

DO YOU BELIEVE?
A BOOK SERIES FROM RATIO CHRISTI

MISUNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

HOW & WHY

KENNETH BERDING, PHD

 RATIO
CHRISTI

FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

WHAT IS RATIO CHRISTI?

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Have you ever misunderstood something you read in the Bible? I certainly have. I imagine you have too. This short book is about reasons we sometimes misunderstand the Bible. The goal is to help us learn how to read the Bible well by focusing on why we misunderstand. We will concentrate upon *problems* in interpretation with the goal of helping us become more faithful interpreters of the Bible.

Since we will focus upon the *negative* (in order to teach the positive), let me begin by listing five central axioms of biblical interpretation—positive principles. I refer to these as *The Big Five* in a class I teach on interpretation and in another book I wrote. If you want to read the Bible well, whatever else you do, you need to pay attention to these five rules of interpretation.¹

1. Pay attention to the context, please!
2. Remember what category of literature you're reading.
3. Don't forget that you're reading cross-cultural literature.
4. Allow Scripture to interpret Scripture
5. Keep it connected to the Big Story

These five central principles of interpretation will show up in one form or another throughout this book and will receive explanations and illustrations in the pages ahead. Why is it that we so often misunderstand the Bible? What factors cause us to misinterpret the Bible?

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE MAKE IT ALL ABOUT US

A new Christian sincerely wanted to learn and obey the Bible. One day this young man decided to randomly open his Bible and do whatever he discovered when he looked down at the page. He opened his Bible, his eyes landing on 1 Kings 12:5: “Go away for three days, then come again to me.”²

Hopeful that three days later God was going to show him what to do, he patiently waited. After three days, he again picked up his Bible and let the pages fall open to wherever they might open. This time, his eyes alighted upon Luke 15:23, “And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.”

Slightly confused, and feeling rather uncomfortable about killing an animal, he decided that maybe he just needed to invite some of his new Christian friends over to his apartment and serve some barbequed steaks—which he did. But he still was unsure if that really was what God wanted him to do.

So, he decided to try one more time. Tentatively he opened his Bible. His eyes landed upon Deuteronomy 32:49-50: “Go up this mountain...and die on the mountain which you go up.”

It didn’t take long for this young man to realize that the Bible wasn’t always about him. This (obviously fictional) story highlights the first reason people frequently misunderstand the Bible. Many people assume that everything in the Bible is specifically *for them*.

Granted, there is a broad sense in which everything in the Bible somehow relates to each of us. If God is ultimately responsible for writing the Bible (which the Bible claims he is, see 2 Peter 1:20-21), and if God intended for his Book to be read (which he obviously did), then he wanted us to know at some level *everything* he included in the Bible. Learning about everything—even the food laws in Leviticus, the genealogies in Chronicles, and the oracle against the nation of Edom in Obadiah—is “profitable” in some way for us (2 Timothy 3:16-17). But that still doesn’t mean that every individual verse relates directly to me.

When Jesus told his disciples to make the people sit down on the grass (Mark 6:39), those words were particular instructions for the people who heard him speak at that moment. When the Apostle Paul received a night vision of a man telling him to come

up to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10), the recording of that vision does not mean that you or I are supposed to travel to Macedonia. When God told Ezekiel to build a model of the city of Jerusalem as though it was under siege (Ezekiel 4:1-3), that isn't something that we're supposed to do. Just because God blessed Abraham and his broader community with lots of cattle (Genesis 13:2) doesn't mean that he intends for me personally to be rich.

Broadening the discussion beyond individual verses, the Bible *as a whole* isn't even primarily about us. The main actor in the Bible is not you or me, nor even major characters like Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, or Paul. The main actor throughout the Bible is God. And the primary way God reveals himself to the world is through the person of *Jesus Christ*. The Bible starts with God ("In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," Genesis 1:1) and ends with Jesus Christ ("The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen," Revelation 22:21). Consequently, if the Bible is primarily about God revealing himself through Jesus Christ, we misread the Bible when we assume that everything we find in the Bible will directly and individually apply to *me*.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #1:

*Don't assume everything you read in the Bible
directly applies to you.*

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE OVERLOOK CONTEXT

“Judge not, that you be not judged.”

Matthew 7:1 may be the most frequently-quoted verse in the Bible. Not everyone knows that these words were spoken by Jesus, nor even that they are originally from the Bible, but most everyone—Christian and non-Christian—is familiar with the statement. These words, however, are almost always used incorrectly. The reason is simple. Most people haven’t looked at the *words around the words*. Stated differently: they haven’t paid attention to the literary *context*.

Words and sentences mean what they mean primarily because of the contexts in which they are found. The most common reason people misinterpret the Bible—more than any other reason—is that they are inattentive to whatever else appears in the verses and paragraphs around the verse they are reading. Matthew 7:1 is a perfect example. Most people quote this verse when they want someone to leave them alone and let them do whatever they want. “Judge not,” to such readers means, “You have no right to question my decisions or lifestyle, especially since you aren’t perfect yourself.”

Said differently, this verse purportedly means that you and I are never permitted to correct someone for doing something wrong. We should simply leave them alone. But this interpretation is *impossible*. Why? Because if it were correct, Jesus would have said different words than he actually said in the follow-up illustration he used to *explain* his saying. He would have said: “Do not take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” But that is not what he said. See for yourself. Here are the verses that follow the famous words “Judge not, that you be not judged.”

For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

MATTHEW 7:2-5

Pay special attention to the concluding clause in this paragraph: “then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” If Jesus had intended that we *never evaluate* the rightness or wrongness of another’s actions, he would have instructed his listeners *not* to take out a speck. Instead, he told them to first take a log out of their eye so they could see clearly enough to remove a speck from a brother’s eye.

This demonstrates that Jesus was not issuing a *prohibition* when he uttered the words “Judge not.” Instead, he was issuing a *warning*. In other words, Jesus was telling them to do some careful self-assessment and then proceed with caution whenever they felt the need to correct someone. Verse two makes the warning and need for self-assessment clear: “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Jesus was warning them (and us by extension) that when we evaluate others, we need to be really, really careful. We are frequently blind to our own shortcomings, and even sometimes project upon others faults we possess but about which we are unaware. So, make sure that you aren’t doing the same thing—or something worse (i.e. the “log in your eye”) than the thing you are trying to correct in a brother or sister. (By the way, this is the difference between what Greek grammarians call an Imperative of Prohibition and an Imperative of Condition, in case you were wondering.³)

By way of summary, how do we know this is correct? We know because we looked carefully at the verses that were around the verse we quoted. Thus, not only do we misunderstand the Bible when we fail to pay attention to context, we apply it appropriately when we pay attention to it.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #2:

Pay attention to the literary context (the surrounding verses and paragraphs).

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE CONFUSE GENRES

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). This verse has brought grief to the hearts of many parents. Parents who have tried to raise their children to walk in the ways of God often second-guess themselves when one or more of their children become adults but no longer accept the faith of their father and mother. “Did I actually raise them well? If I had, this verse promises that they’d still be walking on the right path. Right?”

Wrong. Such parents are reading this verse as a *promise*, when it is in fact a *proverb*. A proverb pithily expresses a generally true axiom (such as, the way you raise your children will normally, though not always, lead to certain outcomes when a child is grown). People who read this as a promise have confused *genres*.

Genre is a French word that means “kind” or “type.” It is a word commonly used to describe different *categories* of music, art, and especially literature. The Bible is a book containing various genres. When you read the Bible, you encounter, among other genres, historical narratives, letters, prophecies, laws, parables, psalms, gospels, apocalypses, genealogies, and love songs. This variety of genres is actually one of the reasons the Bible is so interesting to read.

But here’s the challenging part. Varying genres require varying approaches to reading those genres. For example, we cannot simply assume that something we read in a *narrative*—say, something that Moses *did*—is something that we *have to do*. Narratives *narrate*; they don’t *regulate*. Whenever we read a New Testament letter, we need to ask *who* is writing to *whom*, and then try to figure out *why* that letter was written (the “occasion” of the letter). Was the letter written to correct a misunderstanding? Encourage a friend? Warn about false teaching? That’s an important principle for reading a *letter* well.

But when we read an *apocalypse* like the book of Revelation, we need to stay attentive to symbols, and not assume that a beast is a real animal, a dragon is an actual winged creature, a bride is a newly married woman, or Babylon is a city in the Fertile Crescent.

And, to this point, we cannot read a *proverb* as a promise. A proverb is a generally true observation about life. It is usually true that if we raise our children in the right way, even when they are old they will normally walk the path of life well. But there are still many

exceptions to this general observation. Proverbs allow for that. Promises don't. If we get the genre wrong, we sometimes get the interpretation wrong.

Think of learning how to interpret various genres like learning the rules of a sport. What if someone grew up playing “football” (soccer) in Europe, and after moving to the United States attended his or her first “football” game. Oh my—they can use their hands and tackle people! And why do they call it “football”?! (Honestly, I'm not sure why our hike-rush-throw-and-tackle game is called “football,” except that one player kicks the ball about every ten minutes during a game. I assume that the name has something to do with its historical relationship to rugby.)

But once you learn the rules of a game, specific actions on the field make a lot more sense. Genre is the same. Once you become familiar with how to interpret various genres, you will make fewer mistakes in interpreting the Bible as a whole. In sum, one of the most common reasons we misunderstand the Bible is that we aren't attentive enough to whatever *genre* we are reading.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #3:

Identify genre.

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE **UNDEREMPHASIZE** HISTORY & CULTURE

If you have spent much time in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), you will know that Jesus faced regular opposition from “Pharisees” and “Sadducees.” Who are the Pharisees and Sadducees? Are they different from one another? Maybe the Pharisees aren’t *fair*, *you see*, or the Sadducees are *sad*, *you see*. (That last sentence was a joke; read it out loud in case you didn’t get it.)

Pharisees and Sadducees were two groups who often opposed one another, but agreed that Jesus was dangerous. Sadducees were of the priestly caste. Pharisees were lay people. Sadducees ran the temple. Pharisees only wished they could. Sadducees were pro-Roman for the most part. Pharisees simmered under Roman occupation. Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Pharisees accepted all the books in what Christians refer to as the Old Testament. Sadducees did not believe in resurrection and the afterlife. Pharisees accepted both.

Suppose you weren’t aware of the Sadducees’ deep-seated and public disbelief in future resurrection and the afterlife. Even though Matthew flagged their disbelief (22:23), you might not understand the intent of the question the Sadducees asked Jesus one day.

Teacher, Moses said, “If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.” Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.

MATTHEW 22:24-28

It would be natural to read this passage as though the questioners were struggling with a *theological question* about future resurrection that they needed resolved by Rabbi Jesus. That interpretation might be acceptable if the questioners *weren’t Sadducees*. But since Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, that way of reading the passage can’t be correct.

Because they were Sadducees, we need to read this passage as an intentional *test*, delivered by *skeptics*, who were *sarcastically asking* about something they *didn’t believe*.

Knowing that Sadducees did not believe in future resurrection and the afterlife helps us read this passage better.

We sometimes misunderstand the Bible because we don't pay careful enough attention to history and culture. It is helpful to remember that we are reading an *old* book, and that some things about the Bible's history and culture are different from our own. Thus, we understand the Bible better by paying attention to economics (What is a denarius? How did taxes work?), politics (Who's in charge of what area? How do various rulers relate to one another?), religion (Why did people in other countries get tattoos, but Israel did not? What is the problem with meat sacrificed to idols?), geography (Why does the parable of the Good Samaritan start with "A man was *going down* from Jerusalem to Jericho"? [Luke 10:30]), other peoples of Bible times (Cushites, Hittites, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, mosquito bites), and so on.

There also exist cultural patterns that can help you gain a richer reading of biblical texts, including honor and shame, the importance of family, ritual purification, and patronage, to name a few.

Occasionally you may need some help in understanding historical and cultural backgrounds. This is where specialists (and books written by specialists) can help you. Normally, though, you can adequately understand the main ideas of a passage without accessing specialized background knowledge. But even then, historical and cultural backgrounds can add layers of richness, and even correct misunderstandings. In summary, we sometimes misunderstand the Bible when we underemphasize history and culture.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #4:

Pay attention to history and culture.

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE OVEREMPHASIZE HISTORY & CULTURE

The easiest way to get around an apparently clear passage in the Bible is to claim that something in the history or culture of the time was different from our own, and thus renders the passage irrelevant to us. I grew up hearing that there was a gate in Jerusalem called the *Eye of the Needle*. It was a small gate—or so I was told—large enough for a human to walk through, but very difficult to guide a camel through. A camel would have to get down on its knees and shuffle forward to enter that little gate. And thus, the meaning of the text was to teach us humility in approaching God. There is, however, no archeological evidence that such a gate existed! Where did the idea of a small gate in the walls of Jerusalem come from?

I don't think anyone knows who originally suggested it, but it isn't difficult to imagine why it originated. It most likely arose from someone who wasn't comfortable with Matthew 19:24, where Jesus says, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Someone (maybe a rich person?) felt uncomfortable with Jesus uttering such a statement. A little gate in the walls of Jerusalem softens Jesus's statement. At least a little.

But as you may have guessed by now, the "eye of a needle" is the little hole in the non-pointy end of a needle. The expression even gets recorded with slightly different wordings by Matthew (19:24), Mark (10:24), and Luke (18:25), which shows that it couldn't have been a *name* for a gate.

Jesus's point, it seems, is to say that apart from God (see Matthew 19:26), it is *impossible* for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Riches frequently lead one's heart astray (Matthew 6:21). Jesus's strong warning comes on the heels of an encounter with a rich young man who brought grief to Jesus's heart because he was too attached to his wealth to let it go and follow Jesus (Matthew 19:16-22).

But we often don't want to hear Jesus's call to radical discipleship regarding our wealth. Our discomfort with Jesus's strong statement makes us susceptible to a "historical" explanation that allows for a camel to get through a supposed door in Jerusalem.

I have watched this happen more times than I want to admit, even with *real* historical

backgrounds, not only made-up ones. I'm thinking of one biblical scholar who almost always frontloads his books with historical backgrounds. He introduces everything he thinks is relevant from *outside of the Bible* before he comments on anything inside the Bible itself. His outside-the-Bible explanations can go on for hundreds of pages. By the time he starts to comment on a biblical passage, the reader is so worn out from reading page after page of historical backgrounds that the reader capitulates to this scholar's interpretation of a biblical passage—*even, at times, when the passage in question includes multiple indicators that it means something different.*

Leading with historical backgrounds is the most common way people circumvent biblical teachings that address cultural trends such as divorce, gender confusion, lawsuits, and the rejection of the exclusivity of Christ. The most common approach people use to counteract teaching they don't like is to appeal to some historical background in order to soften the clear teaching of the Bible.

The previous chapter focused on the fact that we sometimes misunderstand the Bible when we underemphasize history and culture. But we also need to remember that we sometimes misunderstand the Bible when we *overemphasize* history and culture and use it to distort the words on the page.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #5:

*Don't use history and culture to make the Bible fit
your preferences.*

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE **UNDEREMPHASIZE** PRESUPPOSITIONS

“And they [the disciples] said, ‘Lord, look, here are two swords.’ And he [Jesus] said to them, ‘That is enough,’” (Luke 22:38). Jesus is speaking to his disciples only hours before he is betrayed and then arrested, trying to prepare his friends for what lies ahead. The atmosphere in the room is tense.

The ambiguity of “That is enough” is the interpretive difficulty in these verses. Is Jesus giving his disciples permission to use self-defense, or is he sharply rebuking them for such a thought? In other words, is Jesus saying “It is enough” or “That is enough!”? If the former translation is correct, it is possible Jesus is advocating self-defense. If the latter translation is correct, it seems he is saying, “Enough of that nonsense!”

In this case, it is not clear which translation is correct. But that’s not the point. Instead, notice how one’s presuppositions might impact the interpretation. Since the literary context in this instance doesn’t offer many clues for resolving the question, other broader assumptions—what are sometimes called *presuppositions*—are very likely to exert at least some influence on the interpretation of this verse.

If you come from an Anabaptist background—perhaps growing up hearing that Christians should never use force—you are likely to gravitate toward viewing this verse as a rebuke. If you grew up in a pro-military family, you are more likely to gravitate toward the idea that Jesus condoned force in certain circumstances.

Notice that I did not say that your presuppositions *determine* the way you read a passage (more on that in the next chapter). But they do *influence* you. One reason people sometimes misunderstand passages in the Bible is because they are unaware that their presuppositions are exerting some influence.

By way of example, it is not uncommon for skeptics of the Bible to make elementary interpretive mistakes as they read the Bible because of one particular presupposition: they don’t believe in miracles. The problem with such skepticism is that all the biblical writers along with almost all ancient biblical readers *did* believe in miracles. Disbelief in miracles prevents a miracle-disbelieving person from sympathetically reading accounts that include miracles, whether at the hands of Moses, Elijah, or Jesus.

Presuppositions do influence our interpretations to some degree. We are more likely to interpret correctly if we stay aware of that reality. In chapter 2, I commented that many people treat Jesus's instruction in Matthew 7:1 ("Do not judge") as a simple prohibition, which it is not. Notice, though, that one of the main reasons people interpret it as a prohibition is because our current cultural climate emphasizes a certain type of *tolerance* to such an extreme degree that any sort of evaluation ("judging") is considered unacceptable. That emphasis on tolerance functions as a presupposition for many people.

You will become a better reader of the Bible if you increase your awareness that your background does assert some influence on how you tend to interpret various Scriptures. If you can discern how your age, associations, church background (or lack thereof), reading habits, social-media influences, ethnicity, parental beliefs, economic status, friendships, sex, political affiliations, geography, work environment, or natural personality tend to move you in particular interpretive directions, you will become a better reader of the Bible.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #6:

Become aware of your presuppositions.

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE **OVEREMPHASIZE** PRESUPPOSITIONS

Many people overlook or deny that presuppositions have any impact on whether they tend to read the Bible correctly. I addressed that problem in the last chapter.

But some people *overemphasize* presuppositions to such a degree that they deny that anyone can ever be confident about arriving at a true interpretation of a passage. In other words, we are sometimes made to think that we are *stuck* in our preunderstandings, beliefs, and biases. We are free to make up our own interpretations, or so we are told, but we can never arrive—nor should we even try to arrive—at a true interpretation of a text. We are so wrapped up in our own beliefs and biases that we have no way of getting out of them.

Ironically, this assumption is *itself* a presupposition that will negatively affect the degree to which someone understands the Bible. But if the authors of the Bible could listen in, they would have nothing to do with such ideas.

Look, for example, at a moment when Paul comments on an earlier letter he had written:

*I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. **But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person...***

1 CORINTHIANS 5:9-11 NASB

The Corinthians *misunderstood* what he had written. They thought that he told them to distance themselves from *all* sexually immoral people—even non-Christians. He didn't. Paul didn't want Christians to stop associating with the 'regular' people of the world. In fact, Paul was instructing them not to spend a lot of time with those claiming to be Christians who were concurrently living in sexual immorality. Paul's *clarification* would be irrelevant if it wasn't possible to arrive at some sort of determinative meaning—that is, if we permitted the notion that one person's interpretation of the same text could be different from the interpretation of someone else.

Similarly, the Apostle Peter commented on how some people were incorrectly

reading the Apostle Paul’s letters, “which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16). If they can “twist” them, this demonstrates that there is such a thing as a *wrong* way to read the Bible.

Besides, assuming that you are *stuck* in your presuppositions to such a degree that your interpretations are predetermined doesn’t work well in other areas of life. Should not a jury aim to ascertain the truthfulness of the witnesses’ testimony? When a lawyer opens a will after the death of a client, should not that lawyer seek to interpret it according to the intentions of the will’s author? An overemphasis on presuppositions would entail that such a lawyer cannot come to a true interpretation of the deceased person’s will. Should teachers stop testing students on what they read on the assumption that a student can never arrive at a text’s meaning?

We misunderstand the Bible when we *overemphasize* presuppositions just as much as when we *underemphasize* them. Those who overemphasize presuppositions sometimes go so far as to deny that understanding is even attainable. The biblical authors, who wrote with the assumption that people would understand what they wrote—and sometimes even corrected misinterpretations—wouldn’t agree.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #7:

Don’t overemphasize presuppositions.

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE
**WHEN WE FORGET THAT IT'S A
BOOK, NOT A LIBRARY**

One of the most precious chapters in all of Scripture for Christians is Isaiah 53. Its strong resonances with the atonement of Jesus impelled the apostles to read this chapter as foreshadowing the sufferings of Jesus on behalf of our sins.⁴ But a Christian probably only has to have one conversation with a Jewish friend about this passage to learn that not everyone agrees it's about Jesus.

What's the nub of the difference in interpretation? The Jewish friend will likely remind his Christian friend to pay attention to the *literary* and *historical context*. The Christian friend will agree that those contexts are vital for proper interpretation. But there is another crucial context for properly interpreting the Bible that often gets left out: We could call that the *canonical context*. Our reference here to the "canon" is the collection of *all* the books of the Bible as a whole. We need all of them—working in conjunction—to get everything that God intends for us when we read the Bible.

You see, the Bible is not simply a library of disparate writings by forty or so authors. It is one Book. If you want to read the Bible correctly—that is, if you want to read it the way the apostles read—you have to pay attention to the *whole* Bible. The placement of any writing in a *canon* affects the way you will view it.

Let's try a simple illustration: would it bother you to learn that Jingle Bells isn't a Christmas song? Your understanding of the song would alter if you discovered that it was a Thanksgiving song (which it actually may be).⁵ But since we always listen to Jingle Bells as part of a *canon* of popular Christmas songs, we interpret it through 'Christmas song' lenses.

This illustration is relative to the Bible because only a happenstance of history led people to start viewing Jingle Bells as a Christmas song. Christians believe that when human authors (prophets and apostles) wrote the words of the Bible, God superintended the entire process so that the Book that came to be is in fact the Word of God. If this is so, should we not view it as *one book*? We acknowledge that the human authors of Scripture reflected their own languages, cultures, and personalities, and simultaneously affirm that God oversaw the process to make sure that the resulting collection of writings functioned

as a single book which reflects God’s character and purpose. Such knowledge accompanied by faith impacts our understanding of the overall message.

This means that Scripture *interprets itself*. Other Scriptures besides whatever verses you happen to be reading should be permitted to correct us when our interpretations start to go astray—because we are reading the Bible as one Book.

We also need to start identifying historical patterns (like redemption out of slavery) and theological themes (like covenant) that course their way throughout the Bible. When we arrive at the writings about Jesus, we need to recognize that Jesus wasn’t merely a good teacher who lived 2,000 years ago. According to the collective agreement of the New Testament authors, Jesus himself “fulfilled” (‘fully filled out’) the sacrificial system of tabernacle and temple, of prophet, priest, and king; furthermore, he completed the righteousness that God intended for the nation of Israel and which they failed to achieve. The New Testament writers teach that God intentionally allowed particular events and themes to emerge throughout the Book he inspired that would *place our focus on Jesus* as the center of that Book.

Thus, accepting Isaiah 53 (or any other Scripture) as part of a *canon* centering on the person and work of Jesus Christ will impact how you read it. The person who only reads grammatically and historically (that is, according to its *literary* contexts and *historical* contexts), but ignores the whole-Bible context (*canonical* context), is almost certain to miss key truths—many of which point us toward Messiah Jesus—that God wanted to communicate to us in his Book.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #8:

Pay attention to patterns and themes that emerge from reading the Bible as one Book (canon).

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE READ *LITERALISTICALLY*

Tragically, some college students who grow up in Christian homes leave the faith they once claimed. One common reason for this is mistrust of the Bible. But in many such instances the problem isn't actually with the Bible itself. Rather, the problem is their interpretation of the Bible as *literalistic*.⁶ Their faith is like what happens to rigid concrete buildings in Southern California where I live: earthquakes destroy. This wouldn't happen if they had read the Bible with sensitivity to genre, context, historical background, and figures of speech.

For example, in 2 Corinthians 12:16 (NASB), Paul writes of himself: "crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit." Was Paul claiming that he had deceived the Corinthians? No. Even a cursory glance at the chapters preceding this comment will demonstrate that Paul employed *irony* in an attempt to get the Corinthians to change their ways. Paul's point in this verse was: "Of course I didn't deceive you!" Furthermore, if you were to read the chapters leading up to this comment literalistically (as though Paul actually *had* deceived them), you also probably would find yourself confused when you observed Paul "boasting" (10:8, 13-17; 11:16-30; 12:5-9), describing himself as "foolish" (11:16-21; 12:6,11), "jealous" (11:2), and claiming that he "robbed churches" (11:8). You have to learn to be sensitive to what a biblical author is actually *doing* with what he is writing.

A more lighthearted example of literalistic reading comes from Ecclesiastes 10:19 (NIV): "A feast is made for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money is the answer for everything." If you were to read this sentence out of context, without sensitivity to the overall point of Ecclesiastes, you surely would misunderstand what the author intended: that life without God is meaningless. To understand it properly in the flow of Ecclesiastes, you would be required to add: *And these too are ultimately empty, futile, and chasing after wind* (compare 1:2,14; 2:11-26; 4:4-8; 11:8; 12:8).

One simple way of improving your reading of Scripture is to keep asking yourself what a biblical author seems to have *intended* in a particular sentence. Did an author, for example, include figures of speech? Did John intend to communicate that Jesus's friend Lazarus was sleeping when he wrote down Jesus's words, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him" (John 11:11)? Clearly not, as Jesus clarified a few verses later: "Lazarus is dead" (11:14).

James, obviously, didn't think that the tongue was an actual fire ("the tongue is a fire," James 3:6). When Paul compared the physical body to a tent, and the resurrected body to a building (2 Corinthians 5:1-4), he was using a figure of speech. Joel did the same thing when he compared locusts to an army (Joel 1:6). Paying attention to figures of speech is one way to avoid reading the Bible literalistically.

I had a Christian friend at my college who started to question the veracity of the Bible because he had "discovered" a contradiction between 2 Kings 18:5, which says about Hezekiah, "there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him" and 2 Kings 23:25, which makes a similar claim about Josiah, "Before him there was no king like him...nor did any like him arise after him (2 Kings 23:25). Both verses, however, are probably simple examples of hyperbole—extravagant speech never intended to be taken literally, analogous to "that was the best pizza I've ever eaten!"

Some teachers helpfully contrast the words "literal" (positive) and "literalistic" (negative) to make my point. A "literal" interpretation (positive) is simply an attempt by a reader to figure out an author's intention by paying attention to issues we've already talked about in this book: genre, context, flow-of-thought, historical backgrounds, figures of speech, and whole-Bible themes (the last centering on the person and work of Jesus Christ). A "literalistic" interpretation, by way of negative contrast, is a woodenly literal reading of the Bible that pays attention to few or none of these. The negative results of reading literalistically are sometimes minor. Sometimes, though, the resulting misinterpretations are profound. But a literalistic reading frequently produces misunderstanding of some kind when reading the Bible.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #9:

Don't read literalistically.

Fair warning: The first half of chapter 10, the chapter you will read next, includes some irony, since irony helps me to make the point I want to make. Take care not to read it literalistically!

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE READ ALLEGORICALLY

There must be something in the water of the Sea of Galilee. Otherwise, how can you explain why so many people allegorize stories from the life of Jesus that take place on or around the Sea of Galilee? Allegorical interpretation draws spiritual meanings out of Bible passages that biblical authors never intended. The way I see it, you had better be careful about drinking water out of the Sea of Galilee...otherwise you might start allegorizing. Let me show you what I mean.

“Jesus can calm the storms of your life.” (Matthew 8:26)

Allegorical meaning: storms = difficult trials.

This story isn't about the storms of your life! It's about Jesus's authority (Matthew 8:27). Don't drink the water. You might start allegorizing.

“When you start to sink, call out to Jesus.” (Matthew 14:30-31)

Allegorical meaning: sinking = giving into your fears.

I'm afraid that this passage is about the authority of Jesus as well (Matthew 14:33). Don't drink the water. You might start allegorizing.

“Just drown those demons in the sea.” (Matthew 8:28-34)

Allegorical meaning: demons = your fears; drown in the sea = totally getting rid of them.

On the contrary, the point of this passage is that Jesus's authority extends even over the realm of demons (Matthew 8:29). Don't drink the water. You might start allegorizing.

“You gotta' cast a net if you wanna' catch a fish.” (Luke 5:4-7)

Allegorical meaning: casting a net = sharing the gospel; catching a fish = converting a person.

It turns out that this passage, like the others, focuses on the authority of Jesus (Luke 5:8-9). Don't drink the water. You might start allegorizing.

Now, just because these particular passages focus on the person and authority of Jesus doesn't mean that every passage will render the same interpretation. It just so happens that these four examples—all somehow related to the Sea of Galilee—focus on Jesus's authority. You know, the intended meanings of the authors of Scripture sometimes aren't as deep as we try to make them (excuse the allegorical pun).

The only explanation I can conceive of for why we move toward allegorical interpretations of passages that include the Sea of Galilee is that we've been drinking the water. Otherwise, there is no textual reason to interpret the four examples listed above the way I've sometimes heard them interpreted over the years. So, you'd better watch out for the water in the Sea of Galilee!

There is one exception, however. *If* you properly identify the literary type you are reading as an allegory, then naturally you should read it allegorically, since that's how the author intended it to be interpreted. There are, however, very few allegories in the Bible. Furthermore, the few available examples of biblical allegories usually include explicit indicators of *what* corresponds to *what* (Isaiah 5:1-6; Matthew 13:3-23; Galatians 4:22-31). Consequently, the problem with allegorical interpretations (reading in spiritual meanings from outside a text) is that non-allegories—most commonly historical narratives—are forced to correspond to meanings that no one can demonstrate were ever in the minds of either human author or divine author. In other words, allegorizers (of non-allegories) fail to pay attention to interpretive clues discovered by careful study of the crucial contexts we have already discussed in this book—literary, historical, and canonical contexts.

Lots of Bible readers over the centuries have gotten infected with the allegorical bug. Be careful not to drink the water.⁷

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #10:

Don't read (non-allegories) allegorically.

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE INSERT OUR OWN AGENDAS

The Bible should be permitted to set its own agenda. That's only fair to the Bible, don't you think (...or to any piece of literature, for that matter)? This is one of the central axioms followed by people who interpret the Bible well. It is often stated as: *allow Scripture to interpret Scripture*. This principle is a natural implication of acknowledging the divine nature of the Bible—that God is ultimately the author of the entire Book.

But this also means that we have to be careful not to read in our personal agendas. Do you like to talk about sin for example? Neither do I. But how are we—who don't like to talk about sin—to account for two of the best-known verses in the Bible? The first reads, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The second states the consequences of sin along with the solution: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Because we dislike talking about sin—much less acknowledging that we personally sin!—we might be tempted to soften these statements, perhaps by trying to make “all” mean something besides “all” in 3:23, or denying in 6:23 that death is the appropriate punishment for someone who sins against Almighty God (even if God is described as perfect and holy throughout the Bible). But if we allow the Bible to set the agenda, we might be more predisposed to accept what the Bible says about sin, and, consequently, might even receive the gift of eternal life (6:23) that Jesus provided by his death on the cross.

Not wanting to talk about sin is one example of a misplaced agenda people impose upon the Bible. Another example is the desire to find something in the Bible to make a person feel good or perform well. They look for verses they can draw upon, say, before a sporting event, such as: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Someone who uses Philippians 4:13 that way, however, has neglected to pay attention to the surrounding verses indicating that Paul is talking about contentment in whatever circumstances he might find himself, *whether* things are going well or are terribly difficult (...whether one wins or loses a game, you might say).

Some people look for Bible verses to support lifestyles they have chosen: materialistic, sexual, or self-promoting. I guess if you are sufficiently motivated by a personal agenda, and if you employ an adequate amount of creativity, you probably can find a way to make

the Bible support whatever agenda you bring to it.

But one of the most helpful things you can do to grow in properly interpreting the Bible is to ask what priorities are most prominently laid out in the Bible itself. Here are a few central emphases that anyone who reads the Bible sympathetically will be able to identify:

1. God is a holy and righteous God. He announces to everyone who will listen that he is the only true God. That is why worshiping idols is repeatedly disparaged throughout the Bible (e.g., Isaiah 6:3; Exodus 20:3-6).
2. God makes promises and keeps them. The big promises of God in the Bible are called covenants. The Bible highlights major covenants that affect everything else you read in the Bible. These include the Noachic covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Mosaic covenant, Davidic covenant, and the promise of a coming New Covenant, which, according to the New Testament authors, gets fulfilled through the death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus, who is the promised Messiah. (e.g., Matthew 26:28; Romans 9:4; 15:8).
3. Sin needs atonement. That is the reason God originally set up the system of sacrifices in the Old Testament. That is also why the New Testament authors claim that Jesus's death was the final sacrifice (e.g., Leviticus 16; Hebrews 9-10).
4. God has established a new community of all who believe in Jesus, and has commissioned them to take the message of salvation to all the world (e.g., Colossians 1:18; Matthew 28:18-20).
5. Jesus is coming again to judge the world and set up his final glorious kingdom. We need to be ready for his return (e.g., Matthew 25; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

Anyone who allows the Bible to set its own agenda (if “agenda” is the right word to use) will end up with a list similar to the summary I just drew up, though many details can appropriately be added.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #II:

Try not to impose outside agendas on the Bible. Allow the Bible to set its own agenda.

WE MISUNDERSTAND THE BIBLE WHEN WE DON'T BELIEVE

Some things about the Bible can only be understood by believers. This is because anyone who believes the truths about Jesus written in the Bible, and asks God to forgive and save them from their sins, receives a gift that people who have not yet received God's forgiveness do not. That gift is the Holy Spirit of God. The Bible teaches that all who entrust their lives to Jesus Christ are sealed by the Holy Spirit who comes to live inside of them (Ephesians 1:13; John 14:16-17). Furthermore, Romans 8:1-27 explains that the Holy Spirit helps true believers in various ways. The Holy Spirit gives us a new mindset, helps us overcome sin, guides us, confirms that we are God's children, produces hope, and assists us when we don't know how to pray.⁸ But the Holy Spirit also helps us when we come into contact with God's words. Here is how the Apostle Paul explains it in 1 Corinthians 2:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:12-16

The "natural person" in these verses is the person who does not have the Spirit living within them. Paul explains that there is something that the Spirit-less person does not get about God's communication. What is that thing? Is Paul saying that the unbeliever cannot understand the grammar of a sentence or the flow of thought of a paragraph? No, the person without the Spirit can manage pretty well with that aspect of interpretation. Does it mean that he or she cannot understand the historical setting of a passage? No, it does not mean that either, though that aspect of interpretation will require a bit more effort of the reader. The main concepts in the Bible are open and available to anyone (believer

or unbeliever) who is willing to carefully look for a biblical author’s intended meaning. Rather, this passage suggests that the person without the Spirit—the person who does not believe—does not *accept* the things taught by the Spirit, *discern* their importance, and accurately *judge* how to apply them to life.

Consequently, if you want to be a person who receives all that God intends for you when you read the Bible, including how it applies to your life, you need to enter into life with Jesus by faith. Are you tired of simply dabbling in the Bible? Maybe you have started to realize that reading the Bible merely as an academic exercise isn’t enough. What is missing? It may be that you need to start *believing* what the Bible teaches—and most particularly, what it imparts about Jesus, the gravitational center of the Bible’s teaching. You might already be able to describe what the Bible communicates about some topics accurately enough, but you will never really know its significance in life without taking the next step into faith. You can describe an orange—“a softball-sized juicy citrus fruit”—but you will never entirely *understand* the orange until you remove the peel and put a piece of the fruit in your mouth.

This does not mean that a person who *is* a believer automatically understands the biblical sentences and paragraphs better than an unbeliever simply because he or she is a believer. But the believer *knows* the juice of the fruit. For example, he or she not only can articulate the idea that Jesus loves them, the believer can *know* it in experience. As the Apostle Paul wrote in a different passage, one who believes, and within whom the Spirit dwells, can “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19). We receive help from the Holy Spirit for application—a help that “natural” persons do not receive. We not only know the meaning of what we read, the Holy Spirit guides us into the significance of the Bible for life.

If we don’t want to misunderstand the Bible—as we consider not just what it meant *then*, but what it means *now* in our daily lives—we need the Holy Spirit. And no one has the Holy Spirit who does not believe.

PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION #12:

Become a believer, so that the Holy Spirit can guide you into application.

WRAPPING UP

As we come to the end of this little book, let's review the 12 *Principles of Interpretation* we have collected at the end of each chapter.

1. Don't assume everything you read in the Bible directly applies to you.
2. Pay attention to the literary context (the surrounding verses and paragraphs).
3. Identify genre.
4. Pay attention to history and culture.
5. Don't use history and culture to make the Bible fit your preferences.
6. Become aware of your presuppositions.
7. Don't overemphasize presuppositions.
8. Pay attention to patterns and themes that emerge from reading the Bible as one Book (canon).
9. Don't read literalistically.
10. Don't read (non-allegories) allegorically.
11. Try not to impose outside agendas on the Bible. Allow the Bible to set its own agenda.
12. Become a believer, so that the Holy Spirit can guide you into application.

There remains, however, one other *Principle of Interpretation* that is so obvious that it didn't receive its own chapter in this book. But it may be the most important of all principles pertaining to reading and understanding the Bible. Here it is:

You can't interpret the Bible well if you don't read it.

I am startled by how often people who rarely or never read the Bible make assertions about the Bible. Unsurprisingly, many things they assert are incorrect. To those who rarely read the Bible, I want to include a word of encouragement. One of the easiest ways to become a faithful interpreter of the Bible is simply to read it a lot. Might I suggest that you read it every day? Morning and evening, if you can. Be sure to pay attention to

the *Principles of Interpretation* we have already discussed. But whatever else you do, keep reading the Bible. Ideas found in one part of the Bible reinforce ideas found in other parts of the Bible. The result is that the simple act of frequently reading the Bible will help you know what to pay attention to during your future Bible readings. Consequently, you will become a better interpreter of the Bible than you are now. So, let me conclude with a...

FINAL PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION:

Read the Bible. Read it a lot.

I am confident that reading the Bible will not only help you interpret it better. Reading the Bible will change your life.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kenneth Berding, *Bible Revival: Recommitting Ourselves to One Book* (Weaver/Lexham, 2013, 2d. ed. 2018), 48-56.
- 2 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.
- 3 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), 487-492.
- 4 Matthew 8:16-17; Luke 22:35-37; John 12:37-38; Acts 8:26-35; Romans 10:16-17; 1 Peter 2:21-25.
- 5 Though disputed, some have asserted that Jingle Bells was originally a Thanksgiving rather than a Christmas song. See <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/jingle-bells-thanksgiving-carol/>. Whether or not this is the case, it makes my point: the canon in which a piece of literature or music appears impacts to some degree the way someone understands it.
- 6 John Marriott, *A Recipe for Disaster* (Wipf and Stock, 2018), 45.
- 7 Some of this chapter was adapted from Kenneth Berding, “Warning: Don’t Drink the Water in the Sea of Galilee. You Might Start Allegorizing,” *Talbot Magazine* (Fall, 2021): 19.
- 8 If you want to learn more about the work of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8, see Kenneth Berding, *Walking in the Spirit* (Crossway, 2011).

FURTHER READING

Most Accessible:

Kenneth Berding, *Bible Revival: Recommitting Ourselves to One Book*

Stephen J. Nichols, *Welcome to the Story: Reading, Loving, and Living God's Word*

A Bit More Challenging:

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*

Walt Russell, *Playing with Fire: How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul*

More Challenging:

Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*

William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*

Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*

Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*

Most Challenging:

Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*

Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth Berding, PhD, is a professor of New Testament at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in California, author of various academic and spiritual-life books and articles, blogs regularly at kennethberding.com and thegoodbookblog.com, and is an elder and teacher at Redemption Hill Church in Whittier, California.

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ratiochristi.org | info@ratiochristi.org
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