



## HOW TO READ THE BIBLE, PART 2: THE SCIENCE AND ART OF INTERPRETATION



Do you want to read the Bible, but you're not sure how to do it well. What does it really mean? How is the Bible rightly understood?

This is a critical question, for it is often asserted that you can get the Bible to say just about anything you want it to say. And hasn't that been true? After all, didn't people once use the Bible to defend slavery, polygamy, the divine right of kings, or the drowning of witches? Shakespeare says it well:

*In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it,  
and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament.*<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the Bible necessarily involves interpretation, or what scholars call *hermeneutics*. We engage in interpretation all the time. Every time we read a billboard, read a letter, examine a legal contract, or pick up a book, we must interpret what is written. We must decode the signs of communication and seek to answer the question, what does this *mean*?

This process is both a science and an *art*. We think of it as a *science* in that we seek certain logical rules and procedures that can be applied across the board that result in meaning; we want accuracy and precision.

But we have to realize that interpretation is also an art. It is an acquired skill that requires both judgment and imagination. When we talk of decoding signs, we usually think of *words* as signs that carry meaning, but decoding these words is a process that involves far more than picking up a dictionary and finding a definition.

Consider, for example, some foreign student being taught English. If he is at my house and picks up a piece of my mail, and the first words he reads are "Dear Bill" — what is he to think? The dictionary may tell him that *dear* is a term of intimate affection, so he may interpret this phrase in that way. Somebody really likes Bill!, he thinks. And if that letter is from my wife, he would be right.



But what if that letter was generated by a computer and was sent by a company trying to get me to refinance my mortgage? In that case, he'd be entirely wrong. But how would he know that? How would you explain that to him?

Or think about the words that a father may say to his daughter, "You will be home by midnight, won't you?"<sup>2</sup> Is that a question, an assumption, a command, or even a threat? Only attention to the total context and to the more subtle clues of communication can enable you to decide. This process of decoding involves an assessment of all sorts of factors that require careful attention and sometimes almost mystical insight. What is this person doing by using these words in this way, speaking to this audience?

### The Issue of Presuppositions

Here's one reason interpretation can be difficult: when reading a text, people often find there what they expect to see. Our presuppositions can determine the meaning we perceive. The preconceptions we come with can shape what we come away with when interpreting a text. We are all situated in particular social contexts that can greatly influence our perceptions.

A very early example of this in understanding the Bible can be seen in a group called the Gnostics. Gnosticism (which comes from the Greek word meaning "knowledge"), which became popular from the second century A.D., was a mixture of pantheistic ideas from the East, the dualism of Plato, and the mystery religions of the Roman world. They approached the Bible with their own philosophical and religious views. As a result, they interpreted the Bible to say that the God and Father



of Jesus found in the New Testament was different from the God of the Old Testament, who was inferior and created this present evil world. Individual human spirits, once of one substance with the divine, were now imprisoned in earthly bodies, causing them to fall asleep spiritually, blind in this realm of darkness. Jesus had come to wake people up to their true origin and destiny by revealing to them the truth of who they are — beings with a spark of the divine, just like Himself. When they read the Bible with their own presuppositions, the Gnostics found passages that supported their understanding.

Much closer to home are the modern, naturalistic interpreters whose nonsupernatural presuppositions lead them to read the Bible as a book of myths and legends, fanciful stories with no basis in history. Their guiding principle of interpretation was stated well by the noted New Testament scholar of the previous century, Rudolph Bultmann:

*Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil . . . It is impossible to use the electric light and the radio and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.<sup>3</sup>*

They can't believe in miracles, so it is no surprise that in reading the Bible they don't find them there.

## Who Is to Be Master?



So do our presuppositions *determine* meaning in reading the Bible? I am reminded of the interchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in Wonderland. They were discussing what Humpty Dumpty meant by the word glory.

*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."*

*"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."*

*"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."<sup>4</sup>*

Who is to be master in our interpretation of the Bible? The answer of the first Christians was clear. It was Jesus. They had come to faith in Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, their Savior and their Lord. His authorized representatives, the apostles, had proclaimed the good news of His saving work, and this gospel, which they summarized in what was called the "rule of faith," became the key to the right understanding of the Bible.

## The Proper Key

In the second century the bishop Irenaeus talked about the role of this rule of faith in biblical interpretation. In those days, mosaics were shipped unassembled, but they included with them a plan or key that showed the recipient how the tiles were to be put together. The church's rule of faith is like that key, Irenaeus says. Whereas the heretics arrange the Scriptures wrongly to form the picture of a dog, the church's rule of faith explains how the Scriptures are to be arranged, to render the portrait of the King (*Adv. Haer.* 1.8.1; 1.9.4).

To read the Bible rightly, one must submit to the Master, who alone holds the key to meaning. Jesus Christ and His gospel must guide our understanding of the Bible, even as our reading of the Bible will refine our understanding of Jesus and His work. Biblical interpretation cannot be separated from theology. There is a two-way relationship between these two. We come to our reading of Scripture with certain suppositions, certain questions, certain expectations, which are either confirmed or challenged by our reading of Scripture, forming a new understanding that is then brought to the process of reading more Scripture. This is what is known as the hermeneutical spiral — this constant back and forth relationship between the reader and the text. But its starting point must be Jesus, our Master.



So it is that the church, composed of those who acknowledge Jesus as Master, provides the proper interpretive community within which we rightly understand the Bible. The Bible and its gospel message creates the church, and then the church proclaims the Bible’s message to the world. In what follows, I will begin to spell out some of the interpretive principles that flow from this understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the key to rightly understanding the Bible.

## We Are Interpretive Realists

Let me begin at the beginning. Because we affirm, with Jesus, that God exists as the Creator of all things and that He speaks in the Bible, we are necessarily “interpretive realists.”<sup>5</sup> That is, we believe that there is a real meaning in the Bible outside of us, independent of our interpretation and waiting to be discovered.

Interpretive realism is grounded theologically in the Creator-creature distinction, which affirms the fundamental independence of God from His world, as well as from all human thought and experience. God exists *outside* of us as the ultimate Author of Scripture, and He speaks to us. We *receive* God’s revelation, we do not *create* it.

This may sound obvious, but it is denied by many today. Postmodern interpreters assert that meaning comes not from the author but from the reader. A text *means* what it means to me. The postmodern “death of the author” requires that we create our own meaning.

Such hermeneutical “will to power” is nothing but idolatry — creating our own god. In contrast, we affirm that there is a God who stands outside of us and over us who has spoken to us, and we had better listen.<sup>6</sup> The authority of the Scriptures follows from *God’s* authorship. Our understanding of the gospel gives us hope that God *can* speak to us, for we believe that God is *personal*, and He has created us in *His* image. This provides a theological rationale for our faith in divine-human communication.



## Good News Must Be Understandable

More than that, we believe that the gospel is God’s good news, and to be good news, it must be intelligible. Thus the very notion of “gospel” requires divine communication. The intelligibility of the gospel undergirds the Reformers’ insistence on the doctrine of the *perspicuity* or *clarity* of Scripture. God has a gospel to communicate with His people, and the Bible’s basic saving message can be understood by ordinary readers.

So our doctrine of God — God as Creator, God as the personal triune God who has a gospel to communicate, and ourselves as created in God’s image — all this gives us theological grounds for believing that when we come to the Bible, we can and must hear His voice to us there.

## Our Understanding Is Limited

Our theology, however, also suggests that not everything in the Bible may be immediately obvious or clear to us. We are “*critical* realists” in our interpretation, for although we believe that God can communicate with us, our understanding of who we are as human beings also forces us to recognize the limitations in our understanding.

For one thing, as *finite* creatures, we are culturally located, occupying only one particular place in space and time. Only God is infinite. We are limited in our knowledge, for we cannot know all the aspects of language, culture, and history that make for complete communication. Only God is all-knowing.

In addition, and more significantly, though we were created in God’s image, our theology asserts that we are now *sinful*; that



divine image is now corrupt and in need of repair. In our sinful state, we are spiritually resistant to God's truth, and we are liable to demonic deception. There is something about us that now hinders our understanding of God's Word to us.

We are not so naïve as to think that we come to the Bible as neutral observers, with a blank slate, with no preunderstanding, and that we can view the Bible exactly as God views it. We now see as "in a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). We acknowledge something of the postmodern critique. As a result, we are "critical" realists. We confess we cannot know God's truth exhaustively, but we affirm that we can know it adequately and truly.

## Our Understanding Is Sufficient

What is the ground of such hermeneutical confidence? It can come only through the work of the Holy Spirit. As God is the *Author* seeking to communicate with us, and His text is the *Word*, supremely the Word of His Son Jesus Christ, so the Spirit is the One who comes alongside us as *readers* enabling us to understand what He has intended.<sup>7</sup> I appreciate what theologian (and CSLI Senior Fellow) Kevin Vanhoozer says about this:

*The Spirit sanctifies the reader, removing pride and prejudice and creating the humility of heart and mind ready to receive something not of its own making. In short, the Spirit transforms us from being non-realists who prefer our own lies, to realists who desire to hear the Word of God. Reading in the Spirit, therefore, means letting the letter accomplish the purpose for which it was sent (Is. 55:11) ... the Spirit is the Word's empowering presence.*



So our understanding of God and humanity leads us to be hermeneutical realists; God is the author who speaks to us, and we can understand Him. We believe in the basic clarity of Scripture in its central message. But our theology also makes us critical realists in our interpretation. Because of our finitude and our sin, God's communication with us is not always clear and plain, and we need the work of the Holy Spirit to be good readers of God's Word.

## In the Bible, God Speaks through Human Authors

Our understanding of the Bible's divine inspiration affirms that God makes use of the words of human authors to produce his Word. This means that as a "human" book, the Bible must be interpreted through grammatical-historical means to seek the intention of the human authors as expressed through what they have written.

The term *grammatical-historical* is really just a fancy term for the common-sensical way that we think about interpreting any document: What did this person mean by writing these words? Interpretation involves decoding the signs that an author uses to communicate a message.

How do we do that? We begin with words, but words can mean all sorts of things. Take, for example, the word *attack*. Is it a noun or a verb? It could refer to a military exercise or a medical condition or a position on a soccer team. We don't know. Words only have a definitive meaning in the context of a *sentence* — such as "The wolf went on the attack and ate the little girl." The sentence provides a context and has a grammatical structure that helps us sort out what is being said.

But sentences have meaning only within a particular setting within the context of a paragraph and of a chapter and of a book. And this raises the question of *genre*, or the kind of book it is.

Take that sentence, "The wolf went on the attack and ate the little girl." How do we understand it? If I read it in our local newspaper, I would probably hesitate to go walking in the woods. But consider the difference in my reaction if that sentence was part of a story that began, "Once upon a time..." That expression is a literary clue that tells me that this is a fairy tale,



and, knowing that genre, I now know how to understand that sentence correctly.

There are all sorts of genres — historical reports, love poems, parables, proverbs, and so on, and we interpret them differently. By using certain generic forms, authors evoke reading strategies in their audience. They send signals to their readers as to “how to take” their statements. Judgment about genre is part of the art of interpretation. After all, Jesus doesn’t announce, “I’m telling a parable here,” when he says, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers...” (Luke 10:30).

The Bible certainly includes historical writing. Luke’s introduction to his Gospel (1:1–4) points to his intention to provide an accurate account of what he reports. He wants us to know that these things really happened. But writing history in the ancient world didn’t require a stenographer’s record of everything that was said nor would it preclude topical collections of teaching or events rather than strictly chronological. All this is part of appreciating the cultural assumptions and conventions that authors used in their work.

Other kinds of literature require other reading strategies. Proverbs tend to present generalizations. Prophetic books may use the common language of the day to depict events beyond our imagination. A book like the Revelation of John uses strange beasts to depict forces in the world, much as political cartoons do in our day. Understanding the ways these various literary forms work is part of the art of interpretation.

This grammatical-historical principle of interpretation is critical, for it is here that we have the central objective control over the interpretative process. The meaning of the Bible for today must begin with *and be controlled* by what the Bible meant by those who wrote it. This is where the objectivity of biblical interpretation must be found.



### Do We Interpret the Bible “Literally”?

Grammatical-historical interpretation, in seeking the original intent of the human author, must take into account the entire range of the historical, cultural, religious, linguistic, and literary factors that help us arrive at that intention. This means that the term *literal* becomes an ambiguous term. Rightly understood — and this is the way it has been understood, especially since the Reformation — literal interpretation, or *sensus literalis* as it is called, is the same as grammatical-historical interpretation. That is, it involves a determination of the meaning of the text as the author intended it, taking into account the original historical and cultural context and literary form in which that message was given.

The Reformers insisted upon this literal meaning, as opposed to an allegorical meaning which had often been used in the church, because an allegorical interpretation imported ideas into the text from outside the Bible, distorting its meaning and denying the principle of Scripture alone as our authority.

But in using the term *literal*, we must be careful not to insist upon using terms like *plain meaning* or *obvious meaning*, for the obvious question is, plain or obvious to whom? Is it the original reader or someone reading today in his or her 21st-century American context?

### Divine Authorship and Biblical Unity

There is, however, another danger in the misuse of so-called literal interpretation. Individual statements in Scripture, taken literally, must be understood in their broader context as a part of the entire biblical canon.

Didn’t Satan tempt Jesus in the desert with a literal interpretation of Scripture, urging him to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple with the divine promise of protection found in Ps. 91:11–12? But Jesus didn’t take the bait. He



interpreted what is literally said in Psalm 91 by using the broader message of the Bible. In response He quoted from Deut. 6:16 (cf. Matt. 4:6–7).

Another notable example of the misuse of biblical literalism appeared in the fourth century. A heretical priest, Arius, insisted upon a literal interpretation of the Bible. Though Arius believed that Christ was highly exalted, he denied that He was eternal. He was still a creature who had a beginning, Arius insisted, for hadn't Paul affirmed in Col. 1:15 that Christ was "the *firstborn* over all creation"?

### The Analogy of Scripture: The Bible Is Its Own Best Interpreter

The church's response to Arius leads to another principle that flows from our understanding of biblical inspiration. Not only is the Bible a human book, requiring grammatical-historical interpretation, but it is also a "divine" book, requiring that we recognize its *unity*. As a book fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Bible reflects one divine mind. Therefore, we must assume that it is consistent with itself. As a consequence, *Scripture is its own best interpreter*. This principle is known as *the analogy of Scripture*.

How does this principle work? Generally, that which is clear and emphatic in Scripture is to be used to interpret what is obscure and sporadic. That is, passages that treat a topic in a more systematic and coherent fashion help us to understand a passage in which a topic may be referred to in passing.

So, for example, the eternal nature of God the Son, the Word as John calls Him, is clearly taught in John 1 and Philippians 2, and these passages provide the basis for understanding what Paul says in Colossians 1 about Jesus being "the firstborn of creation." Or what Paul says about justification by faith in Romans 3–4 and Galatians 2–3 helps us to understand what is said in James 2. Or Paul's reference to baptism for the dead in 1 Cor. 15:29 must be understood in the light of what is taught in Romans 6.

### The Analogy of Faith: The Bible Is Consistent in Its Central Message

The principle of the unity of Scripture has been applied in another way known as *the analogy of faith*. Since Scripture has a unified message, and that central message is captured in "the rule of faith" — that is, the central creedal doctrines of our faith, then individual passages should be interpreted in a way that is harmonious with that faith.

Certainly, we must be careful that our human description of "the faith" — that is, our theological synthesis of the Bible's message — does not stand over the Bible itself. It must be tested by the Bible. As we said, there must be a dynamic relationship between the two such that our exegetical work interacts with our theological formulations, forcing us at times to make adjustments to those formulations if the exegetical results are strong enough. But the analogy of faith is still a helpful approach as a general principle of interpretation.

Because the Bible has a divine author, it has a unified message, and that calls us to seek to synthesize that message as much as we can. And that's what theology is — an attempt to synthesize that coherent and unified message of God found in the Bible.

### The Bible's Focus on Jesus Christ



And what is that unifying center of the Bible’s message? Returning to our fundamental assumption that Jesus is to be Master, we must say that the unifying center of the Bible is Jesus Christ. This is why Christians call the Hebrew Bible the *Old Testament*; it points forward to the *New Testament* (or covenant), which comes to us in Christ. In our next installment in this series, we will further explore this focus on Jesus and consider some of its important implications for our reading the Bible rightly. ■

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In the mouth of Bassanio, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, scene 2.

<sup>2</sup> From William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper, 1961), 4, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* (1855–1871; repr., New York: Signet Classics, 1960), 186.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see Kevin Vanhoozer, “‘But That’s Your Interpretation’: Realism, Reading, and Reformation,” *Modern Reformation*, July–August 1999), 21–24. This theme is expanded in his very insightful book, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Consider the words of God to the disciples referring to the transfigured Jesus (Luke 9:35).

<sup>7</sup> On the role of the Spirit, see Vern Poythress, “Why Must Our Hermeneutics Be Trinitarian?” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 96–98. Also Vanhoozer, *Meaning in This Text?*

<sup>8</sup> Vanhoozer, “But That’s Your Interpretation,” 28.



I take it as a first principle that we must not interpret any one part of Scripture so that it contradicts other parts...  
— C.S. Lewis



- 1 What is interpretive realism and why, according to Bill Kynes, is it important?
- 2 After considering this article, how would you explain the terms “the analogy of Scripture” and “the analogy of faith”? How are they related to the unity of Scripture?



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HOW TO READ THE BIBLE, PART 2:  
THE SCIENCE AND ART OF INTERPRETATION



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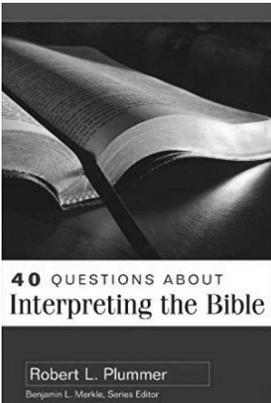
## RECOMMENDED READING

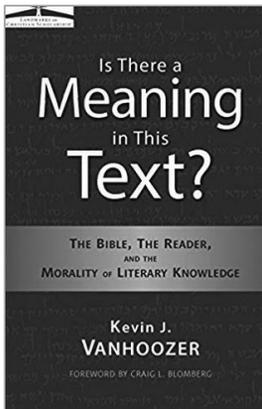
**Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Kregel Academic & Professional, 2010)**

In *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, New Testament Professor Dr. Robert L. Plummer tackles the major questions that persons ask about reading and understanding the Bible.

Questions include:

- Does the Bible contain error?
- Were the ancient manuscripts of the Bible transmitted accurately?
- What is the best English Bible translation?
- Is the Bible really all about Jesus?
- Do all the commands of the Bible apply today?
- Why can't people agree on what the Bible means?
- How do we interpret historical narrative?
- How do we interpret the Psalms?
- What does the Bible tell us about the future?
- What is the "Theological Interpretation of Scripture" and many others





Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Zondervan Academic, 2009)

*Is There a Meaning in This Text?* guides the student toward greater confidence in the authority, clarity, and relevance of Scripture, and a well-reasoned expectation to understand accurately the message of the Bible. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* is a comprehensive and creative analysis of current debates over biblical hermeneutics that draws on interdisciplinary resources, all coordinated by Christian theology. It makes a significant contribution to biblical interpretation that will be of interest to readers in a number of fields. The intention of the book is to revitalize and enlarge the concept of author-oriented interpretation and to restore confidence that readers of the Bible can reach understanding. The result is a major challenge to the central assumptions of postmodern biblical scholarship and a constructive alternative proposal—an Augustinian hermeneutic—that reinvigorates the notion of biblical authority and finds a new exegetical practice that recognizes the importance of both the reader’s situation and the literal sense.

Additional information about *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*:

Is there a meaning in the Bible, or is meaning rather a matter of who is reading or of how one reads? Does Christian doctrine have anything to contribute to debates about interpretation, literary theory, and post modernity? These are questions of crucial importance for contemporary biblical studies and theology alike.

Kevin Vanhoozer contends that the postmodern crisis in hermeneutics — “incredulity towards meaning,” a deep-set skepticism concerning the possibility of correct interpretation — is fundamentally a crisis in theology provoked by an inadequate view of God and by the announcement of God’s “death.”

Part 1 examines the ways in which deconstruction and radical reader–response criticism “undo” the traditional concepts of author, text, and reading. Dr. Vanhoozer engages critically with the work of Derrida, Rorty, and Fish, among others, and demonstrates the detrimental influence of the postmodern “suspicion of hermeneutics” on biblical studies.

In Part 2, Dr. Vanhoozer defends the concept of the author and the possibility of literary knowledge by drawing on the resources of Christian doctrine and by viewing meaning in terms of communicative action. He argues that there is a meaning in the text, that it can be known with relative adequacy, and that readers have a responsibility to do so by cultivating “interpretive virtues.”

Successive chapters build on Trinitarian theology and speech act philosophy in order to treat the metaphysics, methodology, and morals of interpretation. From a Christian perspective, meaning and interpretation are ultimately grounded in God’s own communicative action in creation, in the canon, and preeminently in Christ. Prominent features in Part 2 include a new account of the author’s intention and of the literal sense, the reclaiming of the distinction between meaning and significance in terms of Word and Spirit, and the image of the reader as a disciple–martyr, whose vocation is to witness to something other than oneself.