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# INTERPRETATION

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## A Workshop on the Interaction between Us & the Bible



Few books can come close to the influence the Bible has had on cultures, public policies, philosophies, scientific enterprise, sociology, governance, language, war, the arts, let alone theology. This collection of collections claims various literary styles, languages, motifs, themes, authors and yet, at the core of our belief as people of Christian faith, the Bible comes from one place: God. For this reason (and for us in particular) we are confessing that the Bible is authoritative, that is, God's Word to us by the power of the Holy Spirit (see appendix A). But how does that work? And how do we account for humanity in this transaction? How does a perfect God communication with imperfect people? And who decides what means what? Mark 8:29 says, "[Jesus] asked them, 'And what about you? Who do you say that I am?'" The force of this verse pushes us into the most important question we face when it comes to interpretation: what do WE think the Bible is saying?

**What is your key to the Bible? What influences how you approach it, think about it, and, perhaps most importantly, make use of it?**

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## “Smith Family? Smith Family. Please Meet Your Party at the Information Desk”

Coming through an airport one can hear a lot of noise. There are conversations, vendors, children, airplanes coming and going, televisions, music, bathrooms, the warning beeps from the passenger transport, and, of course, the announcements. How would you know if one of those announcements applies to you? With all the noise, what gets you to filter everything out and focus on the announcement? The speaker will often lead with the person or party's name, more than once, and then repeat the message. Much of the time it works. But this same thing happens when we read the Bible. There is a lot of noise associated with reading the Bible. The way we grew up. Who taught us to read the Bible. What we've heard and held onto. What we've (hopefully) read for ourselves. Whether we're reading from the Old Testament or New, the style of writing, cultural location of the passage or story, unspoken or assumed details of geographical or idiomatic references, literary context, historical context of the passage, historical context of the original and the current audience, whether the passage is heard or read or both, the affect and effect of the particular translation used, and more. What cues us as to what part of the noise is relevant or meaningful for us? This workshop will explore four areas in particular: personal awareness, a brief history and survey of translation, approaches to interpretation, and reviewing a few actual passages. Throughout we'll use the metaphor of a meal. Every significant spiritual movement or transaction we find in the Bible has a common meal at the heart: the meal before passover, the table in Psalm 23, or the Last Supper, to name a few.

**So, Let's eat!**



Prayer is one of the most significant tools we have in the task of Biblical interpretation.

**“What is a moderate interpretation of the text? Halfway between what it really means and what you'd like it to mean?”**

—ANTONIN SCALIA

# Awareness: What Is Actually on the Table?

## *Bible Knowledge Inventory*

Review the following statements and answer according to your knowledge of the Bible. Keep in mind this is *not* a test but rather an awareness-raising tool, an inventory. With each of your answers ask yourself why answer the way you do.

1. What two books in the Bible never mention the name of God? (As a further consideration, can you articulate why they might have been included?)
2. Is "Spare the rod, spoil the child" in the Bible and, if so, where?
3. Is "Money is the root of all evil" in the Bible and, if so, where?
4. Relay as best you can the details of the Genesis 3 Temptation story.
5. Is "Cleanliness is next to godliness" in the Bible and, if so, where?
6. Is "God moves in mysterious ways" in the Bible and, if so, where?
7. How many Gospels are there? Of them, which ones talk about Jesus' birth?
8. Which Gospel is actually a letter?
9. How many books are there in the Bible?
10. Do the Gospels share the same timeline for the events in Jesus' life? What stories are the same no matter which Gospel you read?
11. How did the Bible translation you trust get formed? On what is its text based?
12. Would you say you interpret Scripture literally or allegorically? Why?
13. Which parts of the Bible were shared verbally (oral tradition) before being written down?
14. Is it better to hear Scripture or to read Scripture?
15. How do we know what Jesus said when praying alone in the garden of Gethsemane?
16. How many Creation stories are there?
17. Who is in the best position to interpret Scripture? Why?
18. How many translations are there of the Bible? Which translation is the most faithful?
19. Do any original Hebrew or Greek manuscripts of the Bible exist?
20. What is your favorite verse? How do you apply it to your faith life?

*What Are We Supposed to Eat?*

Why do any of these answers matter? One of the trickiest parts about interpretation is us. Is you. Knowing what you bring TO the text is as important as what you get OUT because your personal lens can determine what you see. If the only thing you want to eat is beef but the only thing available on the Table are vegetables, you won't find anything to eat. But if your approach to the table is to be open to eating what you find, then no matter what is served, you'll always find something to eat. What are you looking for when you engage Scripture? What are you looking for? How you answered the questions above can lend clues as to why some passage may be more important to you than others. Let's face it: we play favorites when it comes to Scripture, even if we agree we should at least TRY to eat our vegetables.

## Answer Key (at least in part!):

1. Song of Solomon (an allegory of love of the Promised Land); Esther (a book laying out the rationale for the Feast of Purim)
2. No. Look up Proverbs 13:24 to see what the Bible actually says.
3. No. Look up 1 Timothy 6:10 to see what the Bible actually says.
4. Reference Genesis 3:1-24.
5. No. Look up James 4:8 to see what the Bible actually says.
6. No. Look up Isaiah 55:8 to see what the Bible actually says.
7. There are four Gospels (that is, stories about the life of Jesus Christ) and two of them, Matthew and Luke, talk about Jesus' birth.
8. Luke is the first half of an extended letter then ends with Acts.
9. Sixty-six.
10. Reference a Gospel Parallel to find this answer for yourself. It lays the Gospels out side by side cross referencing differences and similarities. There are great online resources for this, but be careful to note the difference between a parallel and a "harmony". A parallel simply lays the text out side by side. A harmony tries to reconcile differences and accomplish one continuous narrative.
11. Remember, some Bibles are paraphrases, that is, they are based on a person or committee's interpretation of a translation. Some are translations from English into another language (effectively, a paraphrase). Some are translations from Hebrew and Greek texts thought to be authoritative.
12. Note to check your assumptions about what it means to take things literally or allegorically. Which do you believe is more important in arriving at "truth"?
13. Only a few of the letters in the New Testament were NOT dictated.
14. Opinions vary! This author believes Scripture was meant to be heard.
15. Think about how you arrive at your answers (if you have them).
16. There are two distinct—especially in terms of the method of Creation—stories (Genesis 1:1-2:4a & Genesis 2:4b-25).
17. How you answer this leans heavily upon whom (or what) you determine holds interpretive authority for you.
18. —from Wikipedia: "The Bible has been translated into many languages from the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. As of November 2014 the full Bible has been translated into 531 languages, and 2,883 languages have at least some portion of the Bible."
19. No. What we have are pieces (some of them exceptionally old) of manuscripts that we use to piece together the whole.

What governs your approach to Scripture? Is it to find answers? Is it find proof? Is it to seek God's voice?

## Which cookbook do we use?

Any discussion of translation must include a discussion of the Biblical languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Hebrew and Aramaic are in a class of languages called Semitic (Arabic and related languages are like this too). They read right to left and form ideas by painting mental pictures a varying intensity. So the root word for “broken” gets modifiers that range from “cracked” to “shattered” without using modifier words like “very” or “more”. Semitic languages also employ consonants with vowels implied by context. While we really don’t have an equivalent for this in English (or Greek for that matter), think of the translation task like this:

LV DR MT

The above could read “I love a door mat” or “Live deer meat!” How we know which is which depends heavily on the literary context and what we remember about grammar.

Koine (pronounced “koy-nay”) Greek does not present this challenge. However, because this is no longer a spoken language some phrases and idioms are not always clear. Additionally, some of the manuscripts are akin to this:

GREETINGSMYNAMEISPAU  
LANDIWANTTOSHAREMYTH  
OUGHTSABOUTGODWITHY  
OUMYFAVORITECHURCH

Yes, some manuscripts are in all capital letters and run the words together with no spaces. Hopefully you were able to make out “Greetings, my name is Paul and I want to share my thoughts about God with you, my favorite church.” Again literary context and keen knowledge of grammar and vocabulary are required to navigate this well.

All of this, and, in the case of all the Biblical languages, we have only parts of the oldest manuscripts (generally thought to be the most authentic and reliable, that is, “unedited”). We do not presently have ANY of the original manuscripts. We have considerably old ones, but everything we have is a copy. And what we have is fragmented. In some cases, there is literally a physical hole in the document that we have to use clues to determine what is said. Imagine the following:

GREETINGSMYNAMEISPAU  
LANDI        TOSHAREMYTH  
OUGHTSABOUT        WITHY  
OUMYFAVORI        URCH

Sometimes we have the good fortune of having enough pieces to compare and determine the whole. In other situations, we have to take what we already know about the author and guess at what is meant or missing.

This may all sound terribly inexact. This does NOT mean the Bible is unreliable. In fact, let's be clear one point: EVERY translation is a FAITHFUL translation. The individuals and groups making the effort to render the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek into other languages are not trying to trick people or otherwise hide the truth of what's being said in Scripture. To the contrary: they are trying to illuminate it.

But what should also be clear is that because all the factors above and more, EVERY translation is an INTERPRETATION. Decisions have to be made as to which manuscript to use, what grammar or vocabulary to go with, how best to convey meaning, especially of words that have no English equivalent. (Please note: this is not unusual even today; the German word, "schadenfreude", does not have an English equivalent but we still know what it means and can convey the idea: "taking pleasure in the misery of others".)

At this point, we should observe the difference between a translation and a paraphrase. A translation is seeking to interpret and render Scripture from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek (Common English Bible, New International Version, King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, etc.). A paraphrase is seeking to interpret and render from a translation (So the Living Bible is a paraphrase of the King James Version). This is important to know because a paraphrase is an interpretation of an interpretation.

So which version is the most reliable? How do you pick what works? Remember, EVERY translation is a faithful one. Just be mindful of how it came to you. Many versions will have an introduction that describes how your Bible was put together. Make yourself aware of this history. A case can be made for using later translations because they have the latest scholarship AND oldest available manuscripts on which they're based (the manuscripts used in the New Revised Standard Version were older than the ones available to the King James translators, for example). And yet, the King James has served and continues to serve the Church and many people beyond very well and reliably. Use what moves you.

Among the other considerations of translation is, of course, what books to include. The Roman Catholic Church includes what is known as the Apocrypha (a set of additional books) in their Bible, but Protestant Churches (like the PC(USA)) include only the sixty-six you'll find in our pew Bibles. Who made that decision? A Committee, basically. And a committee is largely responsible for most our translations with some important exceptions. The Message, for example, is a translation by Eugene Peterson. He has taken the further step, however, of trying to render the social and cultural pieces found in the Biblical languages into present-day situations and idioms. This is in the tradition of Martin Luther and the Wycliffe Bible Translators. But the Common English Bible, American Standard Version, New International Version, and many others, were all done by groups of people.

So which cookbook do we use? Whatever we're in the mood for. In worship we use the CEB and the NRSV. But more than once in Funerals we've used the KJV for some texts.

There is a LOT more to translation than this. But the point of this brief survey is remind us that (1) every translation is an interpretation and (2) decisions had to be made to get us there.

## Finding Our Way around the Kitchen

With our Bible in front of us how do we know what to do? How do we decide what we're reading much less what it means?

There are many approaches to interpreting the Bible. While only covering a few here, it should be noted that each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. One caution I would offer immediately is that there is no such thing as an "objective reading" of Scripture. If the Mark 8:29 passage we started with is any indication, matters of faith are importantly and purposefully *subjective*. It matters to God what we think. It should matter to us as well. But remember, the principal reason for all of the furor is the desire to know God's mind and that has been equated with knowing what the Bible says.

### *Inerrancy*

—from *Wikipedia*: Biblical inerrancy, as formulated in the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy", is the doctrine that the Bible "is without error or fault in all its teaching"; or, at least, that "Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact" ... The signatories to the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* admit that "inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic\* text of Scripture". However, even though there may be no extant original manuscripts of the Bible, those which exist can be considered inerrant, because, as the statement reads: "the autographic text of Scripture, ... in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy". Some equate inerrancy with infallibility; others do not. Biblical inerrancy should not be confused with Biblical literalism.

\*That is, the text that was actually written down by the author at the time

This is a less conservative approach than *literalism* in that an Inerrantist is trying to allow for human agency. Also, the focus of this approach is on the reliability of the Bible for matters of faith.

This approach has gifted us with great and faithful efforts to resolve perceived conflicts in Scripture and to challenge our assumptions about what is Biblically normative. It is also pushes us to ask very tough questions of our human agency and to give the Bible its due prominence in our life of faith. How the

**“There is danger in a single story because some stories remain untold and the telling of a story is never synonymous with the real event(s) themselves. The many stories in the Bible testify about God and Jesus (cf. John 5:39; 21:25). God cannot be circumscribed or contained within any story humans narrate, if only because human language is sufficiently insufficient.”**

—MITZI J. SMITH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY, ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, DETROIT, MICHIGAN

inspiration of God of the Biblical writers works is a prominent focus of this approach, which is thought to be interactive and preserving of the personality and gifts of the individual authors.

A weakness of this approach is that, without the “original manuscripts” with which to compare, we’re still relying on human judgement to determine what is authentically inerrant and what is not. Also, we are left wanting for those situations to which the Bible does not speak directly.

### *Literallism*

—from *Wikipedia*: Biblical literalism is a term...concerning biblical interpretation. It can equate to the dictionary definition of literalism: “adherence to the exact letter or the literal sense”, where literal means “in accordance with, involving, or being the primary or strict meaning of the word or words; not figurative or metaphorical”.

This approach presses the faithful to consider the Bible as factually true in all aspects, even outside of matters of faith. The emphasis here is to preserve the Bible’s role as the final arbiter of truth because of the Bible’s role as the Word of God. It is an approach that upholds the values of holding the Bible in reverence and respect and to trust Scripture implicitly. Thus, for examples, Creationism and a young earth approach to history are born of this school of thought. Also, like its cousin, inerrancy, a literal approach demands we take Scripture extremely seriously.

A literal approach does not take human agency as seriously. Further, literalism seems to assume that an objective reading of Scripture is possible. But without the “original manuscripts” this is a dubious possibility at best. Also, this method encourages one to ignore literary methodology for the sake of the prima facie presentation of the text which may actually overlook the author’s intended meaning. Human agency is secondary here as God is thought to have directed the writing of Scripture without “input” from the authors per se.

### *Biblical Criticism*

—from [http://www.theopedia.com/Biblical\\_criticism](http://www.theopedia.com/Biblical_criticism): Biblical criticism is an umbrella term covering various techniques for applying literary historical-critical methods in analyzing and studying the Bible and its textual content. The word "criticism" is not to be taken in the negative sense of attempting to denigrate the Bible, although this motive is found in its history. Technically, biblical criticism simply refers to the scholarly approach of studying, evaluating and critically assessing the Bible as literature in order to understand it better. Higher criticism, arising from 19th century European rationalism, generally takes a secular approach asking questions regarding the origin and composition of the text, including when and where it originated, how, why, by whom, for whom, and in what circumstances it was produced, what influences were at work in its production, and what original oral or written sources may have been used in its composition; and the message of the text as expressed in its language, including the meaning of the words as well as the way in which they are arranged in meaningful forms of expression. The principles of higher criticism are based on reason rather than revelation and are also speculative by nature. Lower criticism, also called Textual criticism, generally asks questions having to do with the preservation and transmission of the biblical text, including in what manuscripts the text has been preserved, their date, setting, and relationship to each other, and therefore what is the most reliable form of the text. In this sense, it is

virtually synonymous with what is called Textual Criticism. Statistical criticism, uses mathematical and statistical methods to sift through variant readings. Instead of using manuscript families and the Bible critic's own reason, this type of criticism puts the various texts into a statistical formula to derive its text.

This approach, generally, is what most seminarians are taught. They are trained to look closely at the Biblical languages and to use that grammatical, historical and statistical knowledge to get as close to an original reading of the text as possible. Part of the charm of this method is that it leaves room to take seriously the science of literacy, archaeology, history, sociology and other language arts to arrive at what is thought to be a original meaning of a given text.

Several problems with this approach ensue because the underlying premise is flawed by the lack of the "original documents". Also, it lays wide the temptation to consider the "technical" reading to be the most faithful which may not be true.

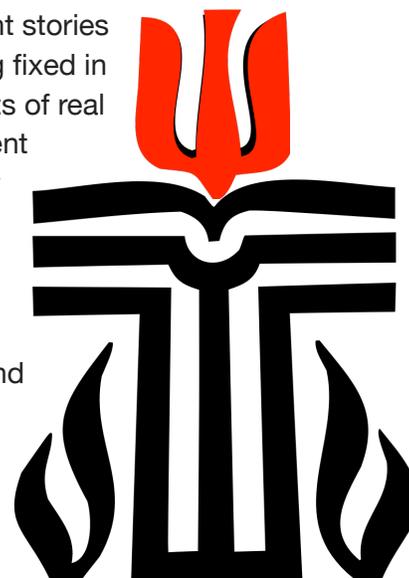
#### *Side Note: The Presbyterian Seal*

One of the things we continually profess is that without God's help we have no chance to understand Scripture. This is symbolized on our church seal in three important ways. First, the Holy Spirit (God) is symbolized by the descending dove. Second, just below it is a Bible laying atop a pulpit. Third, it is with the interaction of God's Spirit and our interaction with the text that the Bible becomes God's Word to us. Preaching alone does not accomplish this. Reading alone does not accomplish this. But the inspiration of God makes everything possible.

#### *The Bible as Folklore/Legend/Allegory*

—from [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_inte2.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_inte2.htm): Alan Dundes is a professor of anthropology and folklore at the University of California. He has written over 30 books based on his studies of the oral traditions of many cultures. In his book called: "Holy writ as oral lit. The Bible as folklore," he reports that multiple versions of various important stories appear in the Bible....From the discrepancies among the various version of the same stories, he concluded not only that the Bible contains folklore, but that the Bible is folklore....Ancient stories were circulated for decades or centuries via an oral tradition before being fixed in written form. Some were legends and myths; others were accounts of real events. Various groups within a religion or culture passed on different versions of the story. By the time that multiple versions of the same story were written down, many discrepancies had developed.

This approach tries to lift up the Bible as more than just another book, but not particularly unique in the annals of history or culture. It tries to not only make cultural sense of the discrepancies (as he described them) found but to make instructive the differences as a way to track the progression of religious thought found in the Bible. While a literalist or an inerrantist would not take this view, they share the same desire to try and place the Bible in a progressive timeline of illumination. This approach presses



the faithful to take seriously that the Bible comes to us over a terrifically large span of time: thousands of years. Here the Bible is seen as any other piece of important historical literature. This method frees us to consider any question and to hold suspicious discrepancies and conflicts.

Some immediate problems emerge as our Christian confession is the Bible is NOT like any other book. Also, this method doesn't take into account the process of inspiration and God's role in the formation of the Scriptures. An egregious problem with this approach is that it does not take seriously the Bible's role as an arbiter of actual faith, simply that people took it that way.

*For a look around the cabinets, counters, and appliances*

Felix Just is a Roman Catholic scholar who has put together a pretty good list of the various methods/schools of thought and their principal questions used to approach the task of interpreting the Bible. You can find his table at <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Exegesis.htm> with space below to evaluate each method yourself. Be warned: some of the methods mentioned assume some knowledge you may or may not have. Also, there's a great outline of textual criticism (all about the manuscripts) at this website (<http://faithbibleonline.net/MiscDoctrine/TextualCriticismOfTheBible.htm>).

So what are we to do with this feast? Like a ridiculous buffet, it can be hard to even know where to start. Begin with the notion that all of these categories (while useful in their way) are all arbitrary. They have been set up to describe what people are actually doing. The take away from this kitchen is that not only might you find yourself using any number of cookbooks, but the kitchen in which you cook may have any manner of tools, methods, resources and circumstances. Be mindful of yours and how you approach Scripture: not just which Bible, but also what you do when you actually open it.



## Sitting Down for a Snack & Finding a Meal



Using the following references and questions, interpret the meaning of these Scripture passages.

### **Matthew 19:16-22**

- What is the central message of this passage?
- For whom is it meant? Who is Jesus talking to? Why did the author of Matthew include it?

### **John 14:6**

- What is the central message of this passage?
- For whom is it meant? Who is Jesus talking to? Why did the author of Matthew include it?

### **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

- What is the central message of this passage?
- For whom is it meant? Who is Jeremiah talking to? Why should we believe this applies to us now?

### **1 Samuel 18:10**

- What do you make of this verse and the idea that the evil spirit came from God?
- What information do you think you need to understand this?