

Some Notes on How to Interpret the Bible

Have you ever heard a conversation that goes like this...

A: "I think that people should..."

B: "No, that's not right. The Bible teaches..."

A: "That's just your interpretation!"

Why do people have such different interpretations of the Bible? Is every interpretation equally valid? How do we decide what the "correct" interpretation is?

What is an interpretation?

The answer to the questions:

What does this text mean?

What does it teach in terms of belief and practice?

What relevance does it have to us?

What is the "correct" interpretation?

People even disagree about what defines the "correct" interpretation. It could be:

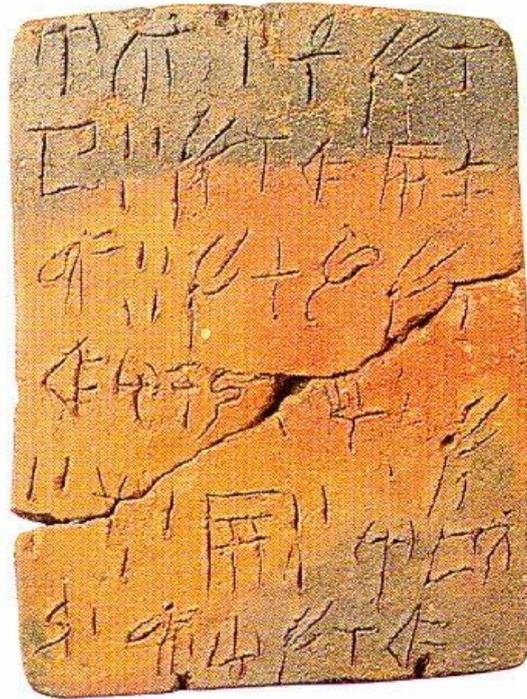
- 1) What does the text mean in itself.*
- 2) What was the intention of the author?*
- 3) What does the reader/listener understand?*

The Text

The problem with the first view is that "text" doesn't have any intrinsic meaning apart from the context of language. Letters, words, sentences, grammar, and rhetoric only have meaning because someone gives them meaning. A community of people have to have a shared linguistic context in order for the text to mean nothing. Some ancient languages are completely indecipherable because the people who used that language are gone.

The Audience

The problem with the last view is that it makes the text totally subjective. If the reader gives it meaning, then we can end up with lots of interpretations that contradict each other. Ultimately, the text ends up meaning nothing and only an instrument to express our own opinion and feeling.



An example of "Linear A". So far, no one has been able to decipher this ancient "Greek" language

The Author

The only interpretation that allows us to reach a real objective meaning which we can debate and discuss is the "authorial intent". We study the words, grammar and rhetoric in their linguistic, historical, cultural context. As Christians, we also believe in dual authorship (Divine and human), so we must consider the personal context of the author as well as the rest of God's revelation and character.

Why do people end up with the "wrong" interpretation?

Ignorance

Most wrong interpretation is very simple. More people have opinions about the Bible than have actually read it thoughtfully.

Thoughtful reading means being patient and humble with the text, asking sincere questions, letting the text to speak for itself, allowing for nuance, and respecting the need for additional context.

Arrogance

Some people knowingly or unknowingly abuse the text of the Bible to support something which they believe or want others to believe. They do not care about the "true meaning".

Extrapolation

The Bible does not deal with every question about every topic. This leaves people trying to fill gaps with extra-biblical reasoning or evidence. This can often lead to differing views.

Bias

Our interpretations can be heavily influenced by what we have been taught already, either within the Church, or within our own culture.

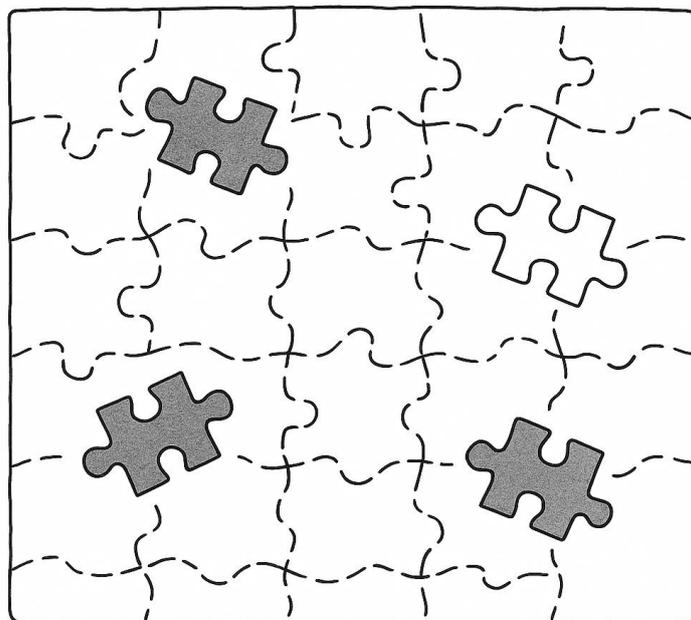
Obscure Teaching

Some parts of the Bible are deliberately obscure. This is often true of prophecy about the future. In this case, God leaves us to "search and inquire carefully" (1 Peter 1:10) what the meaning might be. But the true meaning may be something that God will not reveal clearly until after the events have taken place.

The need for "theories"

When dealing with topics on which the Bible does not give us a single complete answer, or which is obscured in symbolic or mysterious language, it can feel like putting together a jigsaw puzzle with a lot of missing pieces when we don't know what the final picture is supposed to be. This leads people to come up with different "models" or "theories"

A theory is just an explanation for how and why the available evidence fits together. If a theory doesn't account for all the evidence fairly, then the theory maybe needs updating.



Sometimes we only have a few puzzle pieces, and must imagine the rest.

Obscure teaching in Matthew

The teaching of Jesus in Matthew starts more clear and plain, but with his rejection, becomes more obscure and hidden. This is not unusual. Throughout the Bible, God presents us both with clear and plain teaching, but also with teaching whose meaning is more mysterious. God requires us to search and ponder these mysterious teachings, just like the prophets wondered about the coming Christ.

Interpretation of Prophecy - Theories of the end times

It is important to remember that there is no single Bible passage that completely explains how all the prophecy concerning the future relate to each other. The “timelines” of prophecy that people suggest are “theories” which attempt to put all the pieces together. We can argue whether they are a good explanation of the “data” of scripture.

- Dispensational, Pre-millennial, and Pre-tribulational
 - Israel the nation is distinct from the Church
 - God has paused his dealing with Israel because they rejected Christ
 - God will resume his dealing with Israel after the Church has been taken to heaven in the rapture.
 - After the rapture, there will be a time of great trouble (“tribulation”) on the earth for 7 years.
 - At the end of the 7 years, Jesus will return with his Church and judge the world.
 - Then, Christ will establish his 1000 year kingdom.
- Reformed, Covenantal, and Post-millennial
 - The Church is the spiritual successor to Israel. The ethno-national entity which we call Israel today has no significance in God’s plan for the future.
 - The Church will grow and spread until the world has become fully “Christian”, enjoying the 1000 years of Christ’s rule from heaven.
 - The “Rapture” and the “Second Coming” are one and the same event. Jesus will return to save his Church and judge the world.

