INTERPRETATION, HERMENEUTICS, THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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In dealing with controversial passages, interpreters make their choice by their understanding of the big picture, the general understanding, the conceptual context. They follow this procedure even with passages that at first glance would call for a more likely-sounding interpretation. The readers may choose a less likely sounding meaning because of the general understanding they bring to the text. In such cases, where more than one reading is possible, the text doesn't prove either idea that the readers are bringing to it; that text rises no higher than confirmatory evidence in contrast to primary proof. The passage falls out of the process of arriving at the general understanding. That general understanding must come from someplace else or from other places taken together.

The process we're describing here shows the blending of interpretation and theological method. In practical discussions, eliminating another viewpoint can take the following pattern: instead of hoping to disprove the alternate idea, interpreters eliminate it by showing with each passage used to support it has other natural ways of being read. When this procedure is followed with each passage, that alternative idea is at best an opinion rather than certainty. Certainty arises from primary proof, evidence that fits with only one viewpoint

The above observations point up several matters. One is the nature of scripture: scripture throughout is operating out of the same picture of things. The method assumes inerrancy, infallibility, accuracy, truthfulness, *etc*.

Another consideration is canonicity—what writings belong to the authoritative body of literature that supplies the ideas interpreters work with. A subset in that matter is what books were written by Paul, for example—whether he wrote only the basic four (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians) and whether the pastorals and prison letters belong to him.

A third matter pertains to source criticism, literary criticism, and the like. Breaking up the gospels, for example, into a set of independent sources that were redacted by some unidentifiable person greatly reduces the context even within a given book. The assumption is lost that these unknown writers of the sources were operating out of the same understanding of the Christian faith. The impact of such fragmentation is obvious, then, as with the documentary hypothesis for the Pentateuch, in source theories for the gospels, the Book of Acts, and the unity of other writings. At best, context and connection can be rooted only in the perception of the redactor instead of the events themselves. Admittedly, any writer of history does this very thing since he is not recording everything. His choice of material and the connection between parts of the whole flow of events that are presented is impressed on the raw data. Inspired authorship establishes accurate connection and guarantees context.

Adequate concept inventory comes into the picture because an interpreter's mind must contain all the ideas and forms of thought that appear in the biblical content. If they are not present in a reader's mind, he will fudge the biblical content into something that is similar to some idea he does have in his own mind. This last consideration further bleeds off into an understanding of the origins of rationality in the human brain and assumes such viewpoints as the belief that we are born with the forms of knowledge (rationalism) while experience gives us the content of knowledge (empiricism).

Proper thinking patterns include formal and informal fallacies. Allegorizing comparisons comes up frequently. One example is trying to show there is a feminine aspect in God because in perhaps a dozen places scripture compares God to a woman comforting her little one or even Jesus' trying to gather the people of Jerusalem under his wings like a chicken gathers her chicks (Matthew **23**:37). In the latter case, it would be as legitimate to conclude that God has feathers or is bipedal. The fallacy is called allegorizing the comparison, carrying the likeness beyond the ones the author specifies.

How language operates is something intuitive in people's minds. Difficulty arises when the normal characteristics of language usage are not kept the same in biblical interpretation as they are elsewhere in human language communication. In one direction, students of scripture do not allow language to have the flexibility, variety, and richness of usage that exists elsewhere. For example, they tend to bring in restrictive principles of usage like the idea that literal usage is to be assumed unless it cannot work. The "literal" is called the "clear," and other approaches are "twisting scripture" to avoid its "obvious" meaning. Such an approach breaches the more fundamental principle that authorial intent establishes what a statement means.

In the other direction, there has been an attempt to justify additional linguistic principles like fourfold interpretation. Such ideas are rooted in the notion that since God is using the language, he can and will do more with it than when people use it; hence, come hidden meanings, mystical interpretation, and the like. The problem, of course, with reducing or adding principles of interpretation in biblical studies is that a reader loses verification and falsification as tests for meaning. God uses human language the way we use it or we are in no position to "get the point." Besides, taking the biblical use of human language out of its framework puts no limits on the ideas a "false prophet" my claim God means by the text.

A second dimension of how language operates in interpretation concerns the differences between one language and another. That issue comes into the picture because the scriptures we read today were written a long time ago in other languages used by different cultures. Furthermore, in New Testament studies, the writers of the Greek texts had their usage of language affected by the patterns of thought found in Hebrew. Occasionally, then, reading New Testament Greek calls for being aware of Semitic influences together with the difficulty of expressing biblical content in modern languages.

The above considerations illustrate the connections between a wide range of disciplines in biblical study.

The truth itself is *"simple so that a wayfaring fool need not err therein"* (Isaiah **35**:8) The difficulties come in getting to that truth and distinguishing it from other ideas that might look like it. The most basic principle again is identifying the author's intention: "authorial intent." We look for features of the near and distant contexts of what the writer says so we can judge how literally or figuratively he means to speak.

We do not start with a false principle like taking the literal over the figurative whenever possible. Jesus claimed that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (Matthew **26**:61; Mark **14**:58; John **2**:19-22). His listeners mistook him as speaking literally when he meant it figuratively regarding his own body, which would be crucified and resurrected as a replacement for the temple as a place for sacrifice. The religious leaders used it as an accusation for condemning him to crucifixion (Matthew **27**:40; Mark **15**:29). A similar misinterpretation occurs in Matthew **16**:6-12 about *"the leaven of the Pharisees"* and in the blind man's *"being born in sin"* (John **9**:34 < Psalm **51**:5). Nicodemus likewise mistook *"born again"* as if meant literally (John **3**:3-13).

Likewise, we cannot rely on finding another passage that eliminates an incorrect reading of this one. While that sometimes happen, the procedure often calls for a more involved effort of thought and research—efforts such as those indicated above.