
Interpreting Scripture

A General Introduction

*Jason S. DeRouchie**

DEFINITION

Interpreting Scripture: Interpreting Scripture is the process of personally discovering what God through his human authors intended the biblical text to mean and effect. Through exegesis and theology one assesses, synthesizes, and applies God's inerrant Word.

SUMMARY

This study clarifies why we must interpret Scripture, synthesizes what presuppositions should guide our interpretation, and offers a process for how to interpret. Scripture plays a foundational place in all of life, and Scripture itself stresses the need to faithfully interpret in order to stand unashamed before the Lord. Interpreting Scripture faithfully necessitates that we view Scripture as God's Word, assumes that Scripture's truths are knowable, requires that we respond appropriately, and demands that we engage in the task depending on God. The interpretive process is about personally discovering what God through his human authors intended the biblical text to mean and effect. It includes assessing, synthesizing, and applying God's inerrant word by means of exegesis and theology—both the narrow activity of identifying and drawing out what God was actually saying

* Jason DeRouchie is research professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri.

through his human authors in specific passages and the broader activity of relating this message to God’s overarching purpose in redemption culminating in Christ, with specific application to our present situation. The move from exegesis to theology includes at least twelve interrelated steps: (1) genre, (2) literary units and text hierarchy, (3) text criticism, (4) translation, (5) clause and text grammar, (6) argument-tracing, (7) word and concept studies, (8, 9) historical and literary context, (10, 11, 12) biblical, systematic, and practical theology.

WHY MUST WE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE?

Moses stressed that a right relationship with the Lord is only possible when one hears God’s Word in a way that leads to fearing and following him (Deut 31:12–13; cf. 6:1–3; 17:19–20; John 6:44–45). The Bible, therefore, “is no empty word for you, but your very life” (Deut 32:47)! Similarly, David highlighted that God’s words are perfect, sure, right, pure, true, righteous, desirable, and sweet and that these same words revive the soul, give wisdom, rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes, inspire fear, warn, and guide obedience unto great reward (Ps 19:7–11). Only through an encounter with God’s pure, perfect, true, and abiding Word (Pss 12:6; 119:96, 160) can people be

- Reborn in Christ and indwelt by the Spirit (Ps 119:93; Rom 10:17; Gal 3:2; Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23);
- Empowered for holiness (Ps 119:50; John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:17; 2 Pet 1:4),
- Sustained to glory (Deut 8:3; Rom 1:16; 2 Tim 3:15),
- Satisfied always (Pss 1:2; 19:10; 1 Pet 2:3).

Man lives through “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4; cf. Deut 8:3), so we must saturate our whole being with Scripture (Deut 6:7; Josh 1:7–8; Pss 1:3; 78:5–8). We must seek its truths like silver (Prov 2:4) and do so in a way that moves us to tremble in surrender and awe (Isa 66:2).

God has given his Word to the simple and not just the scholar (Ps 19:7; 119:130), and it is because of this that we are even to instruct children in its teachings (Deut 6:6–7; Ps 78:5–8; Eph 6:4). Nevertheless, following the pattern of the priest-scribe Ezra, we must *study* the Word so that we can loyally *do* what it calls for and then *teach* it faithfully (Ezra 7:10). The Lord calls Christians to think maturely, which means yearning for the clear Word of God, rightly understanding what is good, and then being innocent to what is evil (1 Cor 14:20). Ignorant and unstable people are those who misappropriate God’s Word, but those who are knowledgeable and steady can rightly understand the Scriptures (2 Pet 3:16). Paul charged Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim 2:7). Biblical interpretation is not an option. Christians must rigorously think over God’s Book and do so in a way that looks to God for illumination—God’s Spirit guiding the human mind and altering the human heart so that the interpreter can grasp Scripture’s message (1 Cor 2:13–14). “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). The biblical interpreter handles God’s Word without shame only when the Lord himself approves of the interpretation. We must, therefore, carefully interpret Scripture.

WHAT PRESUPPOSITIONS SHOULD GUIDE OUR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE?

At least four foundational presuppositions should guide our interpreting Scripture.

1. Biblical interpretation necessitates that we view Scripture as God's Word.

The only way to truly arrive at what the biblical authors intended is to believe (as they did) that they were reading and writing God's very Word (Isa 8:20; 1 Cor 2:13; 14:37). This requires a submissive disposition to Scripture's authority. We must be willing to let our understanding and application of truth be conformed to the Bible's declarations, all in accordance with God's revealed intention. The Bible is special revelation—God's disclosure of himself and his will in a way that we can understand (1 Cor 14:37; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21). The very words, and not just the ideas, are God-inspired (Matt 5:17–18; 1 Cor 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16–17). And the “words of the Lord are pure” (Ps 12:6); his “law is true” (Ps 119:142); “every one of [his] righteous rules endures forever” (Ps 119:160); and his “commandments are right” (Ps 119:172). Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), and Paul said that this is so because “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16). Indeed, as Peter said, “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21).

These truths imply that Scripture is both authoritative and accurate in all it declares. In order to stress that the Bible's assertions are both reliable and unerring, the church has historically stated that (a) in matters of faith (doctrine) and practice (ethics), Scripture's

teaching is *infallible*—a sure and safe guide, and that (b) in matters of fact (whether history, chronology, geography, or the like), Scripture’s claims are *inerrant*—entirely true and trustworthy.¹ Both terms mean something comparable but address different spheres, and both are rightly understood only in relation to what the authors, led by the Spirit, intended to convey by their texts. That is, submitting to Scripture’s authority means respecting the biblical authors’ intentions and the literary conventions under which they wrote. We must allow for partial reporting from different perspectives, paraphrasing, and summarizing and must not require the Bible to give definitive or exhaustive information on every topic (e.g., the failure of Chronicles to mention David’s sin with Bathsheba [2 Sam 11–12] or Solomon’s idolatry [1 Kgs 11]; the instigator of David’s census being Yahweh in 2 Sam 24:1 but Satan in 1 Chr 21:1; the additional information that Manasseh repented from his deep wickedness in 2 Chr 33:10–19 [cf. 2 Kgs 21:10–18]). We must allow for phenomenological language, with which the authors describe a phenomenon as they observed it or experienced it, not necessarily how it scientifically occurred (e.g., Josh 10:12–13; Matt 5:45). And we must allow for the reporting of a speech without the endorsement of that speech’s truthfulness; a biblical character may truly say something that is not true (e.g., Exod 1:17–21; Josh 2:1–7; Acts 5:1–11). Scripture is the very Word of God, so as we

¹ The “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1976) states, “*Infallible* signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters. Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions. We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant.” See <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>.

interpret it we must trust it to never lead us astray and approach it as the highest influence in our lives.

2. Biblical interpretation assumes that Scripture's truths are knowable.

Proper understanding of Scripture assumes that the Bible is, by nature, clear in what it teaches. In short, truth can be known. Peter recognized that “there are some things in [Paul’s letters] that are hard to understand,” but he went on to say that it is “the ignorant and unstable” who “twist” these words “to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet 3:16). The psalmists were convinced that God’s Word enlightens our path and imparts understanding (Ps 119:105, 130). Paul wrote his words plainly (2 Cor 1:13) and called others to “think over” what he said, trusting that “the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim 2:7).

The very nature of God’s Word demands that its message can be understood in any culture and in any age. Historically, the church has called this the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity or clarity. The Bible is sufficiently clear, but not everything in it is equally clear. It is sufficiently clear to allow us to grasp the portrait of God’s supremacy and his overarching kingdom purposes climaxing in the saving work of Jesus, but some other elements in Scripture are less lucid. Wayne Grudem has helpfully noted that the Bible itself testifies that we can understand it, but:²

- Not all at once;
- Not without effort;

² Wayne A. Grudem, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” *Them* 34.3 (2009): 288–309.

- Not without ordinary means;
- Not without the reader’s willingness to obey it;
- Not without the help of the Holy Spirit;
- Not without human misunderstanding;
- Never completely.

These things stated, we must interpret Scripture convinced that what God intends for us to know we can know.

3. Biblical interpretation requires that we respond appropriately.

We as biblical interpreters are not finished with our task once we discover what God has spoken. We must then move on to recognize that his Word is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). We must grasp not only the biblical author’s intended meaning (which is possible for nonbelievers) but also his intended effect (which is possible only for believers, Rom 8:7–8; 1 Cor 2:14). To rightly grasp God’s truth bound up in his Book, we must employ the necessary habits of heart and mind captured in the order of Ezra resolve: “Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). To *study* means observing carefully, understanding rightly, and evaluating fairly; to *do* includes feeling appropriately and applying wisely; to *teach* involves expressing articulately, faithfully, and boldly.³ These are the necessary habits of the heart and mind needed for rightly grasping truth in God’s Book.

³ For these six elements, see John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 191–98.

Biblical interpretation demands that we respond to Scripture appropriately.

4. Biblical interpretation that culminates in application demands God-dependence.

The process of moving from study to practice is something that only God can enable, and he does so only through Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul writes, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” By “understand” here, Paul means “embrace, affirm, align with, delight in, apply.” Only in Christ is the veil of hardness toward God’s Word taken away (2 Cor 3:14), but in Christ, the Word becomes near us, in our mouth and in our heart (Rom 10:8). The biblical authors’ ultimate intent included a transformed life, the foundation of which is a personal encounter with the living God. We will not experience this apart from the Lord’s help.

Putting the Bible under a microscope (careful study) should always result in finding ourselves under its microscope, as Scripture changes us more into Christ’s likeness. We engage in exegesis and theology in order to encounter God. We approach humbly and dependently and never with manipulation or force. Biblical interpretation should create servants, not kings.

WHAT IS A PROCESS FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE?

Interpreting Scripture is the process of personally discovering what God through his human authors intended the biblical text to

mean and effect. Through exegesis and theology one assesses, synthesizes, and applies God’s inerrant Word.

The English term exegesis is a transliteration of the Greek noun *exēgēsis* (*ek* “from, out of” + *agō* “to bring, move [something]”), meaning an “account, description, narration.” Narrowly defined, exegesis of Scripture is the interpretive activity of identifying or drawing out what God was actually saying through his human authors in specific passages within specific books. Texts convey meaning; they do not produce it. Following God’s leading, the biblical authors purposely wrote the words they did with specific sense and purpose. “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). We have to carefully read what the Lord through his human servants gives us in Scripture. In exegesis we discover what is there, which includes both the specific meaning that the authors convey and its implications—those inferences in a text of which the authors may or may not have been aware but that legitimately fall within the principle or pattern of meaning that they willed.

The English term theology comes from the Latin *theologia*, which derives from a combination of the Greek nouns *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“a formal accounting, reckoning”). In short, theology is a “study of God.” Because Scripture is God’s Word for all time and because every biblical passage has a broader context (historical, literary, and biblical), exegesis (narrowly defined) naturally and necessarily moves us into various theological disciplines:

- Biblical theology considers how God’s Word progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ.
- Systematic theology examines what the Bible teaches about certain theological topics.

- Practical theology details the proper Christian response to the Bible's truths.

Biblical interpreters do not stop until they consider every passage in light of all God's special revelation. Then they must apply the passage through lives of worship. Exegesis moves to theology, and the whole process is to result in a personal encounter with the living God disclosed in Scripture. Doxology—the practice of glorifying or praising God—should color all biblical study. [For more, see Naselli's "Theological Method."]

There are at least twelve steps in the move from exegesis to theology and from personal study to practice and then instruction. While one can discuss the various stages independently, the interpretive process is more like a spiral by which we continually revisit various interpretive questions en route to biblical faithfulness. For ease of recollection, I have tagged the whole process *TOCMA*, which stands for Text, Observation, Context, Meaning, and Application. Each of the twelve steps falls within one of these overarching categories, the first nine covering exegesis and the last three theology.

***Text* — “What is the makeup of the passage?”**

1. **Genre:** Determine the literary form, subject matter, and function of the passage, compare it to similar genres, and consider the implications for interpretation.
2. **Literary units and text hierarchy:** Determine the limits and basic structure of the passage.
3. **Text criticism:** Establish the passage's original wording.

4. **Translation:** Translate the text and compare other translations.

Observation — “How is the passage communicated?”

5. **Clause and text grammar:** Assess the makeup and relationship of words, phrases, clauses, and larger text units.
6. **Argument-tracing:** Finish tracing the literary argument and create a message-driven outline that is tied to the passage’s main point.
7. **Word and concept studies:** Clarify the meaning of key words, phrases, and concepts.

Context — “Where does the passage fit?”

8. **Historical context:** Understand the historical situation from which the author composed the text and identify any historical details that the author mentions or assumes.
9. **Literary context:** Comprehend the role that the passage plays in the whole book.

Meaning — “What does the passage mean?”

10. **Biblical theology:** Consider how your passage connects to the Bible’s overall flow and message and points to Christ.
11. **Systematic theology:** Discern how your passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible, assessing key doctrines especially in direct relation to the gospel.

Application — “Why does the passage matter?”

12. **Practical theology:** Apply the text to yourself, the church, and the world, stressing the centrality of Christ and the hope of the gospel.

To faithfully interpret Scripture requires asking the right questions. In exegesis, we are asking the biblical author, “What are you saying?” (the grammar, text-criticism, and translation question), and, “Why do you say it like that?” (the genre, structure, argument, and historical and literary context question). In theology we are asking, “What do you mean?” (the biblical and systematic theology question), and “What is the significance of this passage for us today? (the practical theology question). May your journey of interpreting Scripture lead you to discover beautiful truths and encounter the living God in the face of Christ. May you increasingly study, practice, and teach God’s Word with care and faithfulness for the glory of God and the good of his church.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

General

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Testament Specific

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