Biblical interpretation is to confuse these concepts. Is what is going on in a given passage normal? Does it happen to every other person in a similar circumstance? Or is what is being described unique? This is usually a cause and effect question. Does a given cause always have the same effect?

If the cause is the same, but the effect changes, it is safe to say that the passage is unique. If the effect is always the same, the passage is probably normative.

Consider Whether the passage is

Prescriptive or Descriptive - This consideration is similar to the previous one. If a passage is historical narrative, generally it will be descriptive, that is it is describing something that happens. On the other hand, Biblical exhortation, typically, is prescriptive - it is prescribing what should or should not be done, how we should act, or what we should believe.

Consider the Application to the Church as a Whole

- This is one consideration I haven't seen included as a Hermeneutical on per se, but most good Bible Scholars do acknowledge it one way or another. When reading a passage of scripture and attempting to apply it, we must be aware of brothers and sisters in other times and places and consider whether it could apply to them the same way. The easiest way to understand this is to look at today's American "Prosperity Teachers", who teach that God has a wonderful plan for our lives and that He wants us to have the best of everything: the biggest house, the coolest car, the most beautiful wife, the best children, the biggest bank accounts, etc. Such a theology completely disregards, and even insults, the saints in poor countries under severe persecution. No Christian in North Korea would be focussed on material wealth. Likewise no Christian in America should be focussed on material wealth either. However, every Christian has needed to have their sins forgiven, regardless of when or where they lived.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Reading Contemporary Definitions into the Text.

- A great example of this is from Revelation 3:15-16 {i}I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. The modern understanding of hot, cold, and lukewarm is that hot is another word for 'passionate', cold is another word for 'distasteful', and lukewarm is another word for 'apathetic'. However, if we consider the primary audience (historical context) we see that the letter to the Laodiceans would have been understood much differently by the people of Laodicea. The city of Laodicea had as its source of water a stream that came from the city of Colossae and another that came from Hieropolis. The stream coming from Colossae came from a hot spring, and the one from Hieropolis had as its source a cold spring. Jesus here is saying that their deeds are neither like those of the Christian Colossians nor like those of the Christians in Hieropolis. What it is not saying is "I would rather that you

had a distaste for me than be apathetic.”

Placing One’s Own Theological Grid Over the Text

- This can be the easiest of errors to fall into. We become so attached to our own theological views that we refuse to acknowledge passages in direct contradiction to those views, or we take the wrong view on whether or not a passage applies to us today in order to maintain a view we hold dear. An example of this is from Matthew 7:21-23 *Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.* This passage is explained away by hyper-dispensationalists as not applying to the Church. ...*he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven* is seen as an act of works, and because the Church exists in the Age of Grace, and salvation is not by works, they argue that it can't apply to this present Age. Never mind the fact that this passage is stating that people will try to enter Heaven by their works, and the focus of this passage is Jesus' admonition to be known by Him rather than justify themselves by their works.

Interpreting With Ulterior Motives. - A good example is from Romans 1:26-27 *For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.* This passage clearly speaks of homosexuality, however some will say that it actually speaks of pedophilia. Because they are motivated for one reason or another to dismiss Biblical admonitions against homosexuality, they must reinterpret passages that clearly address it to make it say something it does not say.

Parochialism - Parochialism is the error of holding a doctrine simply because your church or denomination holds that view. One example of parochialism is Matthew 1:24-25 *And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.* Here the Catholic Church view of Mary being a perpetual virgin is the error. Parochialism involves believing an errant doctrine simply because your denomination or church holds that doctrine.

Individualism - Individualism is the opposite error to parochialism. The error of individualism is holding to the view that one could rely completely on the scripture, and

involve no other human being. In other words, you could isolate yourself from the rest of the world and hold a complete and inerrant view of the scriptures with nothing but your Bible to go by. I had this error described to me in a basic hermeneutics class and I think what they were getting at here is that the scriptures exhort us to “forsake not the assembly”, and “as iron sharpens iron, one man sharpens another”, that we need each other, and the Holy Spirit working through each of us to have a clearer understanding of the scripture. It is also worth noting that if you were on a desert island with nothing but a Bible, you would miss much of the historical context in which various passages of scripture were written, the example of the Letter to the Church of Laodicea in revelation 3 being a good one.

Apathy - 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 . . . *that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.* This passage exhorts us to actively receive the truth “so as to be saved”. This one is very common among non-believers. They will quote scripture when it suits them, but they have no interest in understanding that which they quote, let alone the rest of scripture. It is also fairly common in the Church, which is why we have people in Churches who are, “carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14 KJV). They leave it to their Church leadership to learn the scriptures, but have no motivation to learn it themselves.

Cemented Word Meanings - This error is assuming that words always carry the same meaning. Words carry multiple meanings outside of scripture, and it is unreasonable to expect them to always have the same meaning within scripture. I think these examples speak for themselves:

- Luke 12:1 *Under these circumstances, after so many thousands of people had gathered together that they were stepping on one another, He began saying to His disciples first of all, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.*
- Luke 13:21 *"[The Kingdom of Heaven] is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."*
- Romans 1:3 *concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh,*

Failure to Consider the Historical Context - This historical context matter has been mentioned several times already. It is an important consideration that is often and easily overlooked. An example of failing to consider the

historical context that is easy to understand is Romans 14:1-3 *Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.* This passage is talking about the meats sold in the marketplace that were sacrificed to idols. The Christian was not to concern himself with this fact, and was exhorted to eat, as an idol is nothing and has no power over anyone - let alone the Christian. However, without the historical context, it would appear that Paul was talking about the first century equivalent of modern vegetarians.

Attribution

The contents of this article are a summary of Pastor Ryan Habben's class on Biblical Hermeneutics available in ten 90-minute lessons via mp3 download at TwinCityFellowship.com:

<http://twincityfellowship.com/hermeneutics.php>

Failure to Consider the Macro Context -

Sometimes we can read a passage in its immediate context and apply it wrongly because the way we interpret the passage is in contradiction to the greater context of the entire Bible. An easy way to see this is to consider Old Testament vs. New Testament. Genesis 17:11 *And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.* This passage alone would lead Christian men to get circumcised for religious reasons, which Paul and the author of Hebrews addressed in the New Testament. (Circumcision being not forbidden for personal reasons though.) Circumcision was a done as a sign of the Old Covenant, and not given as a command to all believers for all times.

Conclusion

Those of us who were saved in adulthood remember the passion we had for the Word of God when we were first came to Faith. I remember putting aside various obligations I had at the time (like homework - I was in College) to make time to read and devour the scriptures. While that passion should never go away for a true believer, it does tend diminish as we grow in Christ. It is important to stop at some point and consider how to read the scriptures more deeply. The Bible is very rich with treasures that we can miss if we continue to read in the superficial manner that we did as new believers. I read through the New Testament in about six weeks the first time through, and read most of the Old Testament in just a few months. No one could possibly understand the scriptures to the fullest in such a quick reading. I am amazed at the depth and wonder to the scriptures as I understand how to better interpret it and compare scripture to scripture. I see well-known pastors who preach verse-by-verse through the scriptures spending years, sometimes a decade or more, going through a single book, and getting frustrated that they have to skip over points that they would like to share because there is just so much to explore. It renews my own passion to dive into the depths of what the scriptures have for me to learn.