

# The Interpretation of Scripture

by James I. Packer

from ['Fundamentalism' and the Word of God](#) (Inter-Varsity Press, 1958), pp. 101-114.

The Word of God is an exceedingly complex unity. The different items and the various kinds of material which make it up—laws, promises, liturgies, genealogies, arguments, narratives, meditations, visions, aphorisms, homilies, parables and the rest—do not stand in Scripture as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole. The exposition of them, therefore, involves exhibiting them in right relation both to the whole and to each other. God's Word is not presented in Scripture in the form of a theological system, but it admits of being stated in that form, and, indeed, requires to be so stated before we can properly grasp it—grasp it, that is, as a whole. Every text has its immediate context in the passage from which it comes, its broader context in the book to which it belongs, and its ultimate context in the Bible as a whole; and it needs to be rightly related to each of these contexts if its character, scope and significance is to be adequately understood.

An analogy may help here. A versatile writer with didactic intent, like Charles Williams or G. K. Chesterton, may express his thought in a variety of literary forms—poems, plays, novels, essays, critical and historical studies, as well as formal topical treatises. In such a case, it would be absurd to think any random sentence from one of his works could safely be taken as expressing his whole mind on a subject with which it deals. The point of each sentence can be grasped only when one sees it in the context, both of the particular piece of work from which it comes, and of the writer's whole output. If we would understand the parts, our wisest course is to get to know the whole—or, at any rate, those parts of the whole which tell us in plain prose the writer's central ideas. These give us the key to all his work. Once we can see the main outlines of his thought and have grasped his general point of view, we are able to see the meaning of everything else—the point of his poems and the moral of his stories, and how the puzzling passages fit in with the rest. We may find that his message has a consistency hitherto unsuspected, and that elements in his thought which seemed contradictory are not really so at all. The task of interpreting the mind of God as expressed in His written Word is of the same order as this, and must be tackled in the same way. The beginner in Bible study often feels lost; he cannot at first grasp the Bible's over-all point of view, and so does not see the wood for the trees. As his understanding increases, however, he becomes more able to discern the unity of the biblical message, and to see the place of each part in the whole.

## **a. Interpreting Scripture Literally**

Scripture yields two basic principles for its own interpretation. The first is that the proper, natural sense of each passage (i.e., the intended sense of the writer) is to be taken as fundamental; the meaning of texts in their own contexts, and for their original readers, is the necessary starting-point for enquiry into their wider significance. In other words, Scripture statements must be interpreted in the light of the rules of grammar and discourse on the one hand, and of their own place in history on the other. This is what we should expect in the nature of the case, seeing that the biblical books originated as occasional documents addressed to contemporary audiences; and it is exemplified in the

New Testament exposition of the Old, from which the fanciful allegorizing practiced by Philo and the Rabbis is strikingly absent. This is the much-misunderstood principle of interpreting Scripture *literally*. A glance at its history will be the quickest way of clearing up the confusion.

The Mediæval exegetes, following Origen, regarded the ‘literal’ sense of Scripture as unimportant and unedifying. They attributed to each biblical statement three further senses, or levels of meaning, each of which was in a broad sense allegorical: the ‘moral’ or ‘tropological’ (from which one learned rules of conduct), the ‘allegorical’ proper (from which one learned articles of faith), and the ‘anagogical’ (from which one learned of the invisible realities of heaven). Thus, it was held that the term ‘Jerusalem’ in Scripture, while denoting ‘literally’ a city in Palestine, also referred ‘morally’ to civil society, ‘allegorically’ to the Church, and ‘anagogically’ to heaven, every time that it occurred. Only the three allegorical senses, the Mediævals held, were worth a theologian’s study; the literal record had no value save as a vehicle of figurative meaning. Mediæval exegesis was thus exclusively mystical, not historical at all; biblical facts were made simply a jumping-off ground for theological fancies, and thus spiritualized away. Against this the Reformers protested, insisting that the literal, or intended, sense of Scripture was the sole guide to God’s meaning. They were at pains to point out, however, that ‘literalism’ of this sort, so far from precluding the recognition of figures of speech where Scripture employs them, actually demands it. William Tyndale’s statement of their position may be quoted as typical: “Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the scripture hath but one sense, which is but the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Nevertheless, the scripture uses proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently.”

Tyndale castigates the Scholastics for misapplying 2 Corinthians iii.6 to support their thesis that “the literal sense ... is hurtful, and noisome, and killeth the soul”, and only spiritualizing does any good; and he replaces their distinction between the literal and spiritual senses by an equation which reflects Jn. vi.63: “God is a Spirit, and all his words are spiritual. His literal sense is spiritual ... if thou have eyes of God to see the right meaning of the text, and whereunto the Scripture pertaineth, and the final end and cause thereof.”<sup>(1)</sup> Fanciful spiritualizing, so far from yielding God’s meaning, actually obscured it. The literal sense is itself the spiritual sense, coming from God and leading to Him.

This ‘literalism’ is founded on respect for the biblical forms of speech; it is essentially a protest against the arbitrary imposition of inapplicable literary categories on scriptural statements. It is this ‘literalism’ that present-day Evangelicals profess. But to read all Scripture narratives as if they were eye-witness reports in a modern newspaper, and to ignore the poetic and imaginative form in which they are sometimes couched, would be no less a violation of the canons of evangelical ‘literalism’ than the allegorizing of the Scholastics was; and this sort of ‘literalism’ Evangelicals repudiate. It would be better to call such exegesis ‘literalistic’ rather than ‘literal’, so as to avoid confusing two very different things.<sup>(2)</sup>

The modern outcry against evangelical ‘literalism’ seems to come from those who want leave to sit loose to biblical categories and treat the biblical records of certain events

as myths, or parables—non-factual symbols of spiritual states and experiences. Many would view the story of the fall, for instance, merely as a picture of the present sinful condition of each man, and that of the virgin birth as merely expressing the thoughts of Christ’s superhuman character. Such ideas are attempts to cut the knot tied by the modern critical denial that these events really happened, and to find a way of saying that, though the stories are ‘literally’ false, yet they remain ‘spiritually’ true and valuable. Those who take this line upbraid Evangelicals for being insensitive to the presence of symbolism in Scripture. But this is not the issue. There is a world of difference between recognizing that a real event (the fall, say) may be symbolically portrayed, as Evangelicals do, and arguing, as these persons do, that because the fall is symbolically portrayed, it need not be regarded as a real event at all, but is merely a picture of something else. In opposing such inferences, Evangelicals are contending, not for a literalistic view, but for the very principles of biblical literalism which we have already stated—that we must respect the literary categories of Scripture, and take seriously the historical character of the Bible story. We may not turn narratives which clearly purport to record actual events into mere symbols of human experience at our will; still less may we do so (as has been done) in the name of biblical theology! We must allow Scripture to tell us its own literary character, and be willing to receive it as what it claims to be.

It may be thought that the historic Protestant use of the word ‘literal’ which we have here been concerned to explain is so unnatural on modern lips, and that such a weight of misleading association now attaches to the term, that it would be wisest to drop it altogether. We argued earlier that the word ‘fundamentalist’ should be dropped, as having become a barrier to mutual understanding, and the case may well be the same here. We do not contend for words. We are not bound to cling to ‘literal’ as part of our theological vocabulary; it is not itself a biblical term, and we can state evangelical principles of interpretation without recourse to it (as indeed, we did in the opening sentences of this section);<sup>(3)</sup> and perhaps it is better that we should. If we do abandon the word, however, we must not abandon the principle which it enshrines: namely, that Scripture is to be interpreted in its natural, intended sense, and theological predilections must not be allowed to divert us from loyalty to what the text actually asserts.

## **b. Interpreting Scripture by Scripture**

The second basic principle of interpretation is that Scripture must interpret Scripture; the scope and significance of one passage is to be brought out by relating it to others. Our Lord gave an example of this when he used Gn. ii.24 to show that Moses’ law of divorce was no more than a temporary concession to human hard-heartedness.<sup>(4)</sup> The Reformers termed this principle the analogy of Scripture; the Westminster Confession states it thus: “The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>(5)</sup> This is so in the nature of the case, since the various inspired books are dealing with complementary aspects of the same subject. The rule means that we must give ourselves in Bible study to following out the unities, cross-references and topical links which Scripture provides. Kings and Chronicles throw light on each other; so do the prophets and history books of the Old Testament; so do the Synoptic Gospels and John; so do the four Gospels and the Epistles; so, indeed, do the Old Testament as a whole and the New. And there is one book

in the New Testament which links up with almost everything that the Bible contains: that is the Epistle to the Romans, of which Calvin justly wrote in the Epistle prefacing his commentary on it: "If a man understands it, he has a sure road opened for him to the understanding of the whole Scripture." In Romans, Paul brings together and sets out in systematic relation all the great themes of the Bible—sin, law, judgment, faith, works, grace, justification, sanctification, election, the plan of salvation, the work of Christ, the work of the Spirit, the Christian hope, the nature and life of the Church, the place of Jew and Gentile in the purposes of God, the philosophy of Church and of world history, the meaning and message of the Old Testament, the duties of Christian citizenship, the principles of personal piety and ethics. From the vantage-point given by Romans, the whole landscape of the Bible is open to view, and the broad relation of the parts to the whole becomes plain. The study of Romans is the fittest starting-point for biblical interpretation and theology.

### **c. Problems and Difficulties**

The scientific study of Scripture is a complicated and exacting task. The biblical languages have their own distinctive idioms and thought-forms. Each writer has his own habits of mind, vocabulary, outlook and interests. Each book has its own character, and is written according to stylistic conventions which it is not always easy to see. Each book has its own historical and theological background, and must be interpreted against that background; thus, we should not look in the Old Testament for clear statements about the Trinity, or the believer's hope of a future life, for these things were not fully revealed till Christ came. All these factors must be borne in mind, or we shall misinterpret Scripture.

This does not mean that only trained scholars can study the Bible to any profit. Its central message is so plainly stated in the text that the most unlearned of those who have ears to hear and eyes to see can understand it. "The unfolding of thy words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple."<sup>(6)</sup> The technicalities of scholarship may be out of the ordinary Bible-reader's reach, but none the less he can, with God's blessing, grasp all the main truths of God's message. 'Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.'<sup>(7)</sup> It is only over secondary matters that problems arise. Here, however, ignorance of the background of biblical statements and allusions, coupled (no doubt) with failure to enter adequately into the writers' minds,<sup>(8)</sup> leave us on occasion in doubt as to what texts mean, and how they fit in with other texts and with the rest of the Word of God. But these uncertainties affect only the outer fringes of the biblical revelation. And in fact, this class of problem steadily yields to patient study as our knowledge grows. As in all scientific enquiry, however, the solution of one problem raises another and we have no reason to expect that all the problems that crop up in biblical exposition will ever be completely solved in this world.

An idea that persistently haunts some people is that the presence in Scripture of passages which are hard to harmonize is an argument against regarding it as God's Word written in the sense we have explained, and that one is not entitled so to regard it until one has first reconciled all the seeming discrepancies to one's own satisfaction. If this were right, every apparent contradiction would be a valid reason for doubting the truth of the biblical doctrine of Scripture. But the idea rests on a confusion. Christians are bound

to receive the Bible as God's Word written on the authority of Christ, not because they can prove it such by independent enquiry, but because as disciples they trust their divine Teacher. We have pointed out already that no article of Christian faith admits of full rational demonstration as, say, geometrical theorems do; all the great biblical doctrines—the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, the work of the Spirit in man, the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the creation—are partly mysterious, and raise problems for our minds that are at present insoluble. The doctrine of Scripture is no exception to this rule. But that should not daunt, nor even surprise us; for it is the very nature of Christian faith to believe, on the authority of God, truths which may neither be rationally demonstrated nor exhaustively understood. We must remember that God does not tell us everything about His acts and purposes, nor put us in a position to work them all out for ourselves. We shall not reach right views about the things of God by backing our independent judgment, but only by taking His word. We are wholly dependent on Him for our knowledge of His ways.

God, then, does not profess to answer in Scripture all the questions that we, in our boundless curiosity, would like to ask about Scripture. He tells us merely as much as He sees we need to know as a basis for our life of faith. And He leaves unsolved some of the problems raised by what He tells us, in order to teach us a humble trust in His veracity. The question, therefore, that we must ask ourselves when faced with these puzzles is not, is it reasonable to imagine that this is so? but, is it reasonable to accept God's assurance that this is so? Is it reasonable to take God's word and believe that He has spoken the truth, even though I cannot fully comprehend what He has said? The question carries its own answer. We should not abandon faith in anything that God has taught us merely because we cannot solve all the problems which it raises. Our own intellectual competence is not the test and measure of divine truth. It is not for us to stop believing because we lack understanding, or to postpone believing till we can get understanding, but to believe in order that we may understand; as Augustine said, "unless you believe, you will not understand." Faith first, sight afterwards, is God's order, not *vice versa*; and the proof of the sincerity of our faith is our willingness to have it so. Therefore, just as we should not hesitate to commit ourselves to faith in the Trinity although we do not know how one God can be three Persons, nor to faith in the incarnation, although we do not know how the divine and human natures combined in the Person of Christ, so we should not hesitate to commit ourselves to faith in Scripture as the infallible Word of the infallible God, even though we cannot solve all the puzzles, nor reconcile all the apparent contradictions, with which in our present state of knowledge it confronts us. On all these articles of faith we have God's positive assurance; and that should be enough.

Accordingly, our methods of interpreting Scripture must be such as express faith in its truth and consistency as God's Word. Our approach must be harmonistic; for we know at the outset that God's utterance is not self-contradictory. Article XX of the Church of England lays down that it is not lawful for the Church so to "expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another"; no more is it lawful for any individual exegete. Not that we should adopt strained and artificial expedients for harmonizing; this will neither glorify God nor edify us. What we cannot harmonize by a natural and plausible hypothesis is best left unharmonized, with a frank admission that in our present state of knowledge we do not see how these apparent discrepancies should be resolved. We may not, with the heretic Marcion and some modern Liberals, "criticize the Bible by

the Bible”, singling out some parts of Scripture as the authentic Word of God and denying the divine character of the rest because it seems to say something different from the parts approved; instead, we should confess the divine origin of all the Scriptures, and be guided in interpreting them by Augustine’s axiom: “I do not doubt that their authors therein made no mistake and set forth nothing that might mislead. If in one of these books I stumble across something which seems opposed to the truth, I have no hesitation in saying that either my copy is faulty, or the translator has not fully grasped what was said” (Augustine read Scripture in Latin), “or else I myself have not fully understood.”<sup>(9)</sup> We must base our study of Scripture on the assumption that governed the New Testament men in their study of the Old—that God’s revealed truth is a consistent unity, and any disharmony between part and part is only apparent, not real.

#### **d. The Holy Spirit as Interpreter**

One final point concerning interpretation remains to be made. Scripture tells us that if we are to understand Scripture we need, over and above right rules, personal insight into spiritual things. Scripture sets before us spiritual truths—truths, that is, about God, and about created things in relation to God; and to grasp spiritual truths requires spiritual receptiveness. But no man has this by nature. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”<sup>(10)</sup> The habit of mind which enslaves the natural man, Paul tells us, is to set up his own “wisdom” and make it ultimate, and so he is compelled to dismiss as foolishness all that does not accord with it. Without spiritual enlightenment, he will never be able to see the foolishness of his own wisdom, nor the wisdom of the “foolishness of God”<sup>(11)</sup> proclaimed in the gospel; hence he will never forsake the one for the other. Our Lord confirms this view of man. His repeated diagnosis of the unbelieving Pharisees was that they were blind, lacking the capacity to perceive spiritual realities;<sup>(12)</sup> and He regarded spiritual perception, where He found it, as a supernatural gift from God.<sup>(13)</sup>

Now, the Holy Spirit has been sent to the Church as its Teacher, to guide Christians into truth, to make them wise unto salvation, to testify to them of Christ and to glorify Him thereby.<sup>(14)</sup> To the apostles, He came to remind them of Christ’s teaching, to show them its meaning, to add further revelation to it, and so to equip them to witness to all about their Lord.<sup>(15)</sup> To other men, He comes to make them partakers of the apostolic faith through the apostolic word. Paul indicates the permanent relation between the Spirit, the apostles’ word and the rest of the Church in 1 Cor. ii.10-16. The Spirit, he says, gave the apostles understanding of the gospel: “we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God”; “God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit.” Now the Spirit inspires and empowers their proclamation of these things to other men: “which things we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth”; Paul preaches, and knows that he preaches, “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”.<sup>(16)</sup> And “he that is spiritual”—he in whom the Spirit abides to give understanding—discerns the meaning of the message and receives it as the testimony of God. This applies no less to the apostolic word written than to the apostolic word preached; and no more to the apostolic writings than to the rest of the written Word of God. The Spirit, who was its author, is also its interpreter, and such understanding of it as men gain is His gift.

Not that the Spirit's presence in men's hearts makes patient study of the text unnecessary. The Spirit is not given to make Bible study needless, but to make it effective. Nor can anything in Scripture mean anything when the Spirit interprets. The Spirit is not the prompter of fanciful spiritualizing, or of applications of texts out of their contexts on the basis of accidental associations of words. The only meaning to which He bears witness is that which each text actually has in the organism of Scripture; such witness as is borne to other meanings is borne by other spirits. But without the Spirit's help there can be no grasp of the message of Scripture, no conviction of the truth of Scripture, and no faith in the God of Scripture. Without the Spirit, nothing is possible but spiritual blindness and unbelief.

It follows that the Christian must approach the study of Scripture in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit, sure that he can learn from it nothing of spiritual significance unless he is taught of God. Confidence in one's own powers of discernment is an effective barrier to spiritual understanding. The self-confidence of nineteenth-century critical scholarship was reflected in its slogan that the Bible must be read like any other book; but the Bible is more than a merely human book, and understanding it involves more than appreciating its merely human characteristics. God's book does not yield up its secrets to those who will not be taught of the Spirit. Our God-given textbook is a closed book till our God-given Teacher opens it to us.

A century of criticism has certainly thrown some light on the human side of the Bible—its style, language, composition, history and culture; but whether it has brought the Church a better understanding of its divine message than Evangelicals of two, three and four hundred years ago possessed is more than doubtful. It is not at all clear that we today comprehend the plan of salvation, the doctrines of sin, election, atonement, justification, new birth and sanctification, the life of faith, the duties of churchmanship and the meaning of Church history, more clearly than did the Reformers, or the Puritans, or the leaders of the eighteenth-century revival. When it is claimed that modern criticism has greatly advanced our understanding of the Bible, the reply must be that it depends upon what is meant by the Bible; criticism has thrown much light on the human features of Scripture, but it has not greatly furthered our knowledge of the Word of God. Indeed, it seems truer to say that its effect to date has been rather to foster ignorance of the Word of God; for by concentrating on the human side of Scripture it has blurred the Church's awareness of the divine character of scriptural teaching, and by questioning biblical statements in the name of scholarship it has shaken confidence in the value of personal Bible study. Hence, just as the Mediævals tended to equate Church tradition with the Word of God, so modern Protestants tend to equate the words of scholars with the Word of God. We have fallen into the habit of accepting their pronouncements at second hand without invoking the Spirit's help to search Scripture and see, not merely whether what they say is so (in so far as the lay Bible student is qualified to judge this), but also—often more important—whether God's Word does not deal with more than the limited number of topics with which scholars at any one time are concerned. The result of this negligence is widespread ignorance among Churchmen as to what Scripture actually says. So it always is when the Church forgets how to search the Scriptures acknowledging its own blindness and looking to God's Spirit to teach it God's truth. There is no more urgent need today than that the Church should humble itself to learn this lesson once more.

We have now presented in positive outline the biblical approach to Scripture. Its text is word for word God-given; its message is an organic unity, the infallible Word of an infallible God, a web of revealed truth centered upon Christ; it must be interpreted in its natural sense, on the assumption of its inner harmony; and its meaning can be grasped only by those who humbly seek and gladly receive the help of the Holy Spirit.

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## Notes

1. Tyndale, *Works* (Parker Society), I. 304 ff. The judicious Richard Hooker was making the same point when he wrote: "I hold it for a most infallible rule in the exposition of Scripture, that when a literal construction will stand, the furthest from the literal is commonly the worst" (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V. lix. 2).
2. For a good short review of some of the narrative and didactic forms of Scripture, see J. Stafford Wright, *Interpreting the Bible* (Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1955).
3. P. 102 above.
4. Mt. xix. 3-8, dealing with Dt. xxiv. I.
5. [Westminster Confession](#), I. ix.
6. Ps. cxix. 130, RSV.
7. [Westminster Confession](#), I. vii.
8. Cf. 2 Pet. iii.16.
9. Ep. lxxxii.
10. 1 Cor. ii:14.
11. 1 Cor. i.25; see the whole passage, i.18 ff.
12. Mt. xv.14, xxiii.16, 17, 19, 26; Jn. ix.39-41.
13. Mt. xi.25, xvi.17.
14. Jn. xiv.26, xv.26, xvi.13, 14.
15. Jn. xiv.26, xvi.12, 13, xvii.20.
16. 1 Cor. ii.4.



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