

INTERPRETATION - Introductory Comments

We've all heard the following response when we have tried to share a truth from Scripture - "Well, that's just your *interpretation*!" This retort begs the question of whether there are in fact many valid interpretations or whether there is only one interpretation intended by the author (and the Author). While there is no doubt that genuine believers will differ in their interpretations on a number of difficult passages, the truth is that every passage has only one valid, correct interpretation. God did not stutter nor did He speak in ambiguities. He said what He said and meant what He said, regardless of whether we as finite creatures can agree on what He said. Biblical truth is the ultimate objective truth (Ps 119:160, Pr 30:5) for it is God's inerrant, plenary (complete in every aspect) inspired Word (2Ti 3:16). It therefore behooves all sincere believers to be very careful in our approach to handling and interpreting His precious truth (2Ti 2:15, Acts 20:27, 2Co 4:2, He 5:14; Pr 30:6, Re 22:18, Re 22:19; Dt 4:2, 12:32 Jas 3:1). The apostle Peter issued a stern warning to those who play "fast and loose" with the Scriptures, noting that Paul's epistles contain "some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." (2Pe 3:16)

Webster defines **interpretation** as explaining or telling the **meaning** of something and presenting it in understandable terms. In Biblical interpretation you are seeking to place yourself in the writer's "sandals", setting aside any preconceived ideas, with the ultimate goal being to understand the **writer's original intent**, and God's intent which sometimes goes beyond even the understanding of the human writer (1Pe 1:10, 11, 12).

THE BIBLE HAS ONE INTERPRETATION & MANY APPLICATIONS

Avoid arriving at an interpretation of Scripture based on your personal opinion, popular consensus, gut feelings, the persuasiveness of an argument, and even what you have been taught by other respected teachers (including a specific "brand" of systematic theology). Sometimes the most difficult aspect of interpretation is to "unlearn" prior faulty, flawed interpretations!

Remember that **interpretation** is the bridge between **observation** and **application**. Accurate interpretation is not only possible but it is crucial lest we inappropriately apply the Bible. Acting on what

A synonym for interpretation is **hermeneutics** which is derived from the name of the pagan god Hermes who brought messages from the pagan gods to mortals, "translating" them as it were. The related Greek verb hermeneuo means to bring someone to an understanding of what is conveyed in another language, making it clear and intelligible and thus in a sense "translating" it. **Hermeneutics** is the science (and art) of interpretation, in this case the interpretation of the Bible.

The proper **interpretation** of Scripture has long been a source of debate because many people consider the process too subjective. We've all heard remarks like "Doesn't everyone have their own view?" or "Aren't there many ways to interpret that passage?" The answer in fact is "no" there are not many ways to interpret the Bible. The Bible is not some abstract Picasso painting where everyone weighs in on their opinion as to what message the artist might have meant to convey. In contrast to the relativity so common in our world, it is comforting to know that God offers absolute truth and it follows that every passage of Scripture has **only one intended meaning** and **only one correct interpretation**.

On the other hand, the passage may have many **applications**, but it always has **only one** intended meaning. Therefore the next time you hear the objection, "There are so many interpretations of the Bible I don't think we can be sure of what it means. So why study it?", ask the objector to interpret a verse like John 3:16. You and (they) will usually find that they can understand the passage and that God's one intended message is very clear.

HANDLING ACCURATELY THE WORD OF TRUTH

God has said (application) assumes that you understand what He has said.

Because we are human and now see in a mirror dimly (1Cor 13:12), there will always be Bible passages on which sincere Bible believers (even those who hold to literal interpretation) will not arrive at complete agreement. On the other hand, most of God's Holy Word can be confidently and accurately interpreted.

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

The goal of inductive Bible study is to understand what God meant by what He said through human authors. Paul spoke to this point in exhorting young Timothy to...

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2Ti 2:15)

In this same passage in 2 Timothy, you may have observed that the Greek word for **rightly dividing** literally means to cut straight and was used in ancient times to describe a craftsman cutting a straight line, a sewer sewing a straight seam, a farmer plowing a straight furrow, a surgeon dissecting a straight line (we all hope so!), a mason laying bricks in a straight line or a workman building a straight road. Figuratively the key point is that whatever the endeavor, careful attention is given to performance of the task to assure utmost accuracy.

So how does someone without a seminary background **rightly divide** the Scripture? As you apply the simple principles discussed in the next section, you will learn how to cut the Scriptures straight. Crooked cutting of the Scripture can result in anything from minor errors to total chaos and confusion in the church or at worst a cult.

Some people want to have their ears tickled and therefore try to make the Bible say what they want to hear. We must align ourselves with the Bible, never the Bible with ourselves. Beloved, every time we go to the Scriptures, we need to treat them as a priceless gift from God and **Handle With Care**.

Rightly dividing the Word of Truth (Interpretation) is vital if we are going to

walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good

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work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:10)

Mark it down - the accuracy of your **interpretation** is directly proportional to the amount of time and effort taken to carefully observe the text.

The more time you spend in **observation** of the Scriptures, the less time you will have to spend on **interpretation** and the more accurate will be your **interpretation**.

The less time you spend observing the text, the more time you will have to spend in **interpretation**, and the less accurate will be your result (at least potentially). And without accurate interpretation of the text, there can be no valid **application** of the Word to your life.

Accurate interpretation is possible but does require effort. Paul exhorted Timothy to

Think over these things I am saying, for the Lord will grant you full insight and understanding in everything." (2 Timothy 2:7, Amplified Version).

Finally, the attitude with which we approach interpretation is vitally important. In Isaiah we read of the importance of a **trembling heart**, God declaring...

"My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who **trembles at My word**. (Is 66:2, Is 66:5, Ezra 9:4, 10:3)

LOCKHART'S AXIOMS OF HERMENEUTICS

Rules of interpretations are based upon Corollaries formed from two axioms.

AXIOM 1: THE BIBLE IS A BOOK WRITTEN BY PEOPLE TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY PEOPLE.

1. Each Biblical writing was written by someone to specific hearers or readers in a specific historical-geographical situation for a specific purpose.
2. Each Biblical writing was couched in the cultural setting of the times in which it was written.
3. Each Biblical writing was recorded in a written language and followed normal grammatical meanings including figurative language.
4. Each Biblical writing was accepted or understood in the light of its context.
5. Each Biblical writing took on the nature of a specific literary form (genre = category of literature characterized by a particular style, form, or content - History, Poetry, Narrative, Wisdom, Gospels, Prophecy, Letters/Epistles).
6. Each Biblical writing was understood in account with the basic principles of logic and communication.

AXIOM 2: THE BIBLE IS A DIVINE BOOK

1. The Bible contains **MYSTERY**

Only supernatural can answer: Prophecy, Parables, Miracles, Doctrine

2. The Bible contains **UNITY**

It will not contradict itself (all fits together).

It often interprets itself (study all of it).

Its obscure and secondary passages are to be interpreted in light of clear and primary passages.

3. The Bible contains **PROGRESSION**

Progressive revelation (from partial to complete).

(Source: Clinton Lockhart, Principles of Interpretation, 2nd ed. Fort Worth: S. H. Taylor, 1915)

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

1) Pray

2) Observe

3) Keep Context King

4) Read Literally

5) Compare Scripture with Scripture

6) Consult Conservative Commentaries

1) PRAY

PRINCIPLE: Read the Scriptures prayerfully, open to communication either direction (to Him or from Him) at any and all times during your inductive study.

"But we've already prayed." That's great, but remain in a prayerful attitude throughout your study, ever alert to your Teacher's voice. Don't fall into the trap of performing inductive Bible study as an intellectual exercise, but be open and alert to the heart transformation that is the ultimate goal of your study.

Be like the psalmist who prayed...

Give me understanding, that I may observe
Thy law, and keep it with all my heart.(Psalm
119:34)

C H Spurgeon once said that when he encountered Biblical passages he could not understand, it seemed to him as though God had set a chair there for him to kneel down and worship. He added that...

I have always found that the meaning of a text can be better learned by prayer than in any other way.

2) OBSERVE WITH A PURPOSE

PRINCIPLE: Practice reading the Scriptures actively (not passively), repeatedly, interrogatively, acquisitively and purposefully.



J C Ryle said, "We must read our Bibles like men digging for hidden treasure."

The value of careful observation cannot be overemphasized. Weak and inaccurate interpretation inevitably

results from superficial or careless observation. We must immerse ourselves in the book we are studying by repeated readings of the whole book. If we are reading about the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 on Pentecost, we need to "put our sandals on", so to speak, and imagine ourselves as bystanders to the incredible scene in Jerusalem. Now you're reading with your mind actively engaged!

Think of the passage you are reading as analogous to one of the center pieces from the jigsaw puzzle depicted above. How do handle one of the odd-shaped puzzle pieces? Don't you usually search carefully for the more obvious pieces...the corner pieces and straight edges? Well, that's the same approach you are going to take as you begin to observe a book or a chapter. You observe with a **Focus On The Obvious (F.O.T.O.)** If you remember the old television program, **Dragnet**, Jack Webb's famous line was "*Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts!*" That's the approach we want to take in inductive study as we are seeking to establish the context.

If you have ever consulted one of **Dr. Warren Wiersbe's** commentaries, you know that he invariably has incredible insights. How did he arrive at such insightful interpretations? Well, before he writes a commentary on a passage, Dr. Wiersbe carefully reads and re-reads the entire book (up to 50 times) before he feels competent to even begin interpretation of the text! He may not refer to his approach as inductive Bible study, but that is in fact

what he is doing as he repetitively and carefully observes the text and begins to understand the overall **context** (the corner and straight pieces of the puzzle). The great Bible expositor G Campbell Morgan was known for his powerful sermons. When asked for the secret of his insightful exposition, he replied that he made it a habit to read the chapter or section of Scripture on which he was preaching some 30-40 times before he preached the sermon.

In a similar way, as you read and **observe** with a **purpose** you are in essence reading and re-reading the passage. For example in an epistle, you might read through the chapter or book, observing and marking the **author**. The next time you might re-read and mark the **recipient(s)**. The third time you might read observing and marking **key words** and/or **key phrases** (including synonyms). Each time you mark the text, you should pause and ask as many as the 5 W's or H questions (see note) as possible. As you practice this style of prayerful, purposeful reading, you are becoming familiar with the content of the text and you are beginning to establish the context (see next principle).

It takes some practice to make the interrogative mindset a habit, but over time you will become more comfortable with the **5 W's and H questions**. You will be amazed at how competent the Scripture is at answering your questions, especially as you hone your interrogative skills! You will also begin to experience the joy of discovering Truth on your own in a way that you had previously thought possible only for those who had been to seminary. You will also notice that as you **observe** and interrogate the text, the **interpretation** (and application) begins to "flow" naturally from your observations and especially as you ask questions.

Keep in mind that although careful observation always precedes accurate interpretation, observation does not inevitably lead to correct interpretation.

3) KEEP CONTEXT KING

PRINCIPLE: Context always rules in interpretation, whether you are studying a single word, one verse or a larger section of Scripture. Always check to see who the "neighbors" are!

Context is the setting in which something "dwells". If you take a fish out of water, it doesn't function well! This principle holds for any passage of Scripture which is taken out of context.

In simple terms, **context** is that which goes with the text, the "neighbors" so to speak -- that which comes before and after.

Webster says that "**context**" is "*the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning.*"

The English word **context** is derived from **com** = with and **texere** = to weave or braid, and thus means woven together!



What happens when you remove a piece of thread from a garment? It doesn't function well and it does not fulfill the weaver's intended purpose! It was woven together with other threads in order to make a garment, even as a specific Biblical passage is woven together with other verses to make a context. Any time we break into the middle of a book, a chapter or a paragraph, we need to look at the surrounding **context**. When you interpret Scripture, whether it is a single word, a verse or a paragraph, you must **always** consider the Scripture in light of the surrounding verses, chapters and book in which it is found and finally in the context of the entire Bible. Your interpretation should **never** contradict the context of the book, chapter or paragraph you are studying. If you ignore context, the accuracy of your interpretation will suffer and may even be "spiritually dangerous." Remember that a **text** taken out of **context** potentially can become a **pretext** (a fictitious or false reason given in order to conceal the real one or given in order to justify an action - Example = *"He gave plausible reasons for his conduct, but these were only a pretext to conceal his real motives."* **You've never done that have you?**). It follows that using Scriptural pretext is a major "tool" of the cults or non-Biblical systems of belief about life, death, eternity, etc. If you fail to read (hear) the verse in context it's like the all too typical experience with cell phones where you may

hear every other phrase or word which can lead to a completely inaccurate understanding of what the other person has said which can potentially have dire consequences!

HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

We are prone to interpret everything we read in terms of our modern Western culture, since the "here and now" is where we live. The **Historical and Cultural Context** answers questions like

- What did the specific passage mean to the people to whom it was spoken or written?
- What were the times like?
- What was the attitude toward Christianity?
- When is this taking place?
- What else was taking place in the world at this time?
- What were some of the social and political influences on the writer and on those to whom he was writing?

You have to understand the **historical** setting to best understand the writer's original intent. In other words, try to put yourself into the **historical** and **cultural** context of the author and the audience he was addressing. The epistles for example were written to a particular group (e.g., churches at Philippi, Colossae, etc) at a particular time in history (first century in case of the churches), both factors which will contribute to the accuracy of one's interpretation. Although you can discern various aspects of the historical and cultural context from careful observation of the book, you will probably have to use secondary resources to discover other aspects of historical or cultural context that might help your interpretation. Although William Barclay's commentaries are not always thoroughly conservative and evangelical, Barclay frequently gives excellent historical/cultural descriptions that are not readily available elsewhere.

SCRIPTURE NEVER CONTRADICTS SCRIPTURE!

Remember: Never attempt to interpret a verse by itself but at the very minimum take a moment and examine the paragraph in which it is found. Not only is the immediate context (paragraph, chapter and book) surrounding a verse important, but the context

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of the entire Bible is also crucial in understanding the meaning of a particular passage. **Why?** Because **Scripture never contradicts itself**, so if we arrive at an interpretation in one passage that contradicts truth in another passage, we have an inaccurate interpretation. In short **all** Scripture is the context in which any Scripture is to be considered and applied, for God always agrees with Himself!

Have you ever been misquoted because your quote was yanked "**out of context**"? Then you understand how significant **context** is to accurate communication.

It is surprising that although we use "**context**" in everyday communication, we often tend to disregard this crucial role of interpreting in **context** when studying the Scriptures. We need to discipline ourselves and make a habit of always consulting the verses before and after that favorite verse, so that we can be sure we don't take the passage out of context.

Even experienced Bible students are often surprised to see what a familiar Bible quotation means when understood in light of its immediate setting. Difficult problems of understanding often evaporate simply by determining how a text is framed by the main idea running through that section of Scripture. As alluded to earlier, reading one passage in the Bible by itself can be like looking at a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. As you analyze it, you see elements of form and color, but you realize that it is only one essential part of the "big picture". Because the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament are all "chapters" of one Book, those who live by the whole counsel of God will increasingly be enabled by the Holy Spirit to see each individual part in light of the whole.

Remember context is king in interpretation and a text out of context is at best a "**pretext**" and even worse may be a "**proof text**" or a text of Scripture quoted to prove, defend or support a specific doctrine or belief. Every major cult is founded on a violation of this principle of failing to handle in context as illustrated in the following exercise.

The interpreter should, therefore, endeavor to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term **grammatico-historical interpretation**.

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IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT WHEN PERFORMING WORD STUDIES

Remember that when you are doing **Greek Word studies** (similar warning applies to Hebrew), many Greek words have more than one meaning as determined by the **context**. A word can only mean one thing at a time so we must make every effort to determine the writer's single intended meaning. The diligent student needs to be cautious when looking up definitions of a specific word in Greek lexicons and using the definition to amplify or interpret the meaning of that word in a specific verse. If the definition you choose makes the verse more difficult to understand, then you have probably chosen a definition that is not "compatible with" the **context** of the verse you are studying. Let me give you an example of how context affects the meaning of the Greek word. In Mark God the Father speaks out of a cloud at the transfiguration of His Son and declares to Peter, James and John

This is My beloved Son. **Listen** to Him (Mk 9:7, Lk 10:39-42)

The Greek Verb for **Listen** (akouo) normally means simply "to hear" but in this context conveys the sense of "Hear Him and obey Him" and in fact is so translated by the Amplified Version ("Be constantly listening to and obeying Him!" - Amplified)

DON'T FORGET THE ENGLISH DICTIONARY

As an aside when doing "**Word Studies**" don't forget to occasionally look up words in the English dictionary (and the same caution applies - be certain that it "fits" the context of the verse under study). Let's look at an example in Php 4:6 Paul commands believers to "**Be anxious for nothing...**". A study of the Greek word for **anxious** (merimnao) uncovers an interesting origin from the Greek verb **merizo** which means to divide and gives us a vivid word picture of the effect of anxiety on most of us! When we look up the word **anxious** in Webster's dictionary we read "*Anxious: Characterized by extreme uneasiness of mind or brooding fear about some contingency: worried.*" Does that help amplify what Paul is saying? And don't forget to note the origin of the English word, in this case **anxious** being derived from Latin **angere** = to strangle, to distress, to torment, to choke! What a picture of the potential effect of anxiety! Some Bible Versions translate Php 4:6 with the verb "**worry**"... take a moment and look up "**worry**" in an English dictionary - you may be surprised what you discover.

4) READ SCRIPTURE LITERALLY IF POSSIBLE

PRINCIPLE: If the plain sense of the Scripture you are studying makes good sense, then do not seek to make some other sense out of it or the final interpretation could be complete nonsense and totally unrelated to God's intending meaning. Take every word in its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and self-evident and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.

You might be asking yourself "Why is there so much emphasis on **literal** interpretation, for it seems so logical that the safest interpretation is that which remains closest to the original text." To answer this important question would require a review of the church's approach to interpretation over the past 2000 years which would require much more time than can be given in this brief overview.

Unless the immediate context clearly indicates otherwise, one should always seek to interpret the text literally, in its straightforward, natural, ordinary, usual, normal, meaning, just as you would any other writing, accepting the words at face value without the imposition of hidden or symbolic meanings.

Apocalyptic literature does not dictate that one dismiss normative interpretation in favor of "symbolic conjecture".

Why is this critical? Because the symbolic approach always raises the question "*Whose symbolic interpretation is correct?*" The answer of course is that no one knows who is correct because there are so many symbolic interpretations to choose from - a veritable "interpretative quagmire" ("soft miry land that shakes or yields under the foot; a difficult, precarious, or entrapping position" - Webster)!

No two allegorical/symbolic commentators hold the same interpretative position except in a handful of areas, resulting in a frustrated student who walks away discouraged and even more confused than before reading the commentary. This fact alone disqualifies a non-literal approach because it has factually demonstrated its bankruptcy in conveying a reproducible message from God. In effect, the symbolic or allegorical approach *literally* (pun intended) makes the book of Revelation unknowable.

Perhaps you are still asking why should one insist on a **literal or "normal" interpretation** of all of Scripture? **Couch** explains that there are at least three reasons offered by who are committed to a normal reading of Scripture:

- **First**, the obvious purpose of language is to enable effective communication between intelligent beings. Words have meaning and in their normal usage are intended to be understood. . . . God is the originator of

language. When He spoke audibly to man, He expected man to understand Him and respond accordingly. Likewise, when God speaks to man through the inspired writings of His apostles and prophets, He expects man to understand and respond accordingly. . . .

- A **second** reason for a normal reading of Scripture concerns the historical fulfillment of prophecy. All the prophecies of the Old and New Testament that have been fulfilled to date have been fulfilled literally. . . . Thus, . . . all prophecies which are yet to be fulfilled will be fulfilled literally.
- A **third** reason concerns logic. If an interpreter does not use the normal, customary, literal method of interpreting Scripture, interpretation is given over to the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter. (Couch, M: Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics. Page 36-37. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications) (Bolding added)

LESS IS BETTER

Another key advantage of **literal interpretation** is that it is **minimal interpretation** and thus superimposes the barest "**interpretive layer**" or "**interpretive bias**" on the inspired communication from God.

In other words **Literal interpretation** does pay attention to variations in the style of the text and thus maintains a consistency of interpretation which is driven by the text itself, not the interpretative bias of the commentator: For example it is often stated that evangelicals who hold to a literal one thousand year reign of Christ based on Revelation 20, also demand that every single passage is to be interpreted literally without exception. This is an unfair and weak attempt to discredit the literal approach, because in fact even strict literalists clearly accept that if the language of a given passage is clearly symbolic, it is to be governed by the laws relating to symbols. If the passage is clearly figurative, it also must be interpreted based on the laws dealing with figures of speech.

It is also interesting to note that even those who espouse a symbolic/allegorical approach to the

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Revelation clearly rely on a normal literal approach in many if not most passages in John's great apocalyptic work. For example, when John writes that he "was on the island that is called Patmos" (Revelation 1:9) virtually all commentators, symbolic and literal, agree that John was literally on an island named Patmos! When the symbolic/allegorical authors encounter other passages that are not so easily interpreted, they jettison the literal approach in favor of speculation.

In short, the wise reader is advised to look for the **clear teaching**, not some mystical or "hidden" meaning or special "code" which needs to be deciphered! It is truly remarkable what we can discover when we let God say what He has already said and He gives us eyes and ears to see and hear spiritual truth.

Unless the Scripture calls for you to do so (e.g., in Ga 4:24 Paul says "*this is allegorically speaking*" clearly allowing for an allegorical interpretation), strongly resist any attempt to **allegorize** (symbolic and non-literal representation of truth) or **spiritualize** the meaning of the passage.

Learn to recognize figures of speech (especially common in poetic and prophetic passages) and to interpret them in the same way they are used in normal speech. In other words, interpret figures of speech in the literal significance that the figure conveys. If Jesus calls Himself a "Vine", interpret the meaning of the passage in light of the specific meaning of the figure of a "vine".

As a general rule if you or someone arrives at an interpretation on a text that no one has ever described, you need to consider that interpretation suspect.

INTERPRETATION OF PROPHETIC PASSAGES

A few more thoughts on the literal approach in prophetic passages:

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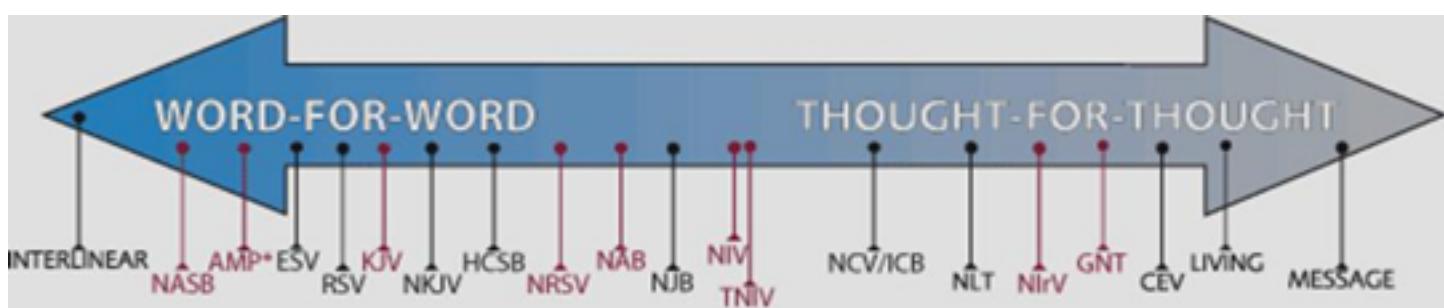
In interpretation of prophecy, the safest, simplest and most sane approach is take the text as saying what it means and meaning what it says. In a sense the literal approach assumes that the best interpretation is no interpretation. For example, in the prophesy of the Revelation, one assumes that John desired to communicate to his reader and therefore wrote plainly, saying exactly what he wanted to say (under the inspiration of the Spirit of course) and what he believed to be the most effective manner of communicating that truth to all generations. As alluded to above, the **literal plain sense** approach does not ignore the fact that prophecy often uses **symbols** and **figures of speech**. The point to emphasize is that the interpretation of such figures and symbols is not to be left up to the reader's imagination or ingenuity. Figures of speech must be defined and explained unambiguously, either aided by the immediate context, the broader context or comparison with other similar passages. If one determines to approach a prophetic book such as the Revelation with a literal mindset, they will find that much of the difficulty in understanding is effectively eliminated. As someone has well said

"The book of Revelation isn't hard to understand--it's hard to believe!"

One of the main reasons why so many commentaries resort to an allegorical interpretation of prophecies like the Revelation and Daniel is that they find the literal meaning of the prophecies difficult to accept and attempt to explain them in some less offensive manner!

Many depart from the simplicity of the "plain sense" rule of literal interpretation reasoning something like...

If the plain sense does not fit my theological system, then I will seek some other sense, lest I should end up agreeing with the literalists!



5) COMPARE SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE

PRINCIPLE: Interpret Scripture with Scripture and don't base your convictions on an obscure passage which cannot be supported by other more easily interpreted texts. Clear up problem areas with the clear teaching of other passages relating to the same subject.

This guideline is based on the hermeneutical principle known as *analogia Scriptura*. According to this principle, Scripture never contradicts Scripture. In other words God never teaches something in one passage that violates what He teaches in another passage. "Apparent" contradictions are just that -- *apparent*, not *actual* for God is not the Author of confusion and never contradicts Himself!

The Westminster Confession states that...

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture... it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

Develop the practice of **comparing Scripture with Scripture** because Scripture is always the best commentary on itself. The beauty of using Scripture to interpret Scripture is that when the Bible answers its own questions, then we know the answer is correct. Why? Because the Bible is a unified whole, and God never contradicts Himself. In other words, the great interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. The Bible is unified in its message. Although it sometimes presents us with paradox, it never confounds us with contradiction.

Where do you find the Scriptures to compare to the passage you are studying?

Practically speaking there are two common sources

1. The cross-references in the margin of your Bible.
2. The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge (TSK)

The **TSK** is a conservative resource originally compiled by Dr. R. A. Torrey around the turn of the 20th century and to this day remains the most comprehensive collection of Scriptural cross references available, with over 500,000 entries. Formerly, the only source of the TSK was a large hardbound volume. With the advent of the computer era, the **TSK** is now readily available digitally:

<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/tsk/>

Since Scripture is always the best commentary on Scripture, consider making it a practice as you perform inductive study to check the **Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge** often, especially when seeking to know the meaning of a given text.

Let's illustrate this principle with 1 Corinthians 15:29 where Paul speaks of those who are "**baptized for the dead**." Based on this verse Mormon teaching encourages their adherents to be baptized for the dead. There are at least three major problems with this interpretation:

- (1) 1Cor 15:29 is an **obscure passage** (as stated earlier, the cults frequently will "*major on the minors*")
- (2) The **context** of the entire Word of God never mentions baptism "by proxy"
- (3) **Other Scriptures** clearly refute and nullify the possibility that Paul's teaching validated the Mormon practice. For example, the writer of Hebrews clearly teaches that it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment (Heb 9:27).

6) CONSULT CONSERVATIVE COMMENTARIES

PRINCIPLE: After you have performed your own inductive Bible study, consult conservative resources to check your interpretative conclusions.

The order is important -- **first the Scriptures** then secondary sources for the Word of God illuminated by the Holy Spirit of God is important than any commentary. Without the Word there is no life, no growth, no holiness, and no acceptable service. We should read it, study it, memorize it, meditate on it, and above all obey it. As someone has said, "Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge."

Consultation serves as a good check on the accuracy of your interpretation, but use secondary

sources with caution because no single individual has a corner on all the truth.

Remember that it's amazing how much light the Scripture sheds on the commentaries!

Be wary if you come to a conclusion that no one else has ever "discovered" and you cannot find support in any other conservative commentary.

REFRAIN FROM STUDYING THE STUDY NOTES!

When you are in the process of performing an Inductive Study, it is always tempting to see how your "**Study Bible notes**" or favorite commentary interpret the section of Scripture you are studying. Please refrain from consulting secondary sources until you have given the Scriptures time to speak for themselves!

UTILIZE OTHER BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Although you may never have thought of other Bible Versions as commentaries, you will be surprised at the insights you can glean from reading a passage, paragraph or chapter in a different version. However, I would offer two caveats: First, always do your inductive study with a more literal translation before comparing other translations. Second, be very cautious when reading translations that are predominantly paraphrases. Paraphrased Bible versions represent a restatement of the passage with the goal being to give the meaning in another form.

Examples of paraphrased versions include: New Living Translation (NLT - in my opinion one of the most trustworthy of the paraphrased versions), The Living Bible (TLB), the Message, and J B Phillip's NT Paraphrase (often very "picturesque" rendering). Remember that paraphrased versions are **highly interpretative** and you should **never** base your final interpretation on a paraphrased version. A special note of caution (cp He 5:14-note, 1Th 5:21, 22-note) is called for when reading "The Message", which is a very loose and free paraphrase. On the other hand, the **Amplified Version** is an excellent, recommended resource which can even function much like a "mini-commentary".

COMPARE MULTIPLE TRANSLATIONS

If you have internet access, there are resources that allow easy comparison of multiple passages including the Amplified Version which functions much like a "mini-commentary" on a given passage...

- BibleGateway.com
- BlueLetterBible.org
- Downloadable Software: E-Sword.net

COMMENTARIES ON BIBLE PROPHECY

Special discernment is in order when referring to commentaries on prophetic books like Revelation and Daniel. Please note that commentaries on prophetic books vary widely in their **interpretative**

approach, and you may not always be able to easily discern their bias.

If an interpreter does not use the normal, customary, literal method of interpreting Scripture, interpretation is given over to the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter thus accounting for the widely-varying imaginative interpretations of the non-literal interpreters.

Remember that all the prophecies of the Old and New Testament that have been fulfilled to date have been fulfilled literally, thus there is no precedent for anything but a literal approach to the prophetic books containing prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

Another key advantage of literal interpretation is that this approach results in minimal interpretive overlay of the inspired text. Clearly the best interpretation of a historical record is no "interpretation". One should seek to allow God to say what He says and assume that He says what He means. The more interpretation that is necessary to "make sense" of the text, the greater the danger one will add to or subtract from the meaning intended by God (Rev 22:18,19).

The Golden Rule (of interpretation) holds that we adhere to the plain sense of Scripture and not seek any other sense unless there are good reasons for doing otherwise. These reasons must be found in the immediate context of the passage under study or related passages. It is not sufficient to simply classify the book of Revelation as an apocalypse and therefore turn the rules of interpretation upside-down as does this commentator:

If you are studying the Revelation, one "test" is to note how the author interprets the "1000 years" in Revelation 20. Is the approach **literal** or **allegorical** (spiritualized or symbolic)? **Allegorize** (allegory) in simple terms means to say something different from what the words themselves mean literally.

If the commentary you are consulting takes an interpretive approach that is anything other than **literal**, you need to be very careful regarding their comments on **prophecy** or you may likely end up more than a little confused! Once any interpreter departs from the **literal** (where the literal makes perfectly good sense), they enter into an arena where the passage could mean almost anything and where their fanciful, false interpretations are limited only by their imagination!