



Module 3: The Word

Interpretation – Part 2

Rules of Interpretation

By Josh McDowell

1. The unexplained is not necessarily unexplainable
2. Fallible interpretations do not mean fallible revelation
3. Understand the context of the passage
4. Interpret difficult passages in the light of clear ones
5. Don't base teaching on obscure passages



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6. The Bible is a human book with human characteristics
7. Just because a report is incomplete does not mean it is false.
8. New Testament citations of the Old Testament need not always be exact
9. The Bible does not necessarily approve of all it records
10. The Bible uses non-technical, everyday language



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11. The Bible may use round numbers as well as exact numbers
12. Note when the Bible uses different literary devices
13. An error in a copy does not equate to an error in the original
14. General statements don't necessarily mean universal promises
15. Later revelation supersedes previous revelation



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8 Rules

1. The rule of DEFINITION: What does the word mean?

Any study of Scripture must begin with a study of words. Define your terms and then keep to the terms defined.

The interpreter should conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words. This quite often may require using a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood. A couple of good examples of this are the

Greek words "allos" and "heteros". Both are usually translated as "another" in English - yet "allos" literally means "another of the same type" and "heteros" means "another of a different type."



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2. The rule of USAGE:

It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms must have been intelligible to them – just as the words of Christ when talking to them must have been. The majority of the New Testament likewise was written in a milieu of Greco-Roman (and to a lesser extent Jewish) culture and it is important to not impose our modern usage into our interpretation. It is not worth much to interpret a great many phrases and histories if one's interpretations are shaded by pre-conceived notions and cultural biases, thereby rendering an inaccurate and ineffectual lesson.



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3. The rule of CONTEXT:

The meaning must be gathered from the context. Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it. Many passages will not be understood at all, or understood incorrectly, without the help afforded by the context. A good example of this is the Mormon practice of using 1 Cor. 8:5b: "...for there be gods many and lords many..." as a "proof text" of their doctrine of polytheism. However, a simple reading of the whole verse in the context of the whole chapter (e.g. where Paul calls these gods "so-called"), plainly demonstrates that Paul is not teaching polytheism.



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4. The rule of HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The interpreter must have some awareness of the life and society of the times in which the Scripture was written. The spiritual principle will be timeless but often can't be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the background. If the interpreter can have in his mind what the writer had in his mind when he wrote – without adding any excess baggage from the interpreter's own culture or society – then the true thought of the Scripture can be captured resulting in an accurate interpretation.



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5. The rule of LOGIC:

Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture, the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason – it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other volume: applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis.



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6. The rule of PRECEDENT:

We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. Just as a judge's chief occupation is the study of previous cases, so must the interpreter use precedents in order to determine whether they really support an alleged doctrine.

Consider the Bereans in Acts 17:10-12 who were called "noble" because they searched the Scriptures to determine if what Paul taught them was true.



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7. The rule of UNITY:

The parts of Scripture being interpreted must be construed with reference to the significance of the whole. An interpretation must be consistent with the rest of Scripture. An excellent example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. No single passage teaches it, but it is consistent with the teaching of the whole of Scripture (e.g. the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are referred to individually as God; yet the Scriptures elsewhere teach there is only one God).



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8. The rule of INFERENCE:

An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. Such inferential facts or propositions are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence. Competent evidence means such evidence as the nature of the thing to be proved admits. Satisfactory evidence means that amount of proof which would ordinarily satisfy an unprejudiced mind beyond a reasonable doubt. Jesus used this rule when he proved the resurrection of the dead to the unbelieving Sadducees in Matt. 22:23-33.



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Goals of Proper Interpretation

1. What was the author intending to communicate to the specific people to whom he was writing?
2. How would the reader of that day have understood the writer?
3. How should we apply the commands and principles today?

Steps to Properly Interpret a Passage

1. Pray for God's understanding
2. Study the history and culture
3. Study the context
4. Study the meaning of words
5. Compare your thoughts with others
6. Determine how to apply commands and principles today



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Principles of Interpretation

1. Interpret from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.
2. Church history is important, but not decisive in the interpretation of Scripture.
3. Saving faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary to understand and interpret the scriptures.
4. Interpret personal experience in light of scripture, not scripture by personal experience.
5. Each Christian has the right and responsibility to interpret the Word of God for himself.



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Principles of Interpretation

6. Interpret a passage in light of the history and culture of those to whom it was written.
7. Interpret a passage in light of its context, audience, and the author's intended purpose.
8. Analyze the syntax for how it contributes to the understanding of a passage.
9. Interpret difficult passages in the light of clear ones.
10. No word, statement, or passage can have more than one meaning at a time.

Principles of Interpretation

11. Interpret a passage in light of its literary form (genre).
12. Interpret a passage or word literally, unless its usage, context, or genre suggest otherwise.
13. A teaching cannot be biblical unless it's consistent with all that the scriptures say about it.
14. When two teachings in the Bible appear to be contradictory, accept both as scriptural in the confident belief that they will resolve themselves into a higher unity.
15. Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command.



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Principles of Interpretation

16. The Bible does not approve of all it records. Distinguish descriptive from prescriptive.
17. The Bible uses exact numbers, rounded numbers, and symbolic numbers.
18. Later revelation supersedes and clarifies previous revelation.
19. We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another without precedent.
20. Determine if commands are based on cultural circumstances or universal principles.

Principles of Interpretation

21. Take into account various biblical literary techniques, such as chiasm or recapitulation.
22. Distinguish between incidental details and the teaching focus of a passage.



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Tools for Interpretation

- Commentaries (be careful!)
- Bible Arcing
- Look at the Book
- 800 page book: “Hard Sayings of the Bible”



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