understanding

GENESIS

How to Analyze, Interpret, and Defend Scripture

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

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Acknowledgments

Contents

"That's *your* interpretation! The Bible doesn't really mean what you think it does." Such statements are common today when disputes arise over biblical issues. It's no longer enough to say, "Thus says the Lord," because people will respond, "But what does the Lord really *mean* by what He says? You are not interpreting the passage properly." Is the Bible really so hard to understand? People can only obey the Scriptures and respond to the gospel to the extent that they correctly *understand* the Scriptures. So, the correct interpretation of Scripture is not merely an academic issue. It is a matter of eternal life and death. In our age of rampant post-modernism, the faithful Christian must not only defend the inerrancy of the Bible, but must also defend its proper interpretation.

This is perhaps most obvious in modern interpretations of the first book of the Bible: Genesis. Does the Bible really teach that God created in six days, or were such "days" symbolic of long periods of time? Does Genesis really suggest that God separately and supernaturally created every kind of creature on earth, or is such language merely an allegory for God-guided evolution? Was Adam a real person, or simply a metaphor? Did physical death enter the world at the time of Adam's sin, or was this merely spiritual death? Was Noah's Flood really global in extent, or merely local? At no time in the history of the world have such questions been as relevant as they are today. Our need to be able to answer these questions — and logically defend our position — has never been greater.

But are such answers even possible? The post-modern mindset is deeply entrenched in our culture today, such that some people will treat the meaning of a biblical text as if it is *subjective* — relative to the person. Perhaps you have heard someone say, "That's not what the text means *to me*." Another person might say, "That's true for you perhaps, but not for me."

It's disheartening, but sometimes even Bible study leaders will ask, "What does this passage mean *to you*?" Can a Bible verse really mean different things to different people? Clearly, a biblical teaching might be *applied* differently to different situations. But can the *meaning* of a passage differ from person to person? On the other hand, if the text has one meaning, then why do people not always agree on what that meaning is? Why are there so many denominations of Christianity with such differing views on what the Bible actually means? Can we really know for certain what the author of Genesis intended? And if so, can we *defend* the proper interpretation of Genesis against those who have a compromised view?

Interpreting a Clear Text

It is my conviction that the Bible has one correct interpretation — the meaning intended by the author. And I submit that Almighty God knows how to communicate clearly with His creations, and that He has done so in the Bible. I will give reasons for this position later; for now, the skeptical reader may consider this claim as a hypothesis. If this view is indeed true, then the main portions of God's Word should not be hard to understand. Though there are some difficult passages that require careful study, I submit that the ordinary, literate person can read and grasp the main-and-plain basic doctrines of the Bible. And I intend to demonstrate this in the chapters that follow.

But I must first address a very common objection to this position: If the Bible is so clear, then why are there so many disagreements on what it means? We must admit that there are numerous denominations of Christianity with their various doctrinal positions. And there are countless cults that profess to believe the Bible while disagreeing on some very fundamental issues. Even within a conservative denomination there are often disputes over matters of theology: interpretations of the "end-times," applicability of Old Testament laws, the continuation or cessation of the prophetic gifts of the Spirit, the nature of election, mode of baptism, and so on.

Do such disputes prove that the text is unclear? Not necessarily. Interpretation of any document involves both the text and the reasoning of the reader. So when proper interpretation is not accomplished, logically this could be due to either a problem in the text *or* a problem with the reader. If the text of the Bible really is God-breathed as it claims to be (2 Timothy

3:16), then it cannot be in error. And so for all errors in interpretation the fault must lie with the reader. Human beings have any number of foibles that can prevent us from reasoning rightly from a text, even when the text is perfectly clear. Let's consider just two.

In some cases, sincere believers misunderstand the text because they are not reasoning properly. Conservative Christians with a sincere desire to understand the Bible nonetheless sometimes don't think clearly; they make mistakes in reasoning resulting in a faulty interpretation. The mistake is unintentional; but it is still a mistake. Optimistically, I submit that this problem accounts for many of the differences within biblically conservative denominations. The nice thing about these kinds of misinterpretations is that they can be resolved through education. A study of the principles of logic is immensely helpful in biblical interpretation. Christian denominations may be able to resolve many of their differences by learning to reason carefully from the text. My hope is that this book will be a starting point to that end.

Second, we must consider a more hideous cause of biblical misinterpretation, one that is far more difficult to alleviate: the sinful nature of mankind. In many cases, the text is very straightforward, but people do not want to accept the clear meaning of the text. Consequently, they are strongly motivated to interpret the text in an unnatural way, contrary to the intention of the author, so that they will not have to do or believe what the text actually indicates. In their minds, such persons are justified in saying that they believe the Bible, while simultaneously embracing unbiblical beliefs and perhaps even a sinful lifestyle. The heart of the problem is a problem of the heart, and cannot be remedied by mere education. It requires an act of repentance.

"But surely a Christian would not succumb to this type of temptation," some might say. But Christians are merely sinners that God saved by His grace and mercy. And that gift of salvation makes us righteous *in principle* before God, but we continue to struggle with sin until the Lord calls us home. Christians do sin sometimes in their interpretation of the Word, and our first inclination is to deceive ourselves about that very fact (1 John 1:8). Namely, people work very hard to convince themselves (and others) that they are not distorting God's Word to protect an unbiblical preconception, when in fact that is just what they are doing.

It's a strange thing to deceive oneself, and my purpose here is not to explore this perplexing aspect of human psychology.[1] Rather, I merely point out that self-deception is a very real phenomenon (James 1:22, 26; Galatians 6:3; 1 Corinthians 3:18), and Christians are not immune from this vice. Genuine Christians, saved by God's grace, can and do at times misunderstand God's Word because they are motivated to *not* believe what the text so clearly teaches. It's an easy trap that we must take great care to avoid.

The Book of Genesis is especially prone to this type of misunderstanding, precisely because it is so contrary to the popular beliefs of our pagan society. For example, the Bible teaches that God created in six days, implying an age of the universe of thousands of years. But some Christians will respond, "Sure, the text says six days. But what's a 'day'? Those were not literal, ordinary days, but vast ages — hundreds of millions of years each. The Bible is true, but your *interpretation* of what it means is simply wrong." Is such a response genuinely motivated by textual considerations, or is it driven by a preconceived opinion, perhaps being influenced by modern "scientific" opinion? And how are we to deal with such disputes?

Undoubtedly, few people would admit to intentionally misreading a text. Those who distort the teaching of Scripture are able to subconsciously convince themselves that they are reading the text properly — the aforementioned self-deception. They believe on some level that their interpretation is true.

The Stakes Are High

Misinterpretation of God's Word is always detrimental, but the consequences in some case are far more devastating than in others. Some misinterpretations result in eternal damnation — those that distort the essential message of the gospel. This is seen in countless cults that profess to be Christian, but deny any number of essential Christian doctrines: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the transcendence of God, the resurrection of the dead, eternal punishment for the wicked, and so on. Those who claim to be Christian but deny the essential gospel of Jesus will not enter His

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1. To deceive oneself, one must do two things that are strangely inconsistent. First, he must believe a proposition (P) in order to do the deceiving. Second, he must be convinced that he does not believe that proposition (P) in order to be deceived. In categorical form we would say of this person that "S believes P," but also "S believes that S does not believe P." Self-deception is strange but true (James 1:22).

Kingdom (Matthew 7:21–23). Curiously, for the most part, these cultists are reading the same words of Scripture that the orthodox Christian is reading. They even quote the Scriptures to support their position! But they have failed to interpret the Bible correctly, to their own demise.

Eternity is at stake. Only the true gospel has the power to redeem sinners. Only the real Christ can save people from eternal destruction. Hence, if we truly love our neighbor, then we must be able to explain the proper interpretation of Scripture and defend that view against the heretics. This calls for us to study *hermeneutics.* **Hermeneutics** *is the study of the principles of the interpretation of a text.* If we are to obey Christ's instructions to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19–20), then we must first have a correct hermeneutic so that we understand the Scriptures. And then we must be able to defend our hermeneutic against faulty views that distort God's Word.

The Literal View

It may come as a surprise to many that there should be any need to interpret the Bible at all. Some may ask, "Doesn't the Bible mean what it says? Isn't it pretty clear, and aren't we supposed to take the words as written?" Indeed, many Christians profess to interpret the Bible *literally* — in strict accordance with the primary meaning of the words. They might say that any alternative to literalism would not be faithful to the text. But this raises two concerns.

First, whatever view is the correct one, we must be able to *defend* that view against alternatives. Throughout history, not everyone has agreed that the Bible should be read literally. There are allegorical, mystical, pietistic, and accomodationist schools of interpretation, to name just a few. An allegorist might say, "Genesis is not to be taken as literal history. It's merely an allegory meant to convey the fact that God created. Jonah in the belly of the great fish, the parting of the Red Sea — these shouldn't be taken literally." Now I happen to think that such schools of interpretation are wrong — that they are not faithful to the intention of the author. But can I logically *demonstrate* this?

Second, while I am sympathetic to those who espouse to read the Bible literally, I must point out that even they do not take *everything* in Scripture in a strictly literal fashion. When God calls His people "stiff-necked" (e.g.,

Exodus 32:9, 33:3), do we believe that they *literally* had stiff necks? Most people, even if they claim to be literalists, understand this as a euphemism meaning "stubborn." That is a very natural reading of the passage, but it is *not strictly literal*, at least *not in English.*[2] Proverbs 25:15 teaches that "a soft tongue breaks the bone." It's not to be taken in a literal fashion. Do false prophets *literally* wear sheep's clothing, and are they *literally* wolves (Matthew 7:15)?

Consider the following verses: Daniel 2:35, Nahum 2:13, Revelation 13:1–2. Does anyone really believe that a mountain will grow to cover the earth, or that a sword will literally devour lions, or that God creates a seven-headed dragon with ten horns? There is no doubt that God has the power to do all these things, yet most people will insist that these are used as non-literal imagery. In some cases, the Bible explicitly tells us what the non-literal figures mean (e.g., Daniel 2:36–45; Revelation 17:7–18: Matthew 13:36–42). Clearly, a strictly literal interpretation of Scripture is too simplistic. Even if we grant that much of the Bible is to be taken literally, clearly, some of it is not.

Sometimes when people say that they read the Bible literally, they really mean "naturally" or *"literarily"* — reading the text in a mostly literal fashion, but allowing for figures of speech, and recognizing that some types of literature within Scripture require a non-literal reading (such as the Psalms). Now, I happen to think that a natural reading of Scripture is the right way to go. But this still leaves us with two issues that we must resolve. First, what does it mean to read the Bible naturally? That is, which sections should be taken literally, and how are we to interpret the non-literal sections? Second, can we prove that this is the right way to interpret Scripture? After all, it may personally benefit us to have a right view of hermeneutics, but this won't do others much good unless we can persuade them that this is indeed the right view.

Rightly Dividing the Word

The importance of correct hermeneutics cannot be overstated. Incorrect hermeneutics leads to bad theology. And bad theology destroys everything it touches. It has contributed to the downfall of individuals and entire cultures.

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2. Some biblical phrases are literal in the original Hebrew, but have been translated somewhat figuratively in English.

Bad theology can destroy lives in this world and for all eternity. We can only live a life pleasing to God by faithful obedience to His Word. And this is only accomplished if we rightly understand His Word.

The goal of this book is two-fold. First, I intend to discover the principles of hermeneutics, the rules or principles by which we can correctly interpret God's Word, in order to arrive at the correct interpretation of Genesis and the other books of the Bible. Second, I aim to logically refute faulty interpretations of Genesis by showing how such views violate established hermeneutical principles. This book therefore is designed to serve as an apologetic resource to help Christians defend the Word against compromised positions, particularly when it comes to the foundational Book of Genesis.

Due to space constraints, I will not deal at length with the questions of biblical inerrancy. And I will only briefly touch on matters of transmission and translation. I start from the Christian position that the Bible is without error in its original autographs, and that it has been carefully transmitted and faithfully translated into modern English. Thus, I take as an axiom that the major modern conservative Bible translations are basically faithful to the original, and can rightly be called "the Word of God." For those who question biblical inerrancy or who have concerns about textual criticism, there are other fine works that discuss these issues. The subject of this book is the dispute that arises over methods of *interpretation*: disagreements about what the Bible means between two professing Christians who both affirm that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God.

It would be easy enough to list commonly accepted hermeneutical principles and show how certain individuals violate such principles, thereby ending up with atrocious misunderstandings of Scripture. But then critics might deny that the hermeneutical principles I have listed are the correct set of principles. After all, there is no reason to accept something as correct merely because it is commonly believed. So my goal in this book is to discover the *necessary* hermeneutical principles that lead to a correct interpretation of the text.

I will attempt to logically prove that each of the principles discussed in this book must be the correct principle. Often such proofs will be accomplished by showing how when a given hermeneutical principle is denied it leads to a contradiction or some other absurdity. I begin with questions

about how to interpret a text in general, and then move on to ask how the Bible should be interpreted. After all, the Bible is not just any text. So should it be interpreted in the same way? I then explore the role of evidence external to the text. I will also consider how different types/styles/genres of literature should be treated. Then I will examine the role of logical reasoning in biblical interpretation, and how mistakes in reasoning can result in misunderstandings of the text.

Does the Bible itself give instructions or guidance on how to interpret it? That is a question I will address at length in chapter 9. Then I move on to application: examining specific doctrines commonly held by professing Christians to see if such views are consistent with hermeneutical principles. My primarily focus will be on the correct reading of Genesis, but I will also explore a few other important Christian doctrines. My goal is to expose faulty views of Scripture that stem from violations of hermeneutical principles.

At the end of each chapter, I have provided a summary and review of the basic principles covered in that chapter. This serves to reinforce the main points of the chapter while omitting the details. This book covers a lot of material, so summary reviews should be very helpful. After reading the book once, a student may want to reread the chapter reviews to help him or her remember the basic points without having to re-read the entire book.

The real fun begins in chapter 10, where I begin applying the now-established rules of hermeneutics to commonly held claims. In chapter 11 I investigate the claim of old-earth creation. In chapter 12, I explore the hermeneutic and motivation behind belief in deep-time (millions of years). Chapter 13 deals with theistic evolution, and chapter 14 examines the claim that the Genesis Flood was non-global. I have included two appendices. The first is an actual dialog I had with a young man who denied the deity of Christ. The second is a discussion of formal logical fallacies and the errors in biblical interpretation that stem from them.

That's *Your* Interpretation!

The first thing we must establish and be able to defend is that there *exists* a correct interpretation of Scripture. That may seem silly or trivial, but in our post-modern culture some people claim that "truth is relative," and hence the notion that there is one correct interpretation of Scripture would be unnecessarily restrictive. Doesn't the Bible mean whatever you want it to mean? Isn't one person's interpretation of Scripture just as legitimate as the next? Isn't the important thing what it "means *to you*"?

In the post-modern view, there is no "correct" or "incorrect" interpretation of the Bible or any document since such a position presupposes that truth is objective and absolute. The absurdity of such a view is quickly revealed when we ask a post-modernist if it is a "correct" interpretation of *his statement* that there is no "correct" or "incorrect" interpretation of any statement. Moreover, principles of logical reasoning are predicated upon the objective and absolute nature of truth. Consider the definition of the word "proposition" as it is found in a textbook on logic. A proposition is a statement or claim that either affirms or denies something; "Grass is green" is a proposition. A given proposition is either true or false.

But some people today verbally deny that there is such a thing as objective truth. The position that truth is subjective (relative to the person) is called "relativism." A relativist might say that a particular claim is "true for you, but not for me." Is it possible for a claim to be true relative to one person, but false for another person?

A proposition like "My favorite color is blue" might seem like such an example. This proposition is "true for me" and for others who prefer blue. But it is false for everyone else, correct? Well, not really. A proposition is not merely a sentence, but the meaning behind that sentence — the claim that is being made. So when I say, "My favorite color is blue" this is a *different* proposition from when Mike says, "My favorite color is blue" even though the sentence is the same. The sentence I've uttered has the meaning "Dr. Lisle's favorite color is blue." Whereas Mike's sentence means "Mike's favorite color is blue." These are clearly two different propositions.

But can the same proposition be true for one person, and yet false for another person? The relativist says, "Yes. Truth is dependent upon the person. It is not absolute or objective." But in making such a claim, the relativist has uttered an *absolute statement*. He did not qualify his proposition by stating to which person or group of people it is true. Instead, he uttered it as if it were absolutely, objectively true, regardless of who makes the claim. Indeed, we may wish to ask the relativist, "Is your position (that truth is relative) absolutely true?" If he says, "no" then he has given up his position, since he has admitted that it is not necessarily true (for everyone). If on the other hand he says, "yes," then he has refuted himself, in stating that it is absolutely true that truth is not absolute. The relativist's self-contradictory position is reduced to absurdity.

For truth to be meaningful at all, it must be objective and absolute, because the alternative leads to nonsense. To say that something is "true for me, but not necessarily for others" is to reduce truth to something internal to the person, and not something meaningful about the external world. Essentially, the phrase "It's true for me" is synonymous with "I believe it." Certainly, different people can have different beliefs; beliefs are subjective. But the universe external to them is not affected by their beliefs.

Believing something doesn't make it so. And in his heart of hearts, every relativist knows this — and demonstrates that he knows it by his behavior. Even the most ardent relativist still looks both ways before he crosses the street. This is because he knows that the truth of getting hit by a car is objective and thus irrelevant to his personal beliefs or feelings on the matter. Relativism teaches that it is absolutely true that truth is not absolute — a contradiction. Relativism is internally inconsistent, and self-refuting. Thus, we must conclude that truth is objective and independent of the beliefs of a

particular individual, since the alternative is self-refuting. We shall refer to the (absolute) view that truth is not absolute as the "relativist fallacy."

But just because there is an objective truth does not mean that it is discoverable, or that language necessarily conveys it. And so we must now ask the follow-up question: "Is language (either written or verbal) capable of conveying truth?" In other words, does language have *meaning*? If so, is the meaning objective, or is the meaning relative to the recipient? Other questions follow from this. Can a given proposition mean two different things to two different people? There is no doubt that people can (in some instances) read the same proposition, and come away with two different *beliefs* about what the proposition means. But is this because the proposition has more than one meaning? Does it have any meaning at all?

Do Words Have Meaning?

To say that a word (or combination of words) has "meaning" is to say that it represents a particular idea or limited range of ideas that the author/speaker is intending to convey to the reader/listener. When you read the word "lion" on a page, it likely conjures a particular thought in your mind. Although this thought may not be exactly identical to what another person thinks when reading the word (size, age, posture, mountain lion vs. African lion, etc.), it is very likely that the ideas will be very similar. It certainly won't conjure up the idea of a quasar, an apple, or waffles. The word has meaning since it represents an idea. And that meaning is objective since the word represents the same idea regardless of who reads it within the context of a given language.

The entire point of communication is to transfer an idea from one person to another person, often to induce a particular action in the recipient. Thus, genuine communication is only possible if words have objective meaning. Of course, it should be obvious from everyday observation that communication is possible. Ideas are indeed transferred from one person to another. Thus, it follows logically that words do have objective meaning.

But not everyone professes to agree with this reasoning. There are some people who would argue that words do not have any objective meaning. These "deconstructionists" would say that it is never possible to take away from a text the author's intended meaning. "Every reading is a misreading" is their creed. Deconstructionists have written some marvelous works

espousing their point of view. They attempt to communicate their belief that words do not possess objective meaning, and thus that we can never get to the author's intent. But if that were true, then why did they bother writing such works? If words have no meaning, and cannot convey the author's intention, then why do deconstructionists attempt to use words to convey their intention to the reader? If genuine communication is impossible, then why do deconstructionists attempt to communicate this to their readers? Such inconsistency betrays the fact that even the most ardent deconstructionist really does believe in his heart of hearts that words do have meaning.

Words, within the context of a given language, do indeed have objective meaning. If they didn't, then writing and reading would be pointless. We could never learn anything from books or from teachers if words did not convey objective meaning. Yet, students do learn all sorts of information and skills from books and from their teachers. So, clearly, words do have meaning. The fact that even deconstructionists must use meaningful words to argue against the notion that words have meaning shows that words indeed have meaning. The alternative is self-refuting. The error of assuming that words do not have objective meaning we shall call the "deconstructionist fallacy."

How Many Meanings Does a Word or Statement Contain?

A given word can have more than one meaning. "Land" can be a noun, as in "I just bought some land." "Land" can also be a verb as in "Planes land on runways." Indeed, a typical dictionary will have over 20 different definitions (i.e., meanings) for the word "land." These are called *lexical* definitions — the definitions of a word that are found in a dictionary. However, when a given word is used in a particular context, only *one* of its lexical definitions will apply. Context, the surrounding words and sentences, indicates which one of the lexical definitions of a word is being used. In the above examples, there is no confusion as to what the word "land" means in each case. The context makes it clear. Any other definition would reduce the proposition to nonsense.

Generally, only one meaning of each word will allow a given sentence to make any sense. The word "plane" was used above and it also has multiple meanings. It can refer to an aircraft, or a two-dimensional geometric entity.

But this second meaning is disallowed in the particular context of the example above. It wouldn't make sense for a geometric plane to land on a runway. Both "land" and "plane" are clarified by their contextual relationship to each other. This is the *context principle*. And this particular sentence has only one meaning — a meaning that any English-speaking person would readily understand.

Of course, sometimes an author will inadvertently write an ambiguous sentence, in which the reader can't ascertain what the author intended to convey: "The school's music department is giving away free guitars on Saturday — no strings attached!" The last phrase is a bit perplexing because it isn't clear if the author means that the guitars literally do not have any strings on them, or whether the phrase is being used figuratively to mean that there is no "catch" or hidden fee. Either meaning fits the context, so the reader is left to wonder. This type of ambiguous grammatical construction is called an "amphiboly." The amphiboly is rightly considered to be a logical fallacy if it is used as part of a logical argument.

There are some situations where sentences are intentionally constructed to allow multiple meanings, but this is usually done in jest. Consider this old joke: "There are 10 kinds of people: those who understand binary, and those who don't." The joke makes use of an intentional ambiguity of the meaning of "10" — which we normally think of as "ten," but is also the number "two" in binary. The joke works by intentionally misleading the reader as to the meaning of "10," only to reveal an alternative meaning in the climax. The reader is supposed to take the meaning of "10" to be "ten" on the first pass, only to realize that it really must be "two" given the context. However, only one word in the sentence is ambiguous (initially) and only temporarily so. Thus, even in this case, the ambiguity is very, very limited. In most propositions, there is one meaning for each word, and one overall claim that is being made.

But there are exceptions. There may be certain situations in poetic literature where the words are left intentionally ambiguous so that the intent is to stir up thinking in the reader, rather than to convey a specific concept. But this type of usage is quite rare even in poetic literature. Generally, each statement is constructed to convey one specific idea to the reader. It is normally the case that an author has one meaning in mind when he or she constructs a particular proposition. It is this meaning that he or she

hopes will be understood by the reader. Whether or not the reader actually understands this meaning is not yet our focus. The point here is that for the vast bulk of literature, there is one primary meaning for each stated proposition; this meaning is the idea that the author has intended to convey to the reader. But can we actually prove this assertion?

Consider the alternative. If a given proposition does not have one specific primary meaning that the author intends to convey to the reader, then logically, it must either have multiple primary meanings, or no meaning at all. In both cases, this leads to an absurd result. Let's consider these two possibilities in turn.

First, if a given proposition has multiple primary meanings, then how could they be faithfully communicated in a single statement? "Plane" has a number of meanings, and "land" has a number of meanings. But the sentence "The plane is ready to land" only makes sense when one of the lexical definitions is used for "plane" and likewise for "land." If the author intended to communicate two different things in a single proposition, how could he reasonably do so given the limited range of definitions of words? Indeed, it is hard to even construct a single simple proposition that could conceivably convey two equally primary points simultaneously.

If I want to convey the fact that (1) it is hot outside, and (2) dogs are mammals, I can't conceive of a way to do that in one simple proposition. Certainly, I could do it in one sentence by connecting the two points with "and" (e.g., "It is hot outside, and dogs are mammals"). But this compound proposition is still comprised of *two* simple propositions. Each of these simple propositions has only one meaning.

A single sentence can be used to convey different primary meanings by emphasizing different words: "We should not speak ILL of our friends" has a slightly different primary meaning from "We should not speak ill of our FRIENDS." The first suggests that we may speak of our friends so long as we do not say anything negative about them, whereas, the second suggests that we may speak ill of people so long as they are not our friends. The two meanings are similar, but not identical. Thus, these represent two different propositions. If we emphasized both words "ill" and "friends," would this convey two equally primary points? It is far more likely that the reader would be confused as to which point we are trying to make. *It is our natural expectation that a given proposition has only one primary meaning.*

To illustrate this last point, consider the aforementioned amphiboly: "The school's music department is giving away free guitars on Saturday — no strings attached!" As indicated earlier, the statement is confusing because we don't know whether the sentence means that the guitars don't have strings, or whether there is no hidden fee. But it doesn't even occur to most people that it might mean *both*. We can scarcely conceive of the notion that the author intended to convey both meanings simultaneously. The human mind naturally presupposes that only one meaning was intended, and that the author simply did not realize that his phrasing was ambiguous (unless it was done intentionally as a joke).

So clearly, a given proposition cannot have more than one primary meaning if it is intended to communicate, because any alternative leads to miscommunication. A proposition might accomplish its primary point by use of a secondary point or image. This is common in idioms. For example, "The early bird catches the worm" is not primarily teaching anything about birds or worms. Its primary meaning is that competitive opportunities favor those enthusiasts who arrive early. Rather than stating this directly, the idiom makes its primary point by the illustration of a specific example. But the sentence still has only one main meaning. This must be the case if it is to be understood. A given proposition, under ordinary circumstances, will have exactly one primary meaning, if it has any meaning at all.

Alternatively, we consider the possibility that a proposition has no meaning at all. If this is the case, then the reader cannot extract meaning from the passage because it is impossible to extract what isn't there. The reader might claim to find meaning. And he may genuinely think that he has discovered the meaning from the passage, but clearly this is impossible if there is no meaning in the passage. Anything that the reader takes away will be coming from his or her own mind, not the mind of the author. In that case, the author has not truly communicated, because none of his ideas were transmitted to the reader.

If propositions have no meaning, then reading is not an exercise in communication, but rather, an exercise in introspection. Like a Rorschach inkblot test, whatever a reader takes away from a passage would be a reflection of his or her own thoughts and feelings, and would have nothing to do with anything in the mind of the author. Again, we must conclude that communication — a genuine transfer of a thought or idea from one person

to another — would not be possible if propositions don't have meaning. Therefore, the existence of successful communication is proof that propositions do have meaning. This isn't to say that a meaningless statement has never been uttered in the history of mankind. Rather, it simply means that a meaningless statement does not communicate anything. Given the success of human communication, we would therefore expect that such statements would be rare, and almost always unintentional.

There have been times when archeologists have uncovered a previously unknown written language. They can see that there are symbols used in a specific non-random, non-repeating sequence, but they do not know the meaning because they do not understand the language. Some scholars spend years attempting to decipher such ancient languages. Why? It is because they expect such sentences to contain meaning. It doesn't even occur to a scholar to suppose that the ancient symbols have absolutely no meaning at all. Obviously, someone wrote these symbols down because he or she was attempting to communicate — to convey an idea to a reader.

The notion that words do not have a primary meaning is a self-defeating position. No one can legitimately argue that "words have no meaning" because in stating that "words have no meaning" the person has assumed that they do! It must be the case that most propositions do have exactly one primary meaning if practical communication is possible.

And communication is indeed possible. Students are able to learn about mathematics, science, and the War of 1812 from their teachers and from textbooks. This would be utterly impossible if (A) words did not have meaning, or (B) if propositions generally had multiple meanings. Communication is not always successful of course. But the point here is that communication could *never* be successful if words did not have meaning. So the claim that propositions do not have one primary meaning is false, since it leads to the absurd conclusion that communication is impossible. We define the *one-meaning principle* as the fact that a given proposition generally has one primary meaning.

Can Human Beings Discover the Meaning of a Proposition?

Given that propositions generally do have one specific and primary meaning, it is natural to ask whether this meaning is able to be discovered by the reader. Communication is only achieved when the reader is indeed able

to understand the meaning of a particular passage, and we have already seen that communication is possible and is happening all the time. Thus, it stands to reason that it is indeed often possible to discover the meaning of a proposition — but "often" is not the same as "always."

We also noted that communication is not always successful. People sometimes do not understand what a text means. Perhaps they do not know the language. Perhaps they do not understand the context. Perhaps the sentence is poorly constructed and ambiguous. Perhaps a person's own opinions and biases get in the way of proper understanding. For these and other reasons, a given proposition is not necessarily understandable to a given person.

So the answer to this question is more nuanced than the previous ones. Can human beings discover the meaning of a proposition? Often yes, but not always. And sometimes understanding can be achieved only with a great deal of effort. What then are the conditions under which a person can understand the meaning of a text?

Essential Requirements for Properly Understanding the Meaning of a Text

First, we note that an interpreter must have basic human perception and rationality. We can dismiss the silly examples of a person who is comatose, or one who is clinically insane. A person with an extreme mental or physical disability might not be able to read, least of all understand a text, nor can a newborn baby. Throughout the rest of this book we consider the average person to be of ordinary intelligence and having no severe mental or physical deficiencies that would inhibit thoughtful communication.

Second, it is clear that the reader must have sufficient knowledge of the language that he or she is reading. This includes basic knowledge of the rules of grammar, a sufficiently large vocabulary, and knowledge of common figures of speech. Knowledge of the topic under discussion is very helpful (though not always strictly necessary); a technical paper on the discovery of the Higgs boson might be very difficult for a non-physicist to understand, even if it is written in his native language. In a way, technical jargon can be thought of as its own language, or as an offshoot or dialect of the common language of the culture.

So, clearly, some level of proficiency in the language is necessary for understanding a given text. But this aptitude need not be a perfect knowledge of all

aspects of the language. Who can honestly say that they know every English word? Yet such limitations do not stop people from reading books, and learning a great deal from such books. A reader with a very limited vocabulary can often understand words beyond her knowledge by their context. Even in cases where the context is not fully sufficient, partial understanding is often possible: "Karms are always red." Although you may not understand what a "karm" is (which of course you won't since I just made up the term), it is obvious from context that it is red in color, it is physical not conceptual (since concepts cannot have "color"), and that it is plural (not only from the "s" but also because of the verb "are") whose singular form is likely to be "karm." So language is surprisingly powerful in its ability to communicate ideas, even when the linguistic knowledge of the reader is quite limited.

Obviously, if a reader has no knowledge of a given language, he will be unable to understand text written in that language unless someone translates it for him or until he learns the language. There may be some languages that have been lost with time, such that no one alive today understands their vocabulary or grammar. Propositions written in an unknown tongue cannot be understood unless and until the language vocabulary and grammar are discovered. This was once the case with Egyptian hieroglyphics. No living human could understand them because the vocabulary and grammar had been lost. This was the case until the Rosetta Stone was uncovered at the turn of the 19th century. Since it had the same decree written in three languages, one of which is hieroglyphics, and another is (known) ancient Greek, the known language could be used to finally decipher the unknown language.

The reader only needs to know the language of a particular text as he or she reads it; this need not be the language in which the original author wrote the text. As long as the translator knows both languages sufficiently well, and presuming that he or she takes care to faithfully translate the original text into the new language, the meaning can be preserved. This isn't to say that this always happens — only that it's possible.

A lady once told me that because I have not read the Bible in its original languages (e.g., Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) that I hadn't really read it, and could therefore not understand it. But this view is easy to refute. Although ideas can be transmitted via language, they are not bound to a specific language. As one example, I learned the physics of relativity by

reading a book on the topic that had been written by Albert Einstein. It is obvious that I understood the meaning of the book, because I now know relativity, as evidenced by the fact that I can correctly solve relativistic physics problems. Yet the book I read by Einstein was not originally written in English. What I had read was an English translation of his book, which was originally written in German. Yet I was able to learn relativity. It would be absurd to argue that I don't know relativity on the basis that I've never read about it in the original German.

Likewise, one need not know Hebrew and Greek to read and understand the basics of the Bible. Of course, knowledge of the original language can be very helpful in understanding nuances of specific passages. But as long as we are dealing with a faithful translation, the basic meaning of the original text will be preserved, and can (in principle) be understood by the reader even if he or she does not know Hebrew or Greek.

By analogy, a person can watch a VHS tape of a movie on an old "standard definition" television, or he can watch the same movie on Blu-Ray using a high-definition television.[1] Either way, the person should have no difficulty understanding the story. On the Blu-Ray he will experience a sharper picture, more vivid colors, and he might notice details that he missed on the VHS tape. But the basic plot of the movie is unchanged. So it is with reading the Bible in the original languages. You will get a sharper picture with more "color," and might notice some extra details. But the basic message is unchanged.

Another requirement for understanding is that the author of a given text must have been sufficiently clear in his writing. If the author were careless, he may have written an incomplete sentence, or failed to specify a referent that was clear in his mind but is not mentioned in the text. In this case, the defect is not in the reader, but in the text itself. Many texts have such errors.

But since our interest is primarily in understanding the meaning of the Bible, we must ask if such a defect is possible in Scripture. Clearly, the answer is no. Given our original premise, that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, though written by men, it was guided infallibly by God. Its primary author is God, who makes no mistakes (linguistic or otherwise). When God communicates, He does so perfectly. If God leaves out a detail, this is by

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1. http://www.icr.org/article/6918/.

design — not accident. We do leave open the possibility of rare transmission and translation errors by men; however, these are few and far between as even secular scholars will readily admit. Nonetheless, aside from these very rare cases, we must conclude that any error in understanding the Bible must be due to a fault of the reader, the copyist, or translator, but never a fault of the Author or the original text.

A certain degree of cultural awareness is necessary to understand certain references in literature. A reference to the victory of the Denver Broncos over the Cincinnati Bengals would be difficult for someone totally unfamiliar with American sports. Imagine someone interpreting such a statement as being about two groups of animals — literal Bengal tigers being attacked and defeated by literal broncos. Figures of speech are often cultural as in, "You are really in hot water now!" We know better than to take the expression literally because of our cultural understanding of this common expression. Not all propositions require such cultural awareness. But some do. And this is an issue that must be considered when we come to the topic of interpreting the Bible.

Some knowledge of laws of logic is necessary to understand a text. This doesn't mean that a course in logic is necessarily required (though it may be very helpful), but basic applications of the law of non-contradiction, the law of identity, *modus ponens*, and so on, will be necessary to properly interpret a text. This may seem too obvious to include in a list like this. But it turns out that many errors in biblical interpretation are due to basic errors in logic. We will address such issues in a later chapter.

We must also consider the problem of philosophical bias. Human beings are not emotionless automatons that objectively and neutrally process information to arrive at objectively inescapable conclusions. Rather, people have biases. They have beliefs and they have things that they strongly *want* to believe. Some people might believe that they are not subject to such a bias, that they would never believe in something simply because they wished it to be so. But this itself is a bias based on wishful thinking! An untruthful bias can cause a person to misunderstand a given text. Conversely, and perhaps surprisingly, a correct bias can actually help a person to understand a given text under certain circumstances. Let's consider some examples.

We start with an absurd case of someone who has the philosophy that "words are meaningless." Can that person ever properly understand a text?

Not if he genuinely believes that words are meaningless. He might be able to read a text, but he will interpret it as meaning nothing. He will get nothing out of it, and thus will never understand the author's intention. This is an extreme and unrealistic example of course. But it illustrates the point. A person who tenaciously and consistently held such a philosophy could never — even in principle — understand a text. Perhaps some people might think that they have a counterexample: someone who claims to have such a philosophy and yet does understand the meaning of a text. But such a person would merely be *professing* that "words are meaningless." If he genuinely believed that words had no meaning, then he wouldn't ever bother to say that words have no meaning, and he would never be able to understand any text.

Let's consider a more realistic scenario. One such bias that can affect our understanding of a written or verbal statement is when we overestimate the character of an individual. Steve says, "I didn't come into work because I was sick yesterday." But Brian saw Steve going for a bike ride last evening. Thinking the best of Steve, and believing him to be honest, Brian believes that what Steve actually meant was that he was sick for only the first part of the day, but then felt better by evening. His estimate of Steve's character motivates him to interpret Steve's claim in the best possible light. But in fact, Steve was simply lying. Steve intended to convey the (false) information that that he was sick all day in order to get out of work. Brian's bias caused him to misinterpret a statement that was really pretty clear.

I was recently conversing with a young man who denies the Trinity (see appendix A for the complete dialogue). I pointed out that John 1:1 teaches that the Word was with God and was God, and that John 1:14 explains that this Word is Jesus. But since the person was biased against this position, he did not want to interpret the "Word" to be a person, but rather an idea, or impersonal aspect of God that later was transformed into the person of Jesus.[2] But the text does not say that the Word was an *aspect* of God. Rather, it teaches that the Word *was God*. The text is very clear, but the young man could not correctly understand the passage because of his bias.

Let's consider a case where a bias can be helpful. Tom states, "Sarah just bought a new truck." But Josh knows that the truck Sarah just bought is a used vehicle, over ten years old. He also knows that Tom is an honest person,

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2. We will see in a later chapter that this is an example of the superfluous distinction fallacy.

and would not normally lie. Josh therefore reasons that by "new truck," Tom probably meant to convey that the truck was "new" to Sarah, rather than "factory-new." This is a very reasonable interpretation of Tom's statement. Josh's accurate biases have provided additional information, which removed the ambiguity and helped him to correctly understand Tom's claim. Someone without such biases may have misunderstood — thinking that Tom was claiming that Sarah's truck is factory-new.

People can be very strongly motivated to interpret a text in light of what they *want* to be true. This turns out to be one of the most significant types of bias that results in major errors of biblical interpretation. Since many people rightly recognize the Bible as the Word of God, they know that it is authoritative; they understand that they are held accountable to what it teaches. But some of God's commands are not harmonious with the lifestyle that people wish to live. They are therefore strongly motivated to find a way to interpret the passage such that it allows them to live the way they *want* to live. This is a powerful vice and can ensnare even the most sincere believers.

Could it be that many of the disagreements over what the Bible means stem from the motivations of the reader? Is it possible that a misunderstanding of a text has nothing to do with any ambiguity in the text itself, but is due to the fact that the person does not want to accept what the text clearly teaches? We'll revisit this topic in greater detail later. The point here is that biases (rightly or wrongly) play a very strong role in how a person interprets a text. To interpret a text faithfully, we must be aware of our own biases, and be ready to correct them as necessary. The goal therefore is not to eliminate bias — this isn't possible. Rather, it is to understand how biases can affect our understanding of the text, for better or for worse, and be ready to give up a bias if and when it is shown to be wrong.

Do We Have the Freedom to Interpret a Text as We Wish?

We have seen above that texts do have meaning, and that it is often possible for us to understand that meaning. But how does this affect our *interpretation* of the text? The common sentiment "That's *your* interpretation" implies a critical but unproven assumption: that people have the right to interpret a given text as they wish. But is this assumption legitimate? Is it rational?

We can pose the question in two different ways. First, we might ask if we can interpret the text as we wish, in the sense of having the capacity or

legal freedom to do so. The answer to this is rather obvious. People do have the *capacity* (for better or for worse) to interpret a text any way they wish, and many individuals exercise this freedom rather liberally. Hence, there are many different interpretations of Scripture (and other texts to a lesser extent) in use today. Many people want to interpret the Bible according to their own desires. Therefore, they will tend to choose this version of the question because it is obvious that we do have the capacity and legal freedom to interpret any text virtually any way that we wish.

But this is trivial. A more interesting and relevant question concerns whether it is *proper* to interpret a text as we wish. More specifically, does such an attitude allow us to consistently arrive at the *meaning* of a text? As we already established above, the meaning of a proposition is the idea that the author intends to communicate to the reader. And we saw that for a meaningful, well-constructed proposition, there is exactly one primary meaning. But since people have the capacity to interpret a text any way they wish, there are an unlimited number of interpretations of a text. But only *one* of those interpretations (at most) will correspond to the meaning of the passage since the passage has one meaning. This is a crucial point, which deserves some discussion.

A given text has an unlimited number of potential interpretations, but it has only *one meaning*. Thus, it is reasonable for us to define the term "correct interpretation" as *the interpretation that matches the meaning of a text* — the one that is faithful to the *author's intention*. All other interpretations will be "faulty" — that is, they are not true to what the passage means. Since communication involves the transmission of an idea, and since communication is only achieved when the recipient understands the meaning, it follows that only a correct interpretation of a text accomplishes genuine communication. Anything else is merely introspection.

Can we prove this point? Consider the alternative. Consider the man who says, "No, we are free to interpret statements as we see fit." I could respond, "Ah, then you agree with me that we are NOT free to interpret statements as we see fit." To this he would likely reply, "No, you misunderstood. I said that we *are* free to interpret statements as we see fit." I could then respond by saying, "I understood you perfectly. I interpreted your words according to my wishes. My desire is that you agree with me, so I interpreted your statement accordingly!"

When our hypothetical critic says, "No, you misunderstood," he is making the claim that proper communication was not accomplished, that I did not interpret his words *properly* (in accordance with his intention). But this contradicts his claim that any interpretation is acceptable. The very fact that people attempt to communicate shows that they do believe that communication is possible. And communication is only possible when the *interpretation matches the author's intention*. The claim that "multiple interpretations are acceptable" is self-refuting because it presupposes that the claim itself has only one correct interpretation. The multiple interpretations view is a form of the relativist fallacy.

"Sure, these principles make sense for any normal literature," says the critic. "But the Bible is not normal literature. It has special rules." How are we to deal with this claim?

Review

Can truth be relative to the individual? No, because the statement "truth is relative" is an absolute statement. If it's true, it's false. Therefore, it's false. To deny the absolute nature of truth is the *relativist fallacy*.

Do words have meaning? Yes. The statement "Words do not have meaning" is self-refuting because it presupposes that words do have meaning. If it is true, it's false. Therefore, it's false. To deny that words have meaning is the *deconstructionist fallacy*.

Does a proposition have meaning? Yes, generally, and only one meaning. If propositions did not generally have meaning, or if they had more than one meaning, then genuine communication could never occur. Thus, people could never learn anything from books or teachers. But communication is possible; people do learn from books and from teachers all the time. Therefore, the notion that propositions are generally meaningless (or have more than one meaning) is a self-refuting proposition. It's necessarily false.

Can human beings discover the meaning of a proposition? Yes — often. If it were never possible to discover the meaning of a proposition, then communication would be impossible. But we know that communication is possible. Concepts can be transferred by the use of language. Thus, it is indeed often possible to discover the meaning of a proposition — but not always.

Are there certain essential requirements necessary to understand a text? Yes, the reader of a text must understand the language of the text. This

includes at least some of the vocabulary and the major rules of grammar. An understanding of the history and culture of the author may be necessary in some cases, but not in all cases. The reader must be able to reason logically, and have a philosophy that is compatible with proper interpretive methods, one that will not cause a misunderstanding of the passage. There may be others. But these provide a reasonable start.

Is it proper/appropriate to interpret according to our own wishes or standards? No, arbitrary interpretation does not generally extract the meaning of a passage. It merely reflects the reader's biases, not the author's intention. The notion that we are free to interpret a text by our arbitrary wishes is self-contradictory; anyone espousing such a view would have to assume that his statement would itself not be subject to arbitrary interpretation. The "correct interpretation" is defined to be the one that matches the meaning of a passage — the author's intention. The one-meaning principle is the fact that a given proposition generally has exactly one primary meaning, and thus exactly one correct interpretation.