

## ***END TIMES LESSON 5 | General Considerations in Interpretation***

1. **Overview.** The adoption of the correct interpretive *method* (the literal method) does not guarantee correct conclusions. The literal method may be used to produce false conclusions. Therefore, *principles* of interpretation are also necessary.
2. **Words.**
  - a. Without question, words are the basic medium to communicate thought. Therefore, all sound exegesis must begin with the interpretation of words.
  - b. Words must be interpreted in their usual, natural, literal sense. Determine the *usus loquendi* (customary language, current usage of speech), the notion affixed to a word by people in general who spoke or still speak the language.
  - c. The received signification of a word (*usus loquendi*) is to be retained unless weighty and necessary reasons require it should be abandoned.
  - d. Where a word has several significations in common use (like homonyms), that must be selected which best suits the passage in question and which is consistent with the author's known character, mindset, and circumstances.
  - e. Too much confidence must not be placed on etymology (the origin of words) because the primary signification of a word is frequently different from its common meaning.
  - f. General terms are used sometimes in their whole extent, and sometimes in a restricted sense (i.e., "salvation," "justification," "sanctification"). Whether they are to be understood in one way or the other depends on the context and parallel passages.
  - g. The simplest sense is in all probability the genuine sense or meaning (the shortest distance between two points is almost always best)(i.e., "believe").
  - h. Our interpretation must not affirm or deny any more or less than what the inspired author affirmed or denied when he or she wrote (i.e., God's "will" (θέλημα)).
  - i. "The words of Scripture must be taken in their common meaning, unless such meaning is shown to be inconsistent with other words in the sentence, with the argument or context, or with other parts of Scripture. Of two meanings, that one is generally to be preferred which was most obvious to the comprehension of the hearers or original readers of the inspired passage, allowing for the modes of thought prevalent in their own day...."<sup>1</sup>
3. **Context.**
  - a. Careful consideration of the preceding and following parts enables us to determine whether a passage is to be taken literally or figuratively.
  - b. The context may be one verse, a few verses, entire paragraphs, entire chapters, or whole books.
  - c. A verse or passage must not be connected with a remote context, unless the latter agrees better with it than a nearer context.
  - d. No explanation must be admitted, but that which suits the context.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Angus and Samuel G. Green, *The Bible Hand-Book*, 180.

#### 4. History.

- a. God's word originated in an historical way and therefore can be understood only in the light of history. It is impossible to understand an author and to interpret his words correctly unless he is seen against his or her historical backdrop (*i.e.*, Da 1:1-7).
- b. The place, time, circumstance, and prevailing worldview will naturally colour the writings that are produced under those conditions. We must reconstruct, as far as possible, the author's world, including physical features of the land, customs, morals, and the religion of the people.
- c. We must seek to know the author whose work we would explain, including his purpose, age, and frame of mind. "[The interpreter] must place himself on the standpoint of the author, and seek to enter into his very soul, until he, as it were, lives his life and thinks his thoughts."<sup>2</sup>

#### 5. Grammar.

- a. A new language was *not* made for the authors of Scripture. They conformed to the current language of their country and time. Their writings would not have been otherwise intelligible. (Was there a genre of literature, "apocalyptic," within which John wrote *Revelation*? How is apocalyptic literature to be interpreted?)
- b. We are to apply to Scripture the same grammatical rules and exercise of common sense and reason that we apply to other books.
- c. No sensible author will knowingly be inconsistent with himself or seek to bewilder or mislead his or her readers.

#### 6. Figurative Language.

- a. The purpose of figurative language is to impart literal truth, which may be conveyed more clearly by the use of figures. The use of figurative language does *not* necessitate a non-literal interpretation. Literal interpretation accounts for figurative language.
- b. Specific rules for determining when language is used figuratively as opposed to literally is impracticable. Judgment, good faith, tact, and impartiality are necessary.
- c. Because the literal occurs much more frequently than the figurative, any term should be understood literally unless there is good reason for understanding it figuratively.
- d. We must not suppose the meaning of metaphors, allegories, parables, and symbols to be so vague and uncertain as to be past finding out. The figurative parts of Scripture are not so difficult to understand as some imagine.
- e. Reference must be made to the general character and style of the book, to the plan and purpose of the author, and to comparison of parallel passages.
- f. The sense of a figurative expression is often known from the author's own explanation of it (*i.e.*, Da 2:36-45).
- g. We should accept the clear and plain parts of Scripture as a basis for understanding the more difficult parts.
- h. "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Interpretation*, 113ff.

<sup>3</sup> David L. Cooper, *The God of Israel*, iii, quoted in Dwight J. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 77.