



## The Associate Editor's

# DESK

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## The Interpretation of Scripture

The apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy wrote, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).<sup>1</sup> Rightly dividing the Word includes adopting the right presuppositions and attitudes toward the Word and using a method of interpretation in harmony with the Word itself.

The fact that Paul admonishes Timothy to correctly interpret the Word of truth, the Bible (John 17:17), implies that it can be interpreted incorrectly, and indeed, many instances can be cited to prove the point. A preacher, for example, delivered a sermon on Mark 2, which tells about some men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus and lowered him through the roof of the house so he could be healed. In the King James Version, Mark 2:4 says, “They could not come nigh unto him for the press.” This pastor preached for half an hour about how the press—the news media—are still keeping people from Jesus even to this day! The text, however, has nothing to do with the news media. “The press” refers to the crowd around Jesus. The whole sermon was based on a false understanding of the text.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, to understand what Scripture actually teaches, it must be interpreted. The Pharisees studied the Old Testament and knew what it said, but

they did not understand it. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus knew the Scripture, yet they failed to understand it. Therefore, when Jesus joined them, Luke says, "He interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27, RSV).

A text can be used in different ways. The most important way is to exegete it. This means we want to know the writer's original intent, what the writer (that is, God through the human instrument), wanted to say in the original context. In exegeting a text, we bring out the original message of the text, and to do this we use the grammatical-historical method.

Another approach is to use a text homiletically. Homiletics is the art of preparing sermons. The homiletical use of a text means to use the language of the text to move people into action, in a worship setting for instance, to apply the language of the text to a present-day problem or situation without considering the historical context. It means using the language of the text to say what the preacher wants to say.

For example, in Mark 1:17, Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, "Then Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.'" Exegetically, what Jesus said referred to Simon and Andrew. He was talking to them and inviting them to follow Him. Homiletically, this text can be applied to you and me. Jesus invites each one of us today to follow Him, and He will make us fishers of men. And every preacher standing in the pulpit on Sabbath morning can use the words of Jesus to give the invitation to follow Jesus.

### **Guidelines in Interpreting a Text**

The following guidelines, framed as questions, encompass essentially what is called the grammatical-historical method of biblical interpretation: (1) What is the immediate context—what comes before and after the text? (2) What is the time and place—when and where was the text written? (3) What is the larger biblical context—what do other texts on the topic have to say?

1. *Immediate context:* Daniel 12:4 says: "But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." This text is frequently used as a prophecy in regard to modern travel. In Daniel 12:4 the context refers to "go to and fro" through the scroll which was sealed until the time of the end. "Run to and fro" is a Hebrew idiom for "searching." When the Book of Daniel would be unsealed after the commencement of the time of the end, the knowledge regarding the times mentioned by Daniel would increase (2 Chron. 16:9; Jer. 5:1; Amos 8:12; Zech. 4:10).

2. *Time and place:* Deuteronomy 22:5 reads, "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so *are* an abomination to the Lord your God." This text has often

been used to forbid women to wear trousers. However, the text does not refer simply to fashion or styles of dress. In its context, it refers to the practice of transvestitism, which is the abnormal desire to wear clothing appropriate to the opposite sex. It is a deviant form of sexual behavior.

The phrase “that pertains to a man” includes everything he wears, his headdress, ornaments, and weapons, not only his clothing. The same applies, of course, to the “woman’s garment.” Furthermore, in the time of Moses trousers were not worn by either sex.

Why is the wearing of clothes of the opposite sex called “an abomination”? First, because transvestitism was frequently associated with homosexuality. Second, transvestite practices were part of the cults of certain deities. People dressed in accordance with the sex of the deity.

3. *Other statements:* Exodus 7:3 says: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.” Many have been baffled by the statement in Exodus 7:3. If God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, how can Pharaoh be blamed for bringing the 10 plagues upon Egypt? In a case like this, it is important to look at the larger context to see if there are other texts that may clarify what is said in Exodus 7:3.

When we read through the story of the exodus from Egypt, there are three statements concerning Pharaoh’s heart. The first kind of statement says God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. We have already read Exodus 7:3. Another text is Exodus 9:12: “The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh; and he did not heed them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses” (see also 10:20; 11:10). The second kind says Pharaoh’s heart was hardened: “Then the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments; and Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said” (7:22; see also 8:19; 9:7). The third type of statement says that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart: “But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the Lord had said” (8:15; see also 8:32; 9:34).

What actually happened? Before we answer the last question, we need to understand that Hebrew thinking was different from ours. In Hebrew thinking, whatever God allowed, He *did*. For example, because God permitted evil in this world Isaiah 45:7 says that God created “evil” (KJV) or “calamity” (NKJV). In the case of Pharaoh, he himself hardened his heart, and God allowed this to happen. Therefore, God is said to have hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

In this age of relativism, where many things that were once forbidden or frowned upon are now accepted and promoted, the authority of Scripture is being questioned. In the area of religion, where pluralism is the trend of the day, Scripture is increasingly made irrelevant. Cultural relativism, which teaches that there cannot be truths valid for all cultures, is undermining the fundamental doctrines of the church.

It is imperative, therefore, for the church to re-establish the authority of the Bible. Ellen G. White predicted that in the time of the end, “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.”<sup>3</sup>

Hand in hand with this must go a proper interpretation of Scripture. Unless we take the biblical text seriously, we will flounder on the sea of pluralism as many others have done; unless we use the correct methods of interpreting the Bible, we will fall into the trap of twisting Scripture to our own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this column are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

2. John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), 57.

3. *The Great Controversy*, 595.

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