



---

# **TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE**

---

Hermeneutics



PHIL SMITH

## Translation and Interpretation of the Bible

A basic meaning of hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical Interpretation. It is also related to linguistics. It deals with languages and the interpretation of languages. It has to do with the meanings of words, sentences, paragraphs, and written communications. It also involves grammar, placement of words and sentences. The word 'hermeneutics' comes from the Greek 'hermeneuo' which means 'to interpret.' Interpretation has to do with words and the way they are used in one culture and people along with their thoughts changing them into the ideas, words and culture of someone else. It also involves understanding the words of the same culture bringing meaning out into understandable and simpler words and idea. More defined, for hermeneutics specifically, it is to discover what God has said in scripture. All of this is hindered by different cultural histories and also individual histories and background making hermeneutics a learned science. For the Bible, even though we all have prior assumptions in regards to what the Bible says, we must try to be as objective as possible and not allow our preconceived opinions to blind us from understanding the clear meaning of the Bible. Sometimes, it is almost impossible for the preconceived ideas and opinions not to affect us in interpreting the true meanings from text. This is not exegesis; for exegesis is applied hermeneutics. We want a correct interpretation of the Bible as we study it. Such an interpretation is not giving the Scriptures meaning but extracting meaning from the text. Eisegesis is the term used when we read meaning into the Scriptures. Though similar it isn't the same. Word order of every language is different from other languages. For the Bible we have Hebrew and Aramaic which was translated into Greek. In terms of English, we also see that the word order of English is far different than the language of Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. For example, Greek, being an agglutinative language allows word to be in any order with meanings shown in word endings. Besides this, cultural, geographical and historical aspects such as customs, economic practice, and legal systems of any language are a mystery to us. This also takes in the locations of towns, cities and water ways. Plus over the hundreds of years, history changes peoples' way of thinking and doing things. Historical, one language must be interpreted in light of its ancient meanings and culture but this is impossible; therefore translation and interpretation in some respects become guess work. Back to exegesis, as already mentioned, exegesis is the application of hermeneutics and looks at the meaning which is already there.

Additional considerations in interpreting the Bible include aspects such as allegories, literalism, devotional, liberal and neo-orthodoxy. This is on top of ancient culture and meanings. We must understand that there is only one harmonious interpretation of the Bible but yet many applications. Getting to this harmonious interpretation remains a massive job. Applications

involve how we apply something. So we decide on a meaning that we think is true and then we apply it in order to use that meaning. Inspiration is also a key factor in interpretation. In interpretation, are we getting the actual inspired original meaning of the text. This adds a moral and supernatural dimension of God's revelation to us. In regards to literalism, this does not focus on an importance of grammar or spelling alone, nor does it include the belief that words signify certain things. Is literalism even possible? This simply means that we should be satisfied with the literal meaning of a text as what we believe what it actually means unless there's reason not to be. We interpret words and sentences in a normal sense, whatever normality means if that word can even be used here. But, nevertheless, this is the usual practice for interpreting literature. The Bible makes sense when this method is employed. Generally speaking, perhaps apart from the Book of Revelation, we should look at the whole of the Bible from this point of view. The literal interpretation is sometimes refers to as 'historical-grammatical. For example, a literal meaning of something, such as 'I am the true vine' in John 15:1 is the true meaning of the imagery used. Yes, we must relate everything also to imagery of the word itself.

For cultural meanings, culture includes the ways, methods, manners and actions of a people at a certain time in history and also, its geography. This has already been said. It is impossible to separate any language from its culture, for language is written in terms of human experiences and their settings. For the Bible, it is those experiences and settings that are of a time long past. The justification of any interpretation should reflect culture, geographical and historical background which we know is widely separated over hundreds of years. So we are talking about ancient periods of time. Yet, it must be understood that the Bible has been given to us as revelation and that revelation is progressive. We must interpret it as revelation; this revelation is God inspired; Holy Spirit inspired and we can rely on the Holy Spirit in guiding us through interpretation. This same revelation was available to people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as it is available to us today and any interpretation should be measured with past reflection of the doctrinal studies which have already been established. So, ever though culture and time are different, what remains the same is God's Spirit. Know that words of text can be considered bricks which build on each other into units of thought. Remember, we have the words which can be organized and used to form sentences which in turn can be used and organized to form paragraphs and full length stories and histories. The historicity of a word must be understood, for example, its meaning within the context, its historical origins and its use within the Bible and as already said, this is no easy task. We must learn to ask the right questions, such as: who are the characters, what is the central message, and what is God trying to teach us? Other questions include where, when and how. How did it happen, why did it occur? We must also remember

that just because Scripture records something, that doesn't mean that is endorsed by God and we must not build doctrines upon uncertain textual readings.

As this builds, literal interpretations do not mean that there are no exceptions. For we also have figurative language. This relates to the form in which the words are used. It consists in the fact that a word or words are used out of their ordinary sense, or place, or manner, for the purpose of attracting attention. This figurative language can be divided into categories such as omission, addition and alteration. It provides depth, richness and imagery in our conversation with others and it is required in effective communication. Figurative expressions also include similes, metaphors, metonymy, hyperbole, irony, personification, anthropomorphism and anthropopathism. Look at the following meanings:

Simile – when one thing resembles another thing using 'like' or 'as'.

Metaphor – where one thing either acts like or represent another however the two are basically unlike.

Metonymy – this happens when one word is substituted for another word.

Hyperbole – this is a deliberate exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis.

Irony – an indirect ridicule in the form of a compliment.

Personification – assigning human characteristics to objects, ideas or animals.

Anthropomorphism – assigning human characteristics to God.

Anthropopathism – assigning human emotions to God.

There is also what is known as types in the Bible. In John 3:14, we see the serpent as a type and Christ as an antitype. A type is representative while antitype is prefigured by type. This is advanced hermeneutical word-speak here. Facts give concreteness, yet they may also provide a symbolical significance. If so, symbolic meanings must first be understood before their typical meaning can be ascertained. These are pictures or object lessons by which God taught His people concerning His grace and the redemption which He would provide through the Messiah. But know that everything isn't symbolic in the Bible. This is a danger to think that it is. But for such an illustration, look in Hosea 11:1 Matthew 2:15, Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:1-25, etc.

In addition, we have parables where moral truth is illustrated from an analogy. In some cases, Jesus left the interpretation of such parables up to us and we have often got it wrong. Etymological meaning is placed alongside for the purpose of comparison. It is a form of figurative language involving comparisons. The name in Greek for this is 'Parable.' This differs from fable, myth or allegory. For a fable is something trivial or fantastic, while a myth is a popular folklore and the allegory is dependent upon a purpose to make meaning out of something. So parables are teachings of Jesus and His kingdom. They are to be understood in

terms of their relationship to Christ along with any cultural significance such as Jesus being a Jew living in the Palestine of the 1<sup>st</sup> century under Roman domination. Others try to interpret Jesus from the standpoint of just that, a Jew living in Palestine of the 1<sup>st</sup> century under Roman domination and they too have got it horribly wrong. So all parables we see have of a Christological nature. This Christological nature gives us a plus in regards to interpretation. It is a way to look at things, words and sentences and their interpretation. We also know that Jesus most likely spoke Aramaic. Each parable has one central truth which Jesus often interprets himself. In fact, they are true-to-life stories illustrating a truth. Clues to the meaning could come before and after the parable. Any interpretation must harmonize with other contexts of doctrinal principles. Jesus told at least thirty-five parables classified under categories such as:

- Seed parables (the Sower, The Weeds, The Mustard Seed),
- Nature parables (The Fig Tree, The Lost Sheep),
- Servant parables (the Two Servants, the Unforgiving Servant, the Shrewd Manager, the Servant's Reward),
- Father parables (Two Sons, The Prodigal Son)
- King parables (Wedding Banquet, King's Rash War)
- Treasure parables (The Talents, The Shrewd Manager, The Lost Coin)
- Harvest parables (Wicked Vinegrowers, Seed Growing Secretly)
- Women parables (Ten Virgins, Unjust Judge)
- Social parables (Great Banquet, Doorkeeper, Good Samaritan)
- Compassion parables (Lost Sheep, Prodigal Son, Good Samaritan)
- Kingdom parables (The Mustard Seed, The Pearl of Great Price, The Wedding Banquet)
- Judgment parables (The Rich Man and Lazarus, Wicked Vinegrowers or Farmers)

The next point that needs to be visited is prophecy. Even though this also involves translation and interpretation, it also includes certain meanings that may relate to the future. These words are used within their own time frame but was mean to apply even to our day and time. Generally, prophecy is a predictive and peculiar language. It's talking about things in the future from a viewpoint that they've already happened. Sometimes this is called prophetic perfect tense. Some points associated with this include understanding the circumstances around the message, the correct interpretation of the figurative language and how they're fulfilled. Interpreting such language one should seek the primary meaning not necessarily minor details. Prophecy contains figurative language, symbolism and dramatic imagery and it is easy to get it wrong especially if the translator is trying to be too specific. Isaiah uses cosmic imagery in Isaiah 13:9-11 describing the end of the world. How can we possible understand this looking at it from

the technological world we live in. There is also a non-systematic character of prophecy where, for example, the future may appear present or even remote.

The Bible of course contains the knowledge of God and doctrinal teaching rest on the literal interpretation of the Bible, again, if that is possible. And there are many applications of Scripture. A systematic theology provides us with deeper meanings of the text which often represent certain doctrines or generally accepted beliefs. This deeper meaning in the Old Testament has the term 'sensus plenior' associated with it. This actually denotes God's intended meaning in Scripture. To continue, denominational drift is caused by attitudes of indifference or hard heartedness. Interestingly, Jesus repeatedly rebuked the Pharisees for not seeing Him in the writings of the Old Testament. It must be re-iterated that meanings in scripture does not always lie on the surface. This is one of the greatest errors of those who do hermeneutics.

The New Testament refers back to the Old Testament directly and indirectly some four hundred times. For example, in Jeremiah 31:15 we have the account of Rachel weeping for her children. This refers to the deportation of Jews to Babylon but Matthew uses this as a Messianic imagery of those slaughtered in Bethlehem by Herod in Matthew 2:17-18. Often the New Testament will fail to quote verbatim from the Hebrew Bible, but this was common in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. There are specific verses from the Old Testament which are understood to directly predict the person and work of Christ. Isaiah 53, Micah 5:2 compared with Matthew 2:4-6 is one of them.

There are thematic parallels where the gospel writers built upon Messianic motifs such as the Son of David, Son of Man and the idea of Servant in the Book of Isaiah. We also find that a New Testament author will cite the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Old Testament. The Septuagint was a common translation of the time written some two hundred years before the coming of Jesus by a Greek Jews in Alexandria.

Here, I quote Bob Utley on Bible Interpretation: You can understand the Bible. He tells us to:

- I. **ALWAYS PRAY FIRST** (The Spirit is essential. God wants you to understand.)
- II. **ESTABLISH THE ORIGINAL TEXT**
  - a. Check the notes in the margin of your study Bible for Greek manuscript variants.
  - b. Do not build a doctrine on a disputed text; look for a clear parallel passage.
- III. **UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT**
  - a. Read the entire context (literary context is crucial). Check the outline in a study Bible or commentary to determine the literary unit.

- b. Never try to interpret less than a paragraph. Try to outline the main truths of the paragraphs in the literary unit. This way we can follow the original author's thoughts and their development.
- c. Read the paragraph in several translations which use different translation theories.
- d. Consult good commentaries and other Bible study aids only after you have studied the text first (remember the Bible, the Spirit, and you are priority in biblical interpretation).

#### IV. UNDERSTANDING THE WORDS

- a. The NT writers were Hebrew thinkers, writing in Koine (street) Greek.
  - b. We must find the contemporary meaning and connotations, not modern English definitions
  - c. (see Septuagint and Egyptian papyri).
  - d. Words have meaning only in sentences. Sentences have meaning only in paragraphs.
- V. Paragraphs have meaning only in literary units. Check the semantic field (i.e., various meanings of words).

#### VI. USE PARALLEL PASSAGES

- a. The Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible. It has only one author, the Holy Spirit.
- b. Look for the clearest teaching text on the truth of your paragraph (reference Bible or concordance).
- c. Look for the paradoxical truths (tension-filled pairs of eastern literature).

#### VII. APPLICATION

- a. You cannot apply the Bible to your day until you understand what the inspired author was saying to his/her day (historical context is crucial).
  - b. Be careful of personal biases, theological systems, or agendas. Let the Bible speak for itself!
  - c. Be careful of principlizing every verse. Not all texts have universal relevance. Not all texts apply to modern individuals.
  - d. Respond immediately to new truth or insight. Bible knowledge is meant to produce daily
- VIII. Christlikeness and Kingdom service.

To conclude, it takes years and commitment to study the language. Scholars spend their lives studying to prepare themselves for this, working to understand the needed techniques to do their job.

#### References:

Adamson, D. (2001). *Practise Your Tenses*. © Longman Group UK ltd 1990, Essex, England. (62 pages).

*Advanced Grammar – Linguistics from Liberty University*. Downloaded via <http://itunes.apple.com> (8 Lectures).

*Advanced Linguistics – Various Authors at the University of Arizona*, downloaded via <http://www.spu.edu/itunes> (15 lectures).



- Basic Principles of Interpreting the Bible* – by James W. Voelz downloaded from Concordia Seminary at <http://itunes.csl.edu> (5 lectures).
- Bible Interpretation Seminar* – 2009 by Bob Utley downloaded from Bible Lessons International at <http://www.freebiblecommentary.org> (15 lectures with the study of a Textbook).
- Biblical Hermeneutics* by James W. Voelz downloaded from Concordia Seminary at <http://itunes.csl.edu> (29 lectures with notes).
- Center for Applied Linguistics (2005). *Teaching Reading to Adult English Language Learners: A Reading Instruction Staff Development Program*. Office of Adult and Community Education, Fairfax Country Public Schools (250 pages).
- Erkel, D. M. (1999). *A Guide to Basic Bible Interpretation*. (32 pages) from [www.theobg.org/Hermeneutics - Dmerel.html](http://www.theobg.org/Hermeneutics-Dmerel.html)
- Famous Manuscripts and Stories behind Them* by Daniel B. Wallace downloaded from the Centre for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts at <http://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/famous-manuscripts-stories/id446676906> (16 lectures).
- Foundations of Language Study 2100 - Syntax & Linguistics* by Professor Kathryn Bartholomew at Seattle Pacific University, downloaded from <http://www.spu.edu/itunes> (18 lectures).
- Geisler, N. & Rhodes, R. (2008). *Correction without Compromise, 'The Literal Interpretation of Scripture'* pp. 195-207 Eugene: Harvest House. (12 pages).
- Hermeneutics and Bible Study Methods (BE101)* by Mark Bailey from Dallas Theological Seminary at <http://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/bible-study-methods-be101/id386158693> (16 lectures).
- Hermeneutics* by Dr Robert Stein downloaded from The Biblical Training Institute at <http://www.biblicaltraining.org/classes/institute/classes> (29 lectures with notes). This included the study of 'A Basic Guide to Interpreting Bible' by Robert H. Stein © 2011 Baker Books
- Hewings, M. (2001). *Advanced Grammar in Use: A self-study reference and practice book for advanced learners of English*. © Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge UK (300 pages).
- Hogue, A. (2003). *The Essentials of English: A Writer's Handbook*. © Pearson Education, Inc. New York. (443 pages).
- Hughes, R. T. (2004). *Teaching Students to Interpret Religious Poetry*. From *Teaching Theology and Religion*, ISSN 1368-4868, Vol 7, 1 PP 38-44 (6 pages).
- Keane, L. (2000). *Practise Your Prepositions*. Pearson Education Limited, Essex, England. (60 pages).
- Klein, W.W., Blomberg, C.L., & Hubbard, R.L. (1993). *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Klein et al, 'the History of Interpretation'. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville. (43 pages).
- Leech, G., Cruickshank, B. & Ivanic R. (2001). *A-Z of English Grammar & Usage*. © Pearson Education Limited 2001. Harlow, Essex, England. (607 pages).
- Linguistic Analysis taught at Eastwest College of Intercultural Studies* at <http://eastwest.ac.nz> (35 lectures/hours)
- McCarthy, M. & O'Dell, F. (2002). *English Vocabulary in Use: Advanced*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. (315 pages).
- Murphy, R. (1995). *English Grammar in Use: A self-study reference and practice book for intermediate students*, Second Edition. © Cambridge University Press, Great Britain (300 pages).



- Murphy, R. (2005). *Basic Grammar in Use: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Cambridge University Press, New York. (300 pages) .
- Philip, J. C. & Cherian, S. (2007). *Analysing errors of Interpretation*. India: A Calvin research Group Academic Resource. (20 pages) Downloaded 2009 from [http://www.brethrenassembly.com/Ebooks/Apol\\_20U1.pdf](http://www.brethrenassembly.com/Ebooks/Apol_20U1.pdf)
- Principles of Biblical Teaching by Michael Patton downloaded from [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org) (8 lectures).*
- Ramm, B. (1970). *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 'Historical Schools' pp 23-92 Baker Book, Grand Rapids MI. (69 pages).
- Taylor, G. (1995). *Sacred Hermeneutics*. The NTS Library – North-western Theological Seminary (25 pages) from [www.ntslibrary.com](http://www.ntslibrary.com)
- Utey, B. (1996). *Bible Interpretation: You Can Understand the Bible*. East Texas Baptist University (240 pages) from [www.freebiblecommentary.org](http://www.freebiblecommentary.org)
- Voelz, J. W. (2008). *The Holy Spirit and Scriptural Interpretation*. (10 pages) from Concordia Seminary at <http://itunes.csl.edu>