

# INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE



STUART ALLEN

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STUART ALLEN

Author of  
*The Unfolding purpose of God*  
*On Reading the Bible*  
*The Early Centuries and the Truth*  
*The Kingdom of God in Heaven & on Earth*  
*The Early and Pastoral Epistles of Paul*  
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## PREFACE

The Bible is the most abused book in the world. In the hands of both scholars and laymen it has suffered the indignity of being used to support all manner of dogmas, beliefs and fancies. Common sense, which has normally been exercised in the interpretation of other works, seems to have been completely abandoned with respect to the 'Book of books', and liberties have been taken which in other spheres would have been condemned outright. It has been said that anything may be proved from the Bible, a statement not so very far from the truth if complete liberty of interpretation be allowed. There is therefore a great need for such a work as this which seeks to put the interpretation of Scripture on a sound basis.

The rules outlined herein rest on the foundation that 'all Scripture is given by inspiration of God' (2 Tim. 3:16) and that God *means* what He says. The reader is here put in possession of a guide which, if followed, will make the Bible a more meaningful Book, will allow it to speak with Divine authority, and deliver from dependence upon man.

Mr. Allen has kept the language simple and straightforward throughout, so that it may be available to all. Also, what could easily have developed into a large work of many pages has been left as concise as possible, in order that none may be overwhelmed. These features commend this book as most readable and enlightening, and it should prove of great help to all who seek the truth of God in His Word. It is sent forth with this end in view.

'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom' (Col. 3:16).

May 1967

Brian Sherring

## FOREWORD

Stuart Allen has gathered a wide circle of readers by his first full length book *The Unfolding Purpose of God*. His ministry at the Chapel of the Opened Book, 52A Wilson Street, LONDON, EC2A 2ER, has demonstrated his restrained and clear style in expounding Bible themes. Many of these addresses have been taped and are available from our Tape Library. It was through the circulation of these in the United States that Mr. Allen was commissioned to prepare weekly Bible Expositions for radio stations in the State of Wisconsin.

These cassettes are numbered A 225 to A 381, are each of 26 to 27 minutes duration, and are available for loan or purchase.

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### Governing Principles for Correct Interpretation

One of the most important subjects within the orbit of Christianity is the science and art of Biblical interpretation or hermeneutics. The word ‘hermeneutics’ is ultimately derived from Hermes, the Greek god who was supposed to bring the messages of the gods to mortals, and was the god of science, speech, writing and art. It has a connection with the Greek word *hermeneia*, interpretation, and its verbal forms: *diermeneuo*, to interpret, or explain; *methermeneuomai* to interpret, to translate; *dusermeneutos*, difficult to interpret; *diermeneutes*, interpreter.

God has spoken to men through the Holy Scriptures, but what has He said? What is the meaning of His Words? If we cannot be sure of His meaning, of what practical use are the Scriptures to us? How can we receive Divine understanding unless the meaning of the Word of God is clear to us? It is the aim of hermeneutics to ascertain what God has said in His Word and to determine its meaning. This is a high and holy task and needs to be approached in deep humility. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our doctrine of salvation, sanctification, Christian living and future hope, and it is our solemn responsibility to get to know what God has said with reference to each of these, and in fact all His Truth as far as we are able to receive it. Not only this, but if we do not know the correct method of Biblical interpretation, we shall confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. In every place where our interpretation is at fault, we have substituted the voice of man for the voice of God, and are getting error instead of truth. Most of the doctrinal variations and disagreements in Christendom are due to differences in interpretation. Thus it is practically impossible to over-estimate the importance of correct hermeneutics, for from this flows correct understanding.

After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and in Luke 24:27 we read:

‘... beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded (interpreted, *diermeneuo*) unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself’.

And later on, to the eleven He said:

‘... all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning Me. Then opened He their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures’ (Luke 24:44,45).

It is helpful to see the important place that understanding has in the parables of the kingdom of heaven. Israel’s unbelief and failure inevitably led to a non-understanding heart (Matt. 13:15), and in such a condition the human mind is especially open to the devil’s activity (verse 19). He that received seed into the good ground is he that heard the word and *understood* it (verse 23). At the end of His discourse, the Lord asks: ‘Have ye *understood* all these things?’ and the favoured disciples were able to answer: ‘Yea Lord’ (verse 51). In the Acts of the Apostles we find Philip asking the Ethiopian eunuch:

‘Understandest thou what thou readest?’

and his reply was:

‘How can I, except some man should guide me?’ (Acts 8:30,31).

There is no doubt that Divine understanding is the need of us all, but we are not in a position to receive this if our method of Biblical interpretation is at fault. We are prompted to ask the question, ‘Is there some way of interpreting the Word of God so that human opinion is ruled out and Divine understanding given?’ We believe there is, hence the supreme importance of this study.

Someone may object and say that anything can be proved from the Bible. We have to face the fact that the most extraordinary ideas and fantastic notions are backed up by quotations from the Scriptures. Edward White writes:

‘There is no folly, no iniquity, no God-dishonouring theology for which chapter and verse may not be cited by an enslaved intelligence. Under these circumstance, it is impossible to express in adequate terms the importance of a correct estimate and exposition of the Bible’ (*Inspiration*, p. 153).

There is no need to list the many vagaries that the Bible has been used to bolster up, but in each case these have been due to a distorted exposition and understanding of the passages concerned. No apology then need be given for a consideration of the science of correct interpretation of the Scriptures. To begin with we shall need to give attention to the following points:

(1) There is a need to bridge the gap between our minds today and the minds of the Biblical writers of over 1900 years ago. People of the same culture, age and location, understand one another easily, but we are separated culturally, historically and geographically from Bible times. Language is different; Hebrew, Chaldee and Greek are far removed from modern language. Habits and manner of living are entirely different. Abraham’s treatment of Hagar may seem rather shabby unless we know the customs and laws of his time. The background of the Scriptures is therefore important. Every part of Scripture had a reason for its being written. Some human need called it into being through the power of God. It is for us to try to ascertain what this was, and it will greatly assist us in the correct understanding of the portion under consideration.

(2) No one is in a position to interpret the Word of God (no matter how educated or scholarly they may be) until they are saved and regenerate. The Lord Jesus said, ‘Except a man be born again, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God (John 3:3). In other words he is spiritually blind and is not in a position to understand or interpret the holy Scriptures whose context is spiritual. One reason why Christ continually gave physical sight to the blind was because this condition is illustrative of man spiritually, and what the Lord can do for men in the natural sphere, He can surely do in the spiritual.

The apostle Paul wrote:

‘The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Cor. 2:14).

A regenerate mind then is an absolute essential to understand the Bible.

(3) There must be a passion to know God’s Word. A lukewarm heart will never discover Scriptural truth. The searcher must be in dead earnest; the search for Truth must be priority number one.

(4) There must be a reverence for God and His Word and an unquestioned faith in both. The Scriptures are called holy, and must be treated as such (2 Tim. 3:15).

(5) There must also be absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit to enlighten. He is the Author of the Word and the only One Who can give opened eyes and an understanding mind. We should be careful not to confuse inspiration and illumination or enlightenment. We talk about works of art and beauty being inspired, but this is not the way the Bible uses the term. In the Biblical sense, inspiration finished when the canon of Scripture closed and the New Testament was complete. No other writings since this time are ‘God-breathed’ or inspired in this way. What we need now is not inspiration but illumination, and this is what the Holy Spirit is prepared to give to those of the redeemed who honestly and painstakingly search the Word. This is something that education and cleverness, by themselves, cannot command. The profound scholar has no monopoly of enlightenment. In fact his scholarship and education may be a bar to the discovery of truth if he is not a humble believer in Christ, and willing to give his education second place to the revealing power of the Spirit of God. There is one further thing that must be stressed here and that is that Divine illumination goes as far as Scripture reveals, not beyond it.

Angus and Green write:

‘The Spirit of God does not communicate to the human mind any doctrine or meaning of Scripture which is not contained already in Scripture itself. He makes men wise up to what is written, not beyond it’.

(6) To be a sound interpreter of the Scriptures a knowledge of the original languages God used is invaluable. Basic doctrine cannot be settled from translations, however good they are, if only for the reason that no translation can fully represent all that the original contains. We should be surprised if one who claimed to be a specialist in the



interpretation of Greek tragedy could not read Greek. This may stimulate some who read these words to commence the study of Greek and Hebrew, which would be a good thing. Such however should bear in mind that it takes more than a few months study to be in a position to lay down the law in the translation and interpretation of the Greek or Hebrew Scriptures. No one can be proficient in a language until they can write it as well as read it, and that is why composition plays such an important part in learning a language. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and we have seen bad slips in doctrine made by amateur Greek students.

(7) If there is one statement that is fundamental to the understanding of the Bible it is this: God means what He says and has a meaning for everything He says in His Word. If this is not so, then all search is useless and we can never be sure of what He wishes to convey to us. To put it another way, we must approach the Bible from the literal stand-point. This word 'literal' can be ambiguous. What do we mean by it? We can define it in this way: the customary, socially-acknowledged designation of a word is the literal meaning of that word. If we were to put our own special meaning on words, no one could understand us. This is surely obvious. But it does not mean that figures of speech, symbols, allegory and type are to be ignored or taken literally. These are a study in themselves and will be considered later on. But let it be said here that behind all figures of speech is literality, otherwise they could convey no certain meaning to us at all. The literal meaning of a word is the basic, customary meaning of that word, and therefore to interpret literally is nothing more or less than interpreting words in their normal customary and proper designation, and only in this way can divergencies of opinion be eliminated, and the authority of Scripture honoured.

When we read a book, we presume the sense is literal, for this is the only conceivable method of communication. If we had to weigh over every word of a book to find some other meaning than the literal, we should soon be forced to give it up in despair. If God wishes to communicate with man, He will do it in words whose meaning men can understand and accept, otherwise His message would never reach the human mind. Therefore we must ever keep before us this great guiding principle: that we approach the Scriptures literally, using that Word in the sense already explained. This cannot be overstressed and failure to do this is largely the cause of so much division that we see all around us in Christendom.

A large part of the Bible makes significant sense when literally interpreted. All the great basic doctrines of God's Word rest clearly on literal exposition. The historical books make sense only when so interpreted, and geographical terms likewise. The opposite of this is spiritualising or the allegorical treatment of Scripture. This is not the same as making a spiritual application of a passage of Scripture or recognising real allegories therein. This is legitimate. Rather is it treating the majority or the whole of the Bible in this way which is quite another matter. We shall have more to say about this later on. Meanwhile, let us thank the Lord that He has been pleased to stoop down to reveal His Truth to us in human words that we can receive and understand under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in consequence rejoice in the eternal riches contained therein.

### **The History of Interpretation**

At this point it may be helpful to give an outline of interpretation in the past, because this will show up wrong conceptions which have led to the misunderstanding of God's Word, and so will help to guard us against similar errors. To trace past interpretation in detail from Ezra's day right down to the present time would be an enormous task and not possible within the limits of the size of this publication. To those who wish to do so, we recommend Dean Farrar's *History of Interpretation*, which, in spite of his liberalism, is an outstanding work on this subject. Other volumes which may be consulted with profit are the *Bible in the Church* by R. M. Grant; *Prophecy and Authority* by K. Fullerton; *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* by B. Smalley.

### **The Greek School of Allegorism**

Inasmuch as the Greek allegorical method was adopted both by Jew and Christian at the beginning, it is necessary to commence here. The Greeks had a religious heritage in Homer and Hesiod. To question or doubt them was considered an irreligious or atheistic act. Yet the stories of the gods were often fanciful, absurd, or immoral, which was an offence to the philosophical mind. How was this tension to be resolved? The answer is, by allegorising. The stories were not to be taken literally, but a secret underlying meaning was to be sought. The important thing to notice is that this Greek allegorical method spread to Alexandria, where there was a large Jewish

population and eventually a Christian population of considerable size. The Alexandrian Jew was bound to face up to Greek philosophical tradition which held sway there, especially that of Plato, and for him the problem was to reconcile this with his own national Scriptures (the Old Testament). His solution was identical with the Greek.

Dean Farrar writes:

‘The Alexandrian Jews were not, however, driven to invent the allegorical method for themselves. They found it ready to their hands’ (*History of Interpretation* p. 134).

He continues on page 135:

‘By a singular concurrence of circumstances, the Homeric studies of pagan philosophers suggested first to the Jews and then through them to the Christians, a method of interpretation before unheard of, which remained unshaken for more than fifteen hundred years’.

Apparently the first writer in this Jewish allegorical way was Aristobulus (160 B.C.). He asserted that Greek philosophy borrowed from the Old Testament and that, by using the allegorical method, the teachings of Greek philosophy could be found in Moses and the prophets. The outstanding Jewish allegorist was Philo (about 20 B.C. - A.D. 54). He had strong leanings toward the philosophy of Plato and Pythagoras. By an elaborate system of allegorising, he reconciled his loyalty to his Hebrew faith and his regard for Greek philosophy. Philo did not regard the literal meaning of Scripture to be useless, but rather an immature level of understanding. He likened the literal sense of Scripture to its ‘body’, and the allegorical to its ‘soul’, the literal being for the immature and the allegorical for the mature. He had around twenty rules which indicated that a passage of Scripture was to be treated allegorically. A few of these were sound, but most of them led to interpretation that was fantastic and erroneous. Philo’s conceptions are a good example of what happens when the grammatico - historical method of interpretation is abandoned. Spiritualising becomes a slippery slope down which it is well nigh impossible to stop.

### **The Allegorism of the Fathers**

This system which sprang from the pagan Greeks and was copied by the Alexandrian Jews, was then adopted by the professing church and largely dominated the interpretation of the Scriptures until the Reformation, with the exception of the school at Antioch and the Victorines of the Middle Ages. The apostolic Fathers had as their Bible the Septuagint, i.e. the Greek translation of the Old Testament. They saw that the Old Testament prefigured Christ in type and symbol, and that the New Testament was full of direct and indirect references to the Old Testament. In other words, they perceived that the Old Testament could never be fully understood apart from the New Testament. This they sought to emphasize by allegory and spiritualisation. The motive was right, but the method wrong. What they apparently did not realise was that the New Testament is the commentary par excellence on the Old Testament and does not need any propping up by such methods, which only throw the door wide open to personal fancies and excesses.

There was a lack of historical sense in their method of exposition; they usually ignored the setting and background of a passage of Scripture. They considered the Scriptures to be full of enigmas and riddles which could only be satisfactorily explained by allegorisation. They confused the allegorical with the typical and thus blurred the correct interpretation of the Old Testament. They professed to see Greek philosophy in the Old Testament, and claimed that it was the allegorical method that discovered it. The pity of all this was that it obscured the true meaning of the Word of God. K. Fullerton writes:

‘When the historical sense of a passage is once abandoned there is wanting any sound regulative principle to govern exegesis ... The mystical (allegorical) method of exegesis is an unscientific and arbitrary method, reduces the Bible to obscure enigmas, undermines the authority of all interpretation, and therefore, when taken by itself, fails to meet the apologetic necessities of the time’ (*Prophecy and Authority*).

No wonder the Gnostics of the second century found this method so handy to propagate their false doctrine!

### **Roman Catholic Allegorism**

It is true to say that, for the most part, Scriptural interpretation of the Middle Ages was allegorical. The Roman Catholic Church has maintained the validity of the allegorical method, though there is evidence that later on, some of their scholars saw the excesses that resulted from this in Patristic theology, and were prepared to admit the importance of the literal meaning of Scripture. Roman Catholics accept the Latin Vulgate translation of Jerome as the authentic version for public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions.

This church thus puts itself into the awkward position of basing its doctrines on a translation instead of the original languages of Hebrew, Chaldee and Greek. This is a great weakness, for no one translation, however good, can adequately set forth the truth of the original.

Moreover the Roman Catholic expositor is forced to accept obediently whatever the church specifically decrees on the authorship of the books of the Bible, and some twenty verses have been officially interpreted and may not be deviated from. Actually the number is more than this, because many of the official documents require definite interpretations of certain verses. Roman Catholic exegesis became summed up during the Middle Ages in three rules:

- (1) A passage may have an allegorical or mystical meaning.
- (2) It may have an anagogical or eschatological meaning, that is, it may prefigure or anticipate the church in glory.
- (3) It may have a tropological meaning, that is, teach a way of life, or in other words, convey the moral significance of the passage.

With its often excessive usage of types, the Roman Catholic diverges from the Protestant. Thus the manna in the wilderness, the passover, the bread and wine of Melchizedek are made types of the Eucharist, thus ignoring the controlling guide of New Testament usage. Such exposition can never be accepted by the honest searcher for truth. It is reading into Scripture what is not there, and is the fruit of the allegorical method of interpretation, which is used to bolster up this sacramental and sacerdotal approach to the Bible. Further, the Roman Catholic believes that to his church alone has been entrusted the Deposit of Truth in a two-fold form, (1) the oral form (tradition) and (2) the written form (the Scriptures), and this written form, the Bible, is obscure and needs an official interpreter, which must be the Church of Rome, to whom alone, he believes, it has been given by God. To him the oral tradition is of equal authority with the Word of God because he believes that both have come from God, and are complementary. Furthermore, no passage of Scripture can be interpreted to conflict with Roman Catholic doctrine.

It is therefore obvious that the Protestant expositor is always at a disadvantage when disputing on doctrinal matters with a Roman Catholic. Whereas the former will take his stand solely on God's Word, the latter can always retreat and bring in his oral tradition, which he believes to be as much God's truth as the Bible. The more one studies the Roman Catholic position, the more one is thankful for the great liberating effect of the Reformation. Believers today have largely forgotten what they owe to God for this great movement: freedom of conscience, and approach to Him through the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and not through any human sacerdotal system with its inevitable bondage.

### **The Jewish Schools**

When Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, they were separated from the Temple and its regulations, and could no longer practice their religion as outlined in the books of Moses. This state of things finally led to Judaism with its synagogues, rabbis and traditions. The vast system of Jewish interpretation that resulted is a separate study in itself, and it is practically impossible to sum it up adequately. Various schools emerged with opposing ideas. The Karaites were the literalists and the Kabbalists the allegorists. The Palestinian Jews of post-captivity days started off well with a literal approach to the Scriptures, but they often failed to put into practice the rules they laid down. In Kabbalism excessive literalism was allied to allegorism with grotesque results. They used gematria to endow words with numerical values which became the basis for interpretation that was absurd or pernicious.

While we believe that certain numbers are used in Scripture with intent, such as 6, 7, 12, 13, 40 and so on, we need to take warning and keep this under control. We have seen some extraordinary interpretations of Scripture result from those with a mathematical inclination who have let their minds run riot along these lines.

### The Syrian School of Antioch

It has been asserted that the first Protestant school of interpretation commenced at Antioch of Syria, and had it not been crushed by orthodoxy for its supposed heretical connection with the Nestorians, the course of church history might have been very different. It produced such prominent names as Lucian, Dorotheus, Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Chrysostom. This school fought the allegorists and maintained the importance of the literal and historical interpretation of the Word of God. They insisted on the reality of Old Testament events, and accused the allegorists of doing away with the historicity of much of the Old Testament, and leaving behind a shadowy world of symbols. Their approach to the Bible was Christological, and they rightly blended together the historic and Messianic elements of the Scriptures. The result was that they produced some of the finest expository literature of ancient times. R. W. Grant points out that this school had a great influence in the Middle Ages and became the pillar of the Reformation and their method the principal exegetical method of the Christian Church.

Another interesting school was that of the Victorines which came into being at the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris in the medieval period. They likewise stressed the historical and literal approach to the Scriptures. They insisted that the spiritual sense could not be properly known until the Scriptures had been literally interpreted.

### The Reformers

The historical and grammatical approach to the Bible became the foundation of Reformed doctrine. Luther exalted the Word of God to be the supreme and final authority on theological matters. He insisted that it cannot be countermanded or subordinated to ecclesiastical authorities, whether of persons or documents. Dean Farrar (in *The History of Interpretation*) quotes him as writing ‘The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and Christian theology’. Also ‘Every word should be allowed to stand in its natural meaning, and that should not be abandoned unless faith forces us to it’.

Luther therefore rejected the allegory of the Roman Catholic church which he called ‘scum and dirt’. He stressed the importance of the original languages and did a great deal to encourage the revival of Hebrew and Greek studies. He claimed that the devout and competent Christian can understand the true meaning of the Bible and does not need official guides to interpretation, like the Roman Catholic church, but that Scripture interprets Scripture. Needless to say he carefully distinguished between Law and Grace, and this was one of his principal rules of interpretation.

The hermeneutical principles of Calvin were similar to those of Luther. He insisted that the illumination of the Holy Spirit was the necessary preparation for the understanding of God’s Word. Like Luther, he rejected allegory, and taught that the historical literal approach was the only sound one. He was a man of great ability and erudition which was exemplified in his *Institutes*, a work that has been universally acknowledged as one of the greatest contributions to theology.

Of the post-Reformation period we intend to say little, for space will not permit us to do otherwise. Sufficient to say that the spirit and rules of the Reformers became the guiding principles of Protestant interpretation. Among outstanding names we would mention Ernesti and Bengel, whose famous *Gnomon* is both concise and penetrating. However, a period of harsh dogmatism developed, concerning which Dean Farrar writes that theologians of this period ‘read the Bible by the unnatural glare of theological hatred’. It was a time of heresy hunting, and as a protest to this, Pietism developed, which stressed the Scriptures from a devotional standpoint as spiritual food. This was undoubtedly right, as the Bible is a great deal more than a book of correct doctrine. Its aim is to teach life and experience, and the personal and experimental must ever be in view in Biblical interpretation. At the same time this must not be exalted above the historical and literal approach. In an effort to find comfort, or some personal application of Scripture, the literal and therefore primary meaning is often obscured or ignored. All kinds of distortions have been made in order to prove a devotional point or obtain a spiritual blessing. We all know how easy it is to take a text from its context and make it mean something that appeals to us. There is the type of believer whose only interest in the Bible is what he gets out of it for himself and his own comfort. He assumes that the whole of Scripture is written to him and about him and, frankly, he is not interested in any exposition that deals with other families of God’s redeemed children, e.g. the people of Israel; his aim is self and his own particular experience. Such an attitude is destructive of all true interpretation of the Word of God and must be rejected. In a subtle way it keeps this sort of person occupied with himself, instead of being occupied with Christ and God’s great and glorious redemptive plan centred in Him. Such a narrow view of the Scriptures can only produce a serious

cramping effect upon growth in grace and knowledge, and acknowledgement of the Truth. If the emphasis is completely devotional, the necessary doctrinal and expository basis of Scripture is set aside.

We do not intend to comment on the liberal and modernistic attitude to God's Word. Such denies its full inspiration and we cannot associate ourselves with it. Basically, it rests on unbelief and exalts the mind and intellect of man above the Sacred Scriptures. We are thankful that archaeology has demonstrated again and again the falsity of so much destructive criticism which comes from this school of thought. Nor will we enlarge on the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth or the movements that have sprung from it. Though externally some of their ideas sound fair and attractive, basically their attitude to the Scriptures is that of the modernist, that is, its inspiration and infallibility are denied. Those who believe in verbal inspiration are charged with holding a mechanical theory of inspiration and the charge of Bibliolatry is made against them. Those who want, above all things, to be counted faithful by the Lord and loyal to the truth entrusted, can have no part or lot in such ideas, and must ever keep a vigilant eye to avoid the deception of the evil one which comes before us today in so many attractive guises.

### **Allegorisation to be avoided**

Having seen that we should approach the Scriptures from the literal standpoint, making allowances for figures of speech, symbols, and types, and avoiding the allegorical system of spiritualising, which is destructive of true understanding, we should note that this does not mean spiritual *application* cannot be made. This can be done safely only when the primary, basic and literal interpretation of the Bible has been settled. There is only *one interpretation* of a passage of Scripture, but there may be a number of *applications* of that passage; these are secondary to the interpretation and must be kept so. Roman Catholics find their sacramentalism by allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament and its ritual. Christian Science, Swedenborgianism, Theosophy and other cults can find their basis in the Bible only by excessive spiritualising and all this leads to hopeless contradiction. Why? Because first account has not been given to the literal exposition of Scripture. To rest one's theology on a secondary meaning of the Bible is not interpretation, but imagination, and human opinion, and in such a procedure the real meaning of God's Word is bound to be lost. The only certain way of obtaining a correct understanding is to anchor interpretation to literal exposition in the sense that we have explained the word 'literal'.

Another reason for the importance of this method is that it acts as a check upon the imagination of men; in other words, it is a principle of *control*, which enables human opinion and error to be avoided. The failure of the spiritualising or allegorical method of exposition was made evident in the first centuries, when the early Christians sought to take a stand against antichristian Gnosticism. The Gnostics claimed to have special knowledge and revelation, and when they touched the N.T. Scriptures they excessively spiritualised them. Unfortunately, the early Fathers, men of piety, and sincere as they were, did the same with the Old Testament, and therefore had little effective answer to such heresy, for the Gnostics had as much right to spiritualise the New Testament as the Fathers did the Old. What was right for one part of Scripture was surely valid for another. The fact is that with both, the method of approach was wrong.

### **Cultural Background**

We mean by this the total ways, manners, tools and institutions by which a people carry on their existence. What a word or expression literally means can only be understood by knowing the background of the people who used it. We are not concerned with what a word means today in the twentieth century, but what it meant in century one, when it was used. Language is always in a state of flux, losing meanings and gaining others, and so we should be prepared to take the trouble to go into past history and explore the background of Bible times.



## Geography

The seeker after truth should study Bible geography. Most Bibles have maps at the end, but how often are they used? Geography is, as it were, the spatial background of Scripture as history is its temporal one. In order to understand properly the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan or, let us say, Paul's missionary journeys, we obviously cannot ignore geography if we are to appreciate fully their importance. We read in the Bible of Tyre, Sidon, Chittim, Hamath, Anathoth and a host of other places. If we know nothing of Bible geography, how can we correctly understand the passages where these are used? And moreover, these places must be taken literally. If the Egypt of Bible times is not the literal land, what is it? Who can be sure of what it represents? Once one has left the normal literal meaning of a word, the door is thrown wide open to any idea, however far-fetched, and uncertainty and error can only result. God's revelation is set in an historical and geographical context, and involves historic personages and events.

H. H. Rowley writes:

‘A religion which is rooted and grounded in history, cannot ignore history. A historical understanding of the Bible is not a superfluity which can be dispensed with in Biblical interpretation, leaving a body of ideas and principles divorced from the process out of which they were born’ (*Relevance of Biblical Interpretation*).

Moreover, not only the understanding of the Scriptures, but their truth, is bound up with history. If it could be proved that Pontius Pilate was not a historic personage, the truth of the Bible falls to the ground.

Another thing must be stressed in the matter of interpretation and that is, the priority of the original languages of Hebrew, Chaldee and Greek. Inspiration in the Biblical sense applies only to these, and does not extend to the hundreds of translations that have been made, however good they may be. Consequently it is useless to base any argument on a translation without verifying the original.

## The Accommodation of Revelation

It must be constantly borne in mind that the Scriptures are the truth of God accommodated to the human mind for its instruction and assimilation. This must be so, because God, infinite and limitless, is seeking to reveal Himself to man, circumscribed and finite. Humanity cannot reach up to Him, but He can, in His goodness and love stoop down to us, and this is what He has done in His Word. To have any meaning to us, God's revelation had to come in human language and human thought forms, referring to objects of human experience. Revelation for us must of necessity have an anthropomorphic character. Anthropomorphism simply means ascribing human characteristics to God. The understanding of God and the spiritual world is by this means and by analogy. So we have God's almightiness spoken of in terms of a right arm, because among men, the right arm is the symbol of strength and power. Similarly the glory of heavenly things is described in the Bible in terms of human experience, such as gold, silver and jewels. Such is the description of the heavenly New Jerusalem in the book of the Revelation. Seisenberger, in his *Practical Handbook for the study of the Bible*, puts it this way:

‘It is with a well-considered design that the Holy Scriptures speak of God as a being resembling man, and ascribe to Him a face, eyes, ears, mouth, hands and feet, and the sense of smell and hearing. This is done out of consideration for man's limited power of comprehension and the same is the case when the Bible represents God as loving or hating, as being jealous, angry, glad, or filled with regret. This shows that God is not indifferent to man, and his behaviour, but notices them well. Moreover the Bible teaches that man was made in the image and likeness of God, and therefore in the Divine Being there must be something analogous to the qualities of man, though in highest perfection and sin excepted’.

When we study the Scriptures we must always bear these facts in mind and remember that, in them, God has graciously stooped down to our limited intelligence, using things that we do know, to explain in a measure those that we do not, because they are infinite and beyond us.

This accommodation is very different from the way *believes* in accommodation of form, but of matter and content. Thus he asserts that the atonement of Christ, as a sacrifice, was only the manner in which the first century Christians thought of the death of Christ, but this idea is not binding upon Christianity today. In other words the sacrificial element in Christ's death was only the opinion of the early Christians. This sort of accommodation we utterly reject.

We might as well shut the Bible up for good if this sort of thing is true, for we could never be sure just what is, or what is not divine revelation.

### Interpretation and Application

Although Scripture basically has one meaning, there are moral applications that can be made. The apostle Paul wrote:

‘... whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for *our learning*, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope’ (Rom. 15:4).

That is, the Old Testament Scriptures, though primarily referring to Israel, can have a message for us. The strict interpretation of them is to the Jew, but there are principles in them that can apply to us today. In another passage (1 Cor. 10:6,11), Paul states that the things which happened to the Israelites during their wilderness journey were for *our examples*, and in 2 Timothy 3:16 we are instructed that all Scripture (and this has primary reference to the Old Testament) is for our profit with regard to doctrine, reproof, correction and education in righteousness. However, we must always bear in mind that such applications are not interpretations, and must not receive that status; nor must we ever misinterpret a passage in order to derive an application from it that appears attractive to us. Furthermore a true application can be made only if it fits in with revealed truth for this present age of grace; if it does not, it becomes error, however appealing it may appear.

In the Anglican morning service, the congregation quote Psalm 51:11, as a prayer: ‘Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me’.

That is wrong application, John 14:16 makes clear:

‘And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may *abide with you for ever*’.

The Holy Spirit can be grieved by the believer (Eph. 4:30), but there is no statement in the church epistles that He is ever taken away from the children of God. Such praying, Sunday by Sunday, is needless and quite ineffective. *The first thing to do with any passage of Scripture is to settle the interpretation, or its basic meaning*, and not until then are we in a position to make any application.

Todd, in his *Principles of Interpretation* writes :

‘Only after the meaning or interpretation of a passage has been learned is one in a position to apply it to the life of an individual or of a company. The application is quite a distinct thing from the interpretation. Much has been lost in the study of the Bible by using it almost entirely by way of application, without enquiring into its literal meaning. Specially is this true of devotional study. Sometimes lessons are drawn from Scripture which are, to say the least, very far fetched, and not really warranted by the passage’.

We can therefore state as a guiding principle that there is one interpretation of God’s Word, but there may be several applications. It is most important to keep these two things distinct and in this order, and in so doing it becomes another check on human ideas and peculiarities. The correct interpretation of the Bible takes note of the people to whom it is addressed, and the background or need that called for its writing. It is like the address on the envelope of a letter. The contents of the letter belong solely to the one to whom it is addressed (this is interpretation), but it may contain statements that are not only true of the owner, but of people in general (this is application). The failure to distinguish between these two things has been the cause of wrong doctrine and confusion, and everyone who wishes to handle the Word of God aright and to receive its riches will take care to avoid doing this.

### The Principle of Induction

Putting into practice the important principle of settling the interpretation of a passage first, we should attempt to discover its real and basic meaning, and not attribute one to it that appeals to us. If we do this we are only reading our own ideas, or those of other people into it, and this is always destructive of truth. Luther wrote: ‘The best teacher is the one who does not bring his meaning *into* Scripture, but brings it *out* of Scripture’. Wise words indeed! Happy is the person who can approach the Bible relatively free from personal prejudices, bias and pre-conceived

notions. Too frequently God's Word is marred by traditional ideas, or is cited merely to support some peculiar concept that appeals to the person concerned or the denomination to which he or she belongs.

The Lord Jesus warned the religious leaders of His day in Mark 7:13 that they made 'the Word of God of none effect through' their tradition. They emptied it of its real meaning so that they could keep their own ideas (7:9), and there is scarcely anything more spiritually blinding than human tradition. The task of the interpreter is to discover the true meaning of Holy Scripture, not to verify his prejudices or to try to bolster up the peculiar tenets of the sect to which he belongs. God's Word must not be used as a peg on which to hang religious opinions.

### **The Preference for the Clearest Interpretation**

Sometimes the searcher for truth is confronted with two or possibly more probable interpretations as far as grammatical rules permit. The rule then is to choose the clear rather than the obscure and the one that fits in best with the context and the general teaching of Scripture. Obscure passages must give right of way to clear passages. We can be thankful that everything essential to salvation and man's basic needs is clearly revealed in the Word of God. Essential truth is not tucked away among incidental remarks, nor is it contained in passages whose meanings are not yet understood. Furthermore, obscure and difficult portions of Scripture should not be used as a sole basis for doctrine. This betrays weakness. For instance, our conception of future punishment should not be based on the book of Revelation alone. This part of Scripture is universally admitted to be difficult of interpretation. When this sort of thing is done it nearly always is an indication that the Scripture is being used to support preconceived ideas and is therefore suspect.

### **Scripture Interprets Scripture**

The next guiding principle for us to observe is that Scripture interprets Scripture. The apostle Paul expresses it in this way:

'... we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual' (1 Cor. 2:13).

The spiritual things we are to compare are the words of the Holy Scriptures, the words of God the Holy Spirit. We can only do this effectively by using a good concordance like Young's *Analytical Concordance*. This enables us to dig into the treasury of God's Word with all its riches. If we have difficulty in understanding a Biblical word, we should open the concordance and note its occurrences, or the way God has used it and, more often than not, the problem will be solved in another passage. Any interpretation that is forced to go entirely outside the Bible should be suspect. If we keep within the covers of God's Book and let Scripture interpret Scripture we are safe. This does not mean that we shall never use Bible dictionaries or commentaries, or read books of exposition, but these must never be exalted in importance to the Scriptures themselves.

### **The Principle of Grammatical Interpretation**

Words are the bricks, as it were, of thought, and a sentence is a unit of thought. The many shades of thought can only be expressed in sentences. Grammar states the principles that arrange the formation of words into sentences that clearly express meaning. Some of us may look back to our school days with distaste when we think of lessons in grammar, but these need not be dry and uninteresting. It all depends on the way the subject is taught. God has conveyed His truth in words and sentences, and the more we know of these and their construction, the better we shall understand the truth they seek to reveal. *Nothing should be extracted from Scripture as interpretation but what is yielded by its grammatical sense.* This can scarcely be overstressed. When this is not observed, fallible human thought is bound to creep in. There is great value in paying attention to grammatical details. When dealing with a word of action or being, which is called a verb, it is obviously important to notice its time value, whether past, present or future. If we do not do this we shall confuse past truth, present truth and future truth.

There are little words called prepositions which are used hundreds of times a day in conversation and writing, e.g., by, through, in, towards, up, down, and so on. These have a theology all their own; for instance the word 'believe' either as a verb or a noun occurs many times in the New Testament chiefly in the Gospel of John. It can be used with what the grammarians call the dative case after it, when it means to acknowledge mentally a fact, such as



two plus two equals four. But very often the Greek reads literally 'to believe into a person'. The Lord Jesus said: 'He that believeth in Me hath everlasting life', but the original reads: '... he that believeth *into* Me ...'. The preposition 'into' conveys the thought of close association with Christ and to believe into Him means to completely commit oneself to Him and to rely absolutely on Him for everything, a very personal and intimate relationship, and a very different thing from believing as a fact that Jesus Christ was an historic personage. One can believe the latter without any spiritual benefit whatsoever. The little word 'into' makes all the difference. Many claim to be believers who have never really believed 'into' Christ and this is the only belief or faith that the New Testament recognises, and it is the only faith that saves.

Observing grammatical sense will also take note of idioms, that is, terms of phrase peculiar to a language. For instance 'the breaking of bread' is a Jewish idiom for eating a meal. The flat round Jewish loaves were not cut, but broken before they could be eaten, hence the expression came to mean the partaking of any meal. To restrict it to the 'Lord's Supper', as some do, is erroneous and fails to recognise this idiom. When the Lord Jesus fed the four thousand He broke bread (Mark 8:6-9), and the disciples distributed it; so also after His resurrection (Luke 24:30) He broke bread and joined in a meal with the eleven. In neither case was He celebrating what afterwards was known as the Lord's Supper. Likewise in Acts 2:44-46, the apostles' doctrine included having all things common or shared, and this included their possessions, goods and meals:

'And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, *did eat their meat (food)* with gladness and singleness of heart'.

Here 'breaking bread' is explained as 'eating their food' and does not refer to taking communion in the modern sense of the phrase; those who insist on this fail to recognise a common Jewish idiom and read into the passage what is not there.

### The Principle of Contextual Interpretation

The Bible is not a collection of verses put together without any relation to one another. Something goes before every verse and something follows it. If we recognise the flow of thought leading to a passage and away from it, we can know with some certainty the flow thought within it. This should be obvious, but it is surprising how often the obvious is missed in Biblical interpretation. Had this principle been put into practice consistently, many false doctrines and sects could never have arisen. One writer puts it this way:

'To interpret without regard to the context is to interpret at random; to interpret contrary to the context is to teach falsehood for truth' (*Companion to the Bible*. Barrows).

It is always dangerous to separate a verse from its context. The practice of putting texts on calendars and making wall texts, and collecting favourite texts together, though often attractive, can be misleading, for the all-important *context* is missing.

### Figures of Speech

There is scarcely a subject of more importance to the earnest seeker after truth than that of figures of speech. Figures of speech wrongly handled, or a failure to recognise them in the Scriptures can lead to doctrinal aberrations and error. They have been used in speech and writing from time immemorial. Writing or speech without figures would be very prosaic and dull. Figurative language is used to make these vivid and interesting. They are a departure from the fixed laws of grammar to arrest attention and emphasize, being true to *feeling*, if not to *fact*. It is most important to note that *behind them is always literality*. If this was not so, we could never understand them. If someone states 'the ground is dry', this is a plain statement of fact. If, however, he says 'the ground is thirsty', a figure of speech is employed, because it is impossible actually for the inert ground to experience feeling. But how much more arresting is the latter statement! There are over two hundred figures of speech. The Greeks and Romans reduced them to an exact science. If anyone asks how they can be recognised, two facts must be borne in mind:

- (1) When rules of grammar are departed from.
- (2) When a statement is contrary to known fact, or the revealed truth of the Scriptures.

No one has a right to assert a passage is figurative unless he can point to the figure and give reasons for its usage. Figurative language is not a convenience that can be turned to an argument in order to escape the literal implication of a passage. Let us take three well-known figures which are linked together:

- (1) Simile or Resemblance.
- (2) Metaphor or Representation.
- (3) Hypocatastasis or Implication.

- (1) *Simile* is *comparison stated*; one thing is said to be *like* or *as* something else, e.g.

‘All we *like* sheep have gone astray’ (Isa. 53:6).

‘One day is with the Lord *as* a thousand years, and a thousand years *as* one day’ (2 Pet. 3:8).

‘All flesh is *as* grass’ (1 Pet. 1:24).

There are hundreds of examples of this figure in the Bible.

- (2) *Metaphor* or *Representation*. This is *comparison substituted*. The figure lies in the verb ‘to be’, while the nouns on either side are literal. ‘All flesh *is* grass’ (Isa. 40:6). Metaphor is from the Greek *metaphero* ‘to carry across’. The likeness is carried across, the verb ‘to be’ then having the meaning of ‘represent’. We may point to a photograph and say: ‘This is my father’. What we really mean is the photograph is a representation of our father. Or, pointing to a map, we can say: ‘This is Great Britain’, meaning this map represents Great Britain, or is a likeness of Great Britain. The figure Metaphor resides entirely in the verb ‘to be’: ‘Ye *are* the salt of the earth’ (Matt. 5:13); ‘the seven stars *are* the angels of the seven churches’ (Rev. 1:20); ‘He that soweth the good seed *is* the Son of Man; The field *is* the world; the good seed *are* the children of the kingdom; but the tares *are* the children of the wicked one’ (Matt. 13:37,38). In each case the verb ‘to be’ could be rendered ‘represents’, and so we have likeness by representation.

*Metaphor* is a distinct figure of speech and not a covering term for all figures. Sometimes great issues hang upon the recognition of a figure and false doctrines can be built upon the failure to distinguish them. ‘This (broken bread) is My Body’ (Matt. 26:26). The Roman Catholic insists that the consecrated bread is literally Christ’s body. But in the Greek the grammar is deliberately broken to arrest attention and to show that the figure *Metaphor* is being used. ‘This’ is made to agree with the word ‘body’ instead of its antecedent, the word ‘bread’, and so through failure to recognise the figure, the deception of the Roman Mass has been perpetuated through the centuries, misleading millions and holding them in bondage.

- (3) The third figure of speech in the group we are considering is *Hypocatastasis* or *Implication*. *Hypocatastasis* is a Greek word which literally means that something is ‘put down under’ or wrapped up. The likeness in this case is only *implied*.

‘... *dogs* have compassed me: *the assembly of the wicked* have enclosed me’ (Psa. 22:16).

If the Psalmist had said that the assembly of the wicked were *like dogs* this would have used *Simile*. Had he said the *wicked are dogs*, he would have used *Metaphor*. But in this verse he wraps up, as it were, his illustration of the wicked by simply using the word ‘dogs’.

In the New Testament we have another example:

‘Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the *leaven* of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees’ (Matt. 16:6).

Here the disciples completely misunderstood the Lord, as the context shows. ‘And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have taken no bread’ (verse 7). They took His statement literally, not realising He was using the figure *Hypocatastasis*. He did not say the wrong doctrine of the Pharisees was either *like* leaven, or *was* leaven, but strongly implied it by using the word leaven by itself, which both in the Old Testament and New Testament is symbolic of evil. In verses eleven and twelve the disciples are made to understand that the Lord was not referring to literal leaven, but to the *doctrine* of the Pharisees and Sadducees. There is another occasion where the Lord Jesus used the same figure of *Implication* and was similarly misunderstood.

‘Jesus answered and said unto them (the Jews), Destroy this *temple*, and in three days I will raise it up’ (John 2:19).

Once again His hearers took literally what was a figure of speech:

‘Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days ? But He spake of the *temple of His body*’ (John 2:20,21).

Another common figure used in the Scriptures is *Hendiadys* or *Two for One*, that is, two things are expressed, but only one thing is meant. In England we speak of a piece of bread and butter, which is not bread and butter considered separately, but a piece of *buttered bread*. We will give one or two examples from the New Testament:

‘For the law was given by Moses, but *grace and truth* came by Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17).

While it would be perfectly true to consider grace and truth, taken by themselves, to be resident in Christ, here the apostle John is contrasting the law, with its types and shadows, with the *reality* that is found alone in the Lord Jesus. There was a measure of grace in the Divine picture book of the Old Testament, but this only looked forward to the coming of the Saviour in Whom is the *true grace*, the perfect thing.

In connection with the filling of Judas’ place, the early disciples prayed concerning the Lord’s chosen:

‘That he may take part of this *ministry and apostleship*, from which Judas by transgression fell ...’ (Acts 1:25).

Ministry and apostleship were not two separate forms of service. It would have been better to recognise the figure *Hendiadys* and translate it *apostolic ministry*. In Acts 14:13 we have another example:

‘Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought *oxen and garlands* unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people’.

The Authorized Version (A.V.) leads one to think that the oxen and garlands were brought separately to the gates. But not so; it was the heathen custom to put garlands upon the animals to be sacrificed, and so the phrase should be ‘garlanded oxen’, two things expressed, but only one thing meant. Likewise in Revelation 5:10, ‘kings and priests’ would be better translated ‘a priestly kingdom’. Sometimes we have an idea represented by three words and then we have *Hendiatris* :

‘... I am the *Way, the Truth, and the Life*: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me’ (John 14:6).

While it is perfectly true that the Lord can be considered as the Way, Truth and Life separately, yet what He really meant was: ‘I am the True and Living Way’, so recognising the figure *Hendiatris* Weymouth renders it thus in his version.

Another frequently used figure is *Metonymy* or *Change of Noun*, where one thing is put for another, frequently for emphasis.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:19,20 we have:

‘Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings’.

When the word ‘Spirit’ stands by itself, it is difficult to know whether God the Holy Spirit is intended, or the gift that He gives. 1 Thessalonians is an epistle written early in the Acts period when evidential gifts were abundant. The reference to prophesyings, prophecy being one of these gifts (1 Cor. 12:10), shows us that the word ‘spirit’ refers not to God, but to His gift. In any case it is beyond the power of any human being to extinguish God. But His gifts can be so treated and this context gives this warning.

We have another example of *Metonymy* in Revelation 6:9 :

‘... I saw under the altar the *souls* of them that were slain for the word of God’.

Whatever ideas may be held concerning the meaning of the soul in the Bible, it will be generally agreed that it cannot be seen by the eyes. Consequently a figure of speech must be used here. ‘Soul’ is put by *Metonymy* for ‘person’, just as we talk of ‘souls on board a ship’, meaning people. This verse in Revelation has sometimes been

used to bolster up unscriptural ideas concerning the life after death. Had this figure been recognised, such ideas would have been prevented.

In Psalm 16:6 the Psalmist says:

‘The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage’.

Here the measuring line is put for the land marked out, as the second statement makes clear. This inheritance was allocated by lot.

Jeremiah’s enemies said concerning him, ‘Come, and let us smite him with the tongue’; obviously impossible literally, but the tongue is put for bitter and unjust words (Jer. 18:18).

We give one more example which is important doctrinally:

‘We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle’ (Heb. 13:10).

Again, it is clear that the first statement cannot be taken literally, for altars cannot be eaten. But the word ‘altar’ is put by *Metonymy* for the sacrifice offered on it. In this case we have a double figure, for the writer is not referring to literal sacrifices, but to the great Antitype, the Lord Himself, upon Whom we feast by faith, and to Whom we are urged to go forth without the camp, bearing His reproach (Heb. 13:13).

We have already considered the anthropomorphic element in the Bible where the figure *Anthropopatheia* or *Condescension* is used. The references to the hands, eyes, ears, nostrils, and arms of God, His remembering or forgetting, or His repentance are all illustrations of this and are a wonderful example of the God of all grace stooping to our level to make Himself and His ways known to us.

In concluding this section we will consider the figure *Ellipsis* where words are left out of the original Hebrew and Greek and must be supplied in English to make sense. In Psalm 84:3 we have:

‘Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, *even* thine altars, O LORD of Hosts, my King and my God’.

The word ‘even’ in the A.V. is in italics, the translation supplying the ellipsis to make sense. But it is wrongly supplied, leading one to think that swallows made nests in the altars. The words ‘so have I found’ should be supplied instead of the word ‘even’ and then we have good sense.

When the Lord declares that the mustard seed is the least of all seeds (Matt. 13:32), it should be obvious that He is not saying that the mustard seed is the smallest in existence, but the smallest of *seeds sown in a field* as the context shows, and the ellipsis could have been supplied in verse 32. Sometimes we have false ellipsis, that is, words are supplied which are unnecessary.

‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle ...’ (Rom. 1:1).

The words ‘to be’ are in italics, showing they are not in the original Greek. They are not needed. Paul was a ‘called apostle’, saved and called by the risen Christ. Again in Philippians 3:15 we read:

‘Let us therefore, as many as *be* perfect, be thus minded’.

But the apostle has stated that he himself was not at this stage perfect or mature, nor had reached the goal in the race in which he found himself, pressing forward for the ‘prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus’ (3:14). This being so, it was very unlikely indeed that any believer in the Philippian church had outstripped him in experience. The Greek reads literally: ‘as many as perfect therefore’ showing that the figure *ellipsis* is here. We must therefore supply the words ‘would be’ or ‘wish to be’. Paul is setting the example for all who desire, not only to run the heavenly race, but to reach the goal and attain the prize.

In 1 Corinthians 15:29 we have one of the problematic verses of the New Testament :

‘Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?’

Many have been the interpretations put on this verse. The Mormons use this to bolster up their idea of baptism, vicariously on behalf of someone who has died, though what is this supposed to achieve, expressed in New Testament terms? The New Testament knows nothing of such a practice and it was not heard of until the second century and then among the heretics. Some have thought it means that the apostle refers to those who were baptized on the basis of the testimony of some who had died. Others that the verse refers to young converts who took the place in the church of older believers who had passed away, and yet again Paul was thinking of baptism as a symbol of death and is not referring to those who have died physically.

We believe the best explanation has been given by Dr E.W. Bullinger in his *Figures of Speech*. Re-punctuating the verse and supplying the ellipsis he translates:

‘What shall they do who are being baptized? It is for dead bodies, if the dead rise not at all’.

That is to say, water baptism has no meaning apart from resurrection, and to this chapter 6 of Romans plainly testifies and moreover it fits in to the context in chapter 15.

The afore-going will give some idea of the great importance of figures of speech as used in the Scriptures. All sorts of wrong ideas and false doctrines can arise where these are not recognised and understood. We would strongly advise the reader to obtain a copy of Dr. Bullinger’s monumental work referred to above.

### **The Interpretation of Types**

The relationship which the Old Testament sustains to the New, forms the basis for the consideration of types. The fact that the Old Testament has a pronounced prophetic element links it indissolubly with the New, and typological teaching is a form of prophecy. On the Lord’s own authority He is to be found in the Old Testament. To the disciples on the road to Emmaus He expounded the Old Testament Scriptures:

‘And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in *all* the Scriptures *the things concerning Himself*’ (Luke 24:27).

And to the disciples He said:

‘... These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in *the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning Me*’ (Luke 24:44).

In John 5:39, the Lord Jesus said to the Jews: ‘Search (or ye search) the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: *and they are they which testify of Me*’. There can be therefore no doubt whatsoever that Christ is prefigured by type and shadow in the Old Testament, and that this is a separate study in itself.

There are several Greek words used in the New Testament, which point back to the nature of the Old. *Hupodeigma* means a representation, a copy, an example and occurs six times. ‘Let us labour ... lest any man fall after the same *example* of unbelief’ (Heb. 4:11). As chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews make clear, the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness has a typical meaning, which this verse reinforces: ‘... there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: who serve unto the *example* and shadow of heavenly things ...’ (Heb. 8:4,5). Here the earthly priesthood is typical of heavenly realities.

*Tupos* and *tupikos* come from the verb *tupto* ‘to strike’, and mean the impression formed by a blow, a pattern and then a type.

‘Now all these things happened unto them (Israel) for *ensamples* (types): and they are written for our admonition ...’ (1 Cor. 10:11).

Once again the behaviour of Israel in the wilderness with their sin and rebellion is looked upon, not just as an historical event, but something that was typical and pointed forward to the Christian era. *Skia* means a shadow, sketch or outline. ‘For the law having a *shadow* of good things to come, and not the very image of the things ...’ (Heb. 10:1 and 8:5). ‘Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a *shadow* of things to come ...’ (Col. 2:16,17). These verses show that the ceremonial law was a shadowing forth in type of New Testament realities. *Antitupos* means a figure or likeness.



‘For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the *figures* of the true’ (Heb. 9:24). The Tabernacle was a type or figure of realities in the heavens (Heb. 8:5).

These words establish beyond doubt the typical character of much of the Old Testament, and the whole of the epistle to the Hebrews revolves around these types and adumbrations, without which it could not be understood. There is no doubt therefore that the doctrine of the types is Scriptural and important to the student of the Scriptures and the seeker after truth. The fact that typical teaching has been abused does not invalidate its truth. The early church fathers doubtless erred in this respect, as have many Roman Catholic theologians, realising that such teaching could strengthen Romish doctrines. But the Protestant has not been guiltless either, for some, in order to support devotional ideas, have pressed typological teaching beyond its proper limits.

So we ask ourselves, have we any Biblical guiding principle to lift us above mere human opinion and the doctrines of men? The answer is, yes, and it is this: *a character or event in the Old Testament is a type, if the New Testament specifically designates it to be such*. This may be too narrow for some interpreters, but at least we are on sure ground when we put it into practice. It may be true that there are *inferred* types, but we need to be careful here and make certain that the immediate or the remote context justifies them. That Adam was in some respects a type of Christ Romans 5:14 makes clear:

‘Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, *who is the figure (type) of Him that was to come*’.

Melchizedek, who appears suddenly in the narrative of Genesis 14 and disappears mysteriously, is typical of the Priesthood of the Lord Jesus. This is expressly stated in Hebrews 7:3, 15-17. Moses the Prophet, the mouthpiece of God, is a picture of the greatest of all prophets, Christ Himself (Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22-23). The sacrificial lambs of the Old Testament were all foreshadowing the Saviour (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7). The manna in the wilderness finds its fulfilment in Christ (John 6:30-35). The brazen serpent of the Old Testament was likewise a type of Christ, (John 3:14,15). The veil of the Tabernacle was a picture of the Lord’s humanity (Heb. 10:20). The smitten rock (Num. 20:11) typified the Lord Jesus Christ as 1 Corinthians 10:4 asserts, ‘... for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ’. Joshua, the captain of Israel and leader into the promised land, prefigured Christ, and we should remember that Jesus is the Greek equivalent for Joshua (Heb. 2:10; 4:8, and note the margin).

And so we might go on. A rich field for study is opened here, and when we have the controlling guide of the New Testament we are delivered from interpretive schools, and many fanciful ideas and the opinions of men. Some students of Scripture identify *typology* with *allegory*, but this is a mistake, for, as we have seen, allegory is a figure of speech, a continued metaphor, whereby one story or aspect of truth is given in terms of another, not necessarily that of the New Testament, whereas true typology is based on the unity of Old Testament and New whereby something in the Old foreshadows something in the New. In dealing with types we must be careful to note *dissimilarity* as well as *similarity*. As well as there being points of similarity between Christ and Adam, or Christ and Moses, there are many points of dissimilarity, especially when we consider the sin and weaknesses of both Adam and Moses. One of the errors that can arise is to make typical the elements of dissimilarity in a type, but this is guarded against if we carefully note how the New Testament comments upon the types of the Old.

True typology is a species of prophecy, and in the Old Testament we have some of the major and basic doctrines of the New Testament set forth in picture form, such as redemption, justification and atonement. We should take care in typical study to avoid extremes and flights of fancy. Some have been put off such study because of the extremes to which certain expositors have gone. The doctrine lying behind the Tabernacle needs care. A spiritual equivalent cannot be found for every single detail, and to try and produce this is not a mark of spirituality, nor is it sound. Another important thing to remember is that we should never seek to prove doctrine from types unless there is New Testament authority. There are at least six kinds of types in the Word of God:

- (1) *Persons*, as we have seen, (2) *Institutions* such as Old Testament sacrifices, (3) *Offices*, Moses as prophet, Melchizedek as Priest-King, (4) *Events*, The wilderness wanderings, (5) *Actions*, The lifting up of the brazen serpent in the wilderness, (6) *Things*, such as the Tabernacle and its furnishings.

## Symbols

Linked with types, yet separate from them, are symbols. One difference between them is the *time element*, a type being essentially a prefiguring of something future, whereas a symbol has no definite reference to time. In a symbol there are two elements: the idea which is mental, and the concrete image which represents it. It is well known that the prophetic books of the Bible are full of symbols and it is largely because of this fact that they are difficult to interpret. Here again, unless we have some guiding principle, the door is wide open to fancy, speculation and ridiculous extremes. We will confine ourselves to Scriptural symbols and consider the interpretation of prophecy later on.

When we seek to understand a symbol in the Bible we should have a concordance by us and be prepared to search and note every context where such a symbol is used, in other words, compare Scripture with Scripture, which we have seen is fundamental to the true interpretation of God's Word. We should carefully note if the symbol in question is *explained* by another passage of Scripture, and if so, we must accept this and *not force upon it another meaning which is contradictory*. Thus the wild animals of Daniel's prophecy stand for nations under human rule and energized by Satan. We should be helped by this when we come to interpret the wild beasts of the book of Revelation which have a similar meaning, and refer to the heads or rulers of these nations.

We must note that there is sometimes double imagery in symbols. The Lord Jesus is called 'the lion of the tribe of Judah' (Rev. 5:5), and Satan too is likened to a 'lion ... seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet. 5:8), showing that sometimes a symbol can be used in more than one way; only the context and usage can decide. In consideration of symbols used in the Bible, there is no doubt that *numbers* are sometimes used symbolically, though here, once again, we need to take great care, for some have gone to great lengths in lack of wisdom and flights of fancy, especially those who are mathematically minded. Not every number in the Bible has spiritual significance, and to try and deduce all sorts of doctrines from numbers and gematria can be most misleading and also lead to error and division.

It hardly needs stressing that seven is an important number in God's purpose. The creation in seven days (however we interpret the days); the religious life of Israel revolving around seven, seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost, seven years with its Sabbatical year, seven times seven years with the Jubilee; the seventy sevens of Daniel's prophecy, and the book of the Revelation is just full of sevens, not only the figure, but in the occurrence of words and phrases as well.

Six is man's number. He was created on the sixth day and so comes short of seven, God's perfect standard, and it is noteworthy that some of the enemies of God, such as Goliath, for instance, are stamped with six, and the superman of the end time is linked with a triple six (Rev. 13:18). *Four* is linked with the earth (the four quarters), *forty* with testing (Israel in the wilderness and the Lord Jesus likewise). *Thirteen* (ominous number for some) is linked with Satan. For a Scriptural exposition of this subject we recommend Dr. E.W. Bullinger's *Number in Scripture*.

There is also symbolism in *colour*, even though the colours of the Bible may be difficult to determine exactly. While there is room for differences of opinion here, *scarlet* seems to be linked with sacrifice. *Blue* is the heavenly colour. *Purple*, having been worn by kings and high dignitaries, is the colour of royalty, whereas *white* suggests purity or righteousness. It is significant that in the last book of the Bible, where a spotless creation is finally reached, there are more references to white than in any other book in the New Testament.

Metals have a significance too. *Silver* was connected to the atonement money (Exod. 30:12-16), and therefore linked with redemption and atonement. *Gold* stands for the highest and holiest and can therefore in some contexts represent Deity. The *brass* of the Bible is not the same as the metal we know today, being composed of copper and tin, whereas the modern metal consists of copper and zinc. Bronze or copper would be nearer the mark than brass. Its use in connection with the brazen altar, upon which all the sacrifices for sin were made, the brazen serpent in the wilderness and the brazen feet of Christ in glory, about to return in power and glory (Rev. 1:15), link this metal with judgment.

Needless to say, a fixed meaning cannot be made for every occurrence of a metal or a colour in the Scriptures. Wisdom and balance must obtain here, as in all our dealings with the Word of God.

### The Interpretation of Prophecy

When we come to consider prophecy and its interpretation we realise we are face to face with a difficult subject, and one where a great cleavage of opinion exists among believers. Is this really necessary? Prophecy, we are told, is a light that shines in a dark place, to which we should take heed (2 Pet. 1:19), but if we cannot know for certain what it means, it ceases to be either a light or a guide; neither can we take heed to something of which we cannot be sure. It is evident that, from the stand-point of the Scriptures, prophecy was not given to puzzle or confuse, but to *guide and direct* the Christian, especially in times of darkness and declension, and to hide future truth from the enemies of God and the merely curious. It is in such times as these that we should be able to approach Biblical prophecy, which is only God writing history in advance, and see the glorious goal that He has planned and will most assuredly attain, and this can give us confidence, strength and full assurance of hope.

The interpretation of prophecy is confessedly difficult even if every sound guiding principle is kept. Yet we cannot help feeling that this subject has been clouded and confused by the various schools of interpretation, by tradition, by fanciful and grotesque ideas, for nowhere can the imagination more run riot and go to greater extremes than in the consideration of prophecy.

We believe we can be greatly helped by putting into practice the guiding principles of historico-grammatical interpretation which we have already considered. Some evangelical expositors use these principles till they come to the study of prophecy and then they throw them away. Why? Because they are not convenient to their views? These principles are not just relevant to a *part* of the Bible, but to the *whole* of it, and we are convinced that if they are carried out with relation to prophecy, quite a number of the difficulties vanish. To get a correct understanding of a prophetic passage, we must take note of:

- (a) the context, near and remote,
- (b) note figurative and symbolic elements, and ascertain if these are explained in the passage or in other parallel parts of Scripture. For instance, a number of the symbols in the Revelation are explained (Rev. 1:20), and we must be ready to accept these as Divine explanations and not seek to *re-interpret them* according to our ideas,
- (c) the historical background of the passage should be ascertained, noting of whom and to whom the prophecy relates. Is it Gentile nations or the people of Israel, or the Messiah Himself?
- (d) Scripture must be compared with Scripture. The book of the Revelation has well over 200 references to the Old Testament, which fact makes it very evident that the *last book in the Bible can never be understood apart from a knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures*, in fact it is an insult to the Divine Author to try and interpret it with the Old Testament shut. While the Revelation is a New Testament Book, it is Old Testament in much of its outlook. In fact, if we found it in our Bibles next to the prophecy of Daniel it would not be incongruous.
- (e) We must decide whether the prophetic passage we are considering is conditional or unconditional and,
- (f) whether it has been fulfilled or not, bearing in mind there is such a thing as multiple or double fulfilment which is not the same as multiple sense; the prophecy may be fulfilled in more than one stage.
- (g) As we stressed before, we must take the literal meaning of the prophecy as a controlling guide. This does not mean a dry, wooden, excessive literalism, which disregards poetic imagery, figures of speech and symbols. In the Old Testament we have prophecies relating to Messiah's first coming and also to His second coming. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, both of these events were future, but for us those relating to the first coming are now history, while only those looking forward to His Second Advent are future. In other words, in the Scriptures we have examples of definite predictions which have been fulfilled, and as we study them, we can see without a shadow of doubt *how* they have been fulfilled, that is, whether literally or spiritually.



Let us consider the Old Testament foreview of the events centring around the Crucifixion;<sup>\*</sup> there were at least fourteen prophecies fulfilled at this time.

- (1) The Lord's disciples were to forsake Him (Zech. 13:7; Mark 14:27);
- (2) He was to be dumb before His accusers (Isa. 53:7; Matt. 27:12-14);
- (3) He was to be wounded and bruised (Isa. 53:5; Matt. 27:26,30);
- (4) His hands and feet were to be pierced (Psa. 22:16; Luke 23:33);
- (5) Yet none of His bones would be broken (Exod. 12:46; John 19:31-36);
- (6) He was to be crucified with thieves (Isa. 53:12; Mark 15:27,28);
- (7) He was to pray for His persecutors (Isa. 53:12; Luke 23:34);
- (8) The people were to ridicule Him (Psa. 22:7,8; Matt. 27:41-43);
- (9) His garments were to be parted and lots cast for His vesture (Psa. 22:18; John 19:23,24);
- (10) The cry from the cross (Psa. 22:1; Matt. 27:46);
- (11) They were to give Him gall and vinegar to drink (Psa. 69:21; Matt. 27:34);
- (12) His body was to be pierced (Zech. 12:10; John 19:34-37);
- (13) His heart was to be broken (Psa. 22:14; John 19:34);
- (14) He was to be buried in a rich man's grave (Isa. 53:9; Matt. 27:57-60).

If any spiritualisers existed when these Old Testament Scriptures were written, we can well imagine that they would have dubbed any *literal* fulfilment as 'unspiritual or carnal', *but they would have been wrong, for every one of these fourteen prophecies was definitely and literally fulfilled within twenty-four hours.* To these we can add others, such as the prediction of Bethlehem as Messiah's birthplace (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:4-6), His virgin birth (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23), and His riding into Jerusalem on a colt (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:4,5). The meaning of these would have been completely missed had any attempt been made to spiritualise them. Is there not a lesson that we can learn regarding prophetic interpretation from all this? We believe there is. If so many prophecies concerning the Lord's first coming were fulfilled literally, is not God teaching us that this is the way we should seek to interpret the yet future prophecies of His second coming?

By what sound system of interpretation are we to regard prophecies relating to His first Advent as literal, but the second Advent as spiritual? If the principles of historico-grammatical interpretation cannot be applied to prophecy, then a large portion of the Bible must be exempted, for prophecy extends from Genesis to Revelation, and if so, of what use can such a principle be? We therefore believe as a guiding principle, prophecy should be interpreted literally, unless the plain teaching of the New Testament in dealing with the passage or material in question is against this. Davidson, in his *Old Testament Prophecy*, writes:

'I consider the first principle in prophetic interpretation is to assume that the literal meaning is his (the writer's) meaning - that he is moving among realities, not symbols, among concrete things like people, not among abstractions like our church, world, etc.'

He reprimands expositors who make Zion the church; the Canaanite the enemy of the church, the land of Canaan the promises to the church, and so on. There is no doubt that to the Jew, to whom much of prophecy was first given, Jerusalem meant Jerusalem and Canaan the literal Canaan. Once this is departed from, the door is wide open to human opinion and error. If God does not mean what He says when He inspires prophecy, how can it be a light to guide us in the darkness and how can we ever understand it?

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<sup>\*</sup>This is treated in the author's *The Unfolding Purpose of God* (chapter 1).

(h) We believe a comprehension of the Divine purpose for the nation of Israel to be essential for the proper understanding of prophecy. If we err here, it is unlikely that we shall ever grasp what the Divine plan for the future is, nor shall we ever get the proper position of the Church, the Body of Christ, in this great plan. We must get clearly in our minds the teaching of Romans chapters 9 to 11, relating to Israel according to the flesh, and chapter 11 must not be interpreted or divorced from chapters 9 and 10, which are an integral part of this section. The 'all Israel' of 11:26, who are in the future to be saved, have already been explained by the 'all Israel' of 9:6,7, and in neither case can these refer to the Church, but are Paul's 'kinsmen according to the flesh' (9:3-5).

The weighty statement of Romans 11:29 must ever be kept in mind, 'For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance (or change of mind)'. This statement alone should be sufficient to prevent us from making the mistake of many spiritualisers, namely that Israel has been finally cast off by God, and the Church has inherited their blessings. If this is true, then God *has* changed His mind and altered the thing that has gone out of His lips, the very thing that He has stated He will never do (Psa. 89:34-37; Jer. 31:35-37). If God has broken His Word regarding the nation of Israel, away goes all Christian assurance, for how can we be sure that He will not do so in connection with the Church? Moreover, the future restoration of Israel rests upon the New Covenant of grace (Jer. 31:31-37), and this has been sealed by the precious blood of Christ (Matt. 26:28).

This restoration has no regard for personal merit or demerit. Israel are 'enemies' of God so far as the gospel is concerned, but they are 'beloved' by God, in spite of this, 'for the fathers' sake' (Rom. 11:28). Their present opposition, blindness and failure cannot invalidate God's unconditional promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or alter His eternal love to their descendants. They are yet to 'look on Him Whom they have pierced' (Zech. 12:10) when He returns to the mount of Olives, and at this Second Advent Christ will turn away 'ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom. 11:26). In no sense can 'Jacob' be the Body of Christ, and there is certainly no ungodliness of this Church to be turned away or dealt with at the Lord's Second Coming, for they already rejoice in the forgiveness of all trespasses (Col. 2:13; Eph. 1:7; 4:32). Once the true Scriptural position of Israel, past and future, is understood, the rest of the Bible falls into place. But this can never be realised, unless the guiding principles we have enunciated are carried into effect. Nothing is more destructive of true understanding of the purpose of the ages in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:11) than the acceptance of allegorising or spiritualising as a *method of interpretation* as is done by the amillennialist. Not only this, but as H. L. Payne has stated:

'It does not seem too much to say that the great strength of modern liberalism had its spring and finds its support in the post- and amillennial circles. This is due in large measure to the fact that the literal interpretation of the Scripture has been set aside, and thus the door has been thrown open to all other error'.

Further, if the spiritualising principle be admitted into all realms of Christian doctrine, every orthodox doctrine would be eliminated. Amillennialism then is the friend of destructive modernism and Romanism, for spiritualising has always characterised Roman Catholic doctrine. If we want to let the Word of God speak for itself with all its authority, then such a system must be avoided at all costs, for not in this way can the opinions of men be eliminated in handling the Word.

(i) The Lord Jesus Christ as the central theme must be constantly kept in mind in all prophetic interpretation. 'The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' (Rev. 19:10). To miss our way here is to miss our way everywhere. The whole of God's purposes for a new heaven and earth wherein dwelleth righteousness is centred in the Saviour. Not one of them can be understood or come to fruition apart from Him. To be taken up with prophetic details and to miss Christ is tragic, being on a par with the Pharisees of old, who searched the Scriptures and missed the Messiah of Scripture, in spite of the fact that the Old Testament testified of Him on His Own authority (John 5:39,40).

We believe that adherence to historico-grammatical principles will clear away quite a number of prophetic difficulties, many of which are man-made and not in the text at all. Prophecy is hard enough to expound without adding weights of man's devising, and wise are we if we avoid these pitfalls and endeavour to approach prophecy apart from schools of interpretation, whether preterist<sup>\*P</sup> historicist or futurist.

### The Interpretation of Parables

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<sup>\*P</sup>preterist Æone who holds that the prophecies of the Apocalypse have already been fulfilled.

The root meaning of the word 'parable' is 'a placing alongside' for the purpose of comparison, and basically it is therefore a method of illustration. It is important to note when parables are introduced into the Gospel records, and the reason for them, which we shall find is very different from the average Christian conception. In Matthew's Gospel, parables are not introduced until the thirteenth chapter. It is quite wrong to think that parabolic teaching characterized Christ's ministry from the start. It is evident from chapter 11 onwards that events were moving to a climax:

'Then began He to upbraid the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, because they repented not' (Matt. 11:20).

In chapter 12 the Lord is presented as greater than the Temple and its priesthood (v. 6), greater than Jonah the prophet (v. 41), and greater than Solomon the king, (v. 42). He had come to His earthly people Israel as Prophet, Priest and King, and the majority manifested that they were not going to receive Him as such. Chapter 13 immediately follows with the account of Christ beginning to teach in parables and we are left in no doubt as to the reason. 'And the disciples came, and said unto Him, Why speakest Thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries (secrets) of the kingdom of heaven, *but to them it is not given ...* Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing *see not*; and hearing *they hear not, neither do they understand*' (Matt. 13:10,11,13). Then He went on to quote Isaiah 6:9,10, which predicted the very state of the people to whom He was speaking, with blinded eyes, deafened ears, and a hard, non-understanding heart or mind, which was going to be repeated in the generation that followed, during the Acts period, when at the end, this prophecy is quoted for the third and last time. This terrible condition has characterised the Jew, as a race, ever since.

It is evident that in parabolic teaching the Lord was *veiling the truth* not making it simple to understand, very different from the usual idea that a parable is a simple earthly story with a heavenly meaning, suitable for children in a Sunday school. The very reverse is true. The Lord is wrapping up the truth, as it were, and making it more difficult to understand to those who were rejecting Him. To those who were willing and responsive to learn, as the disciples, He said:

'But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear' (Matt. 13:16; cf. Luke 8:8).

We must be prepared, therefore, to face the fact that the interpretation of parables is not easy. There are four points at least to consider:

- (1) A parable is some well known earthly event or custom.
- (2) Behind the earthly illustration is the spiritual lesson or truth which the parable sets forth.
- (3) The earthly picture bears a relationship by analogy to the spiritual truth behind it.
- (4) Because every parable has two meanings they all stand in need of interpretation.

To do this adequately we must remember (1) that the Lord linked these first parables with the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:24,31,33,45,47,52). We must therefore have a Scriptural conception of the kingdom of heaven before we can interpret the parables correctly. (2) As the parables are largely drawn from the agriculture of Palestine of the Lord's time, a knowledge of this is obviously helpful. (3) As some details of the parables are interpreted by the Lord Himself, we must give first place to this fact and not re-interpret them in any way. (4) The context, as always, must be carefully considered. Luke 15 records the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The context gives the setting and the reason for the parables:

'Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them' (Luke 15:1,2).

The following parables therefore concern publicans and sinners and the heart of God towards them, and are a rebuke to the Scribes and Pharisees. This setting carries over into chapter 16 with the parable of the unjust steward, at the end of which we read: 'And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, *heard all these things*: and they derided Him' (Luke 16:14). The Lord continued to speak to them in the next verses 'And He said *unto them*, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men ...' and He ended up by speaking to them the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

It may be objected that this is not stated to be a parable and therefore cannot be treated as such, but this cannot be maintained because several are given without any such introduction and are obviously parabolic, e.g., the

prodigal son (15:11). We should seek to discover the central truth of any parable and not try to fix a doctrinal significance to all the details, which will only side-track from the main teaching. The issue to get clear is: what did it first mean to those to whom the Lord gave it? It is possible that more truth resided in the parable than they could apprehend. Even so, this must square with the teaching of the Lord as a whole and the remoter context of the rest of the New Testament. It is unwise to base fundamental truths upon parables or symbolic prophetic Scriptures, such as the book of Revelation. This generally shows a weakness; if such truths are really basic and foundational, they will be treated as plain doctrine in other parts of Scripture.

The most important thing is to get a Scriptural conception of that aspect of the kingdom to which the Gospel parables pertain. In the New Testament we have several phrases embodying the word kingdom: the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the Father, the kingdom of His beloved Son, and variants of these. We have to decide whether all these are synonymous, or have they differences of meaning? The kingdom of God occurs throughout the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation. It is found in Paul's earlier epistles written during the Acts and in those written afterwards from prison. It must therefore be all-embracing, including things in heaven as well as things on earth, the whole of God's mighty redemptive plan in Christ being envisaged in it. There can be nothing that pertains to God outside this universal sovereignty. The kingdom of heaven occurs thirty-two times in Matthew's Gospel and nowhere else. This phase of the kingdom must therefore be restricted to the scope and purpose of this Gospel which is peculiarly related to the people of Israel and God's purpose for them as made known in the Old Testament. Here, Christ's ministry and that of the twelve was exclusively to Israel (Matt. 15:24; 10:5,6), which is the central channel, from a human standpoint, through which God planned to bring in His kingdom the world over, taking the knowledge and light of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, so fulfilling His original promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is aptly expressed in the Lord's prayer of the Sermon on the Mount. '... Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done *in earth, as it is in heaven* ...' (Matt. 6:10), or as Moses expressed it centuries before: '... as the days of *heaven upon the earth*' (Deut. 11:21). After the forty days instruction by the Lord after His resurrection, the disciples do not hesitate to ask: '... wilt Thou at this time *restore again the kingdom to Israel?*' (Acts 1:6), showing clearly that this earthly aspect of the kingdom is linked with the people of Israel and not the Church.

The occurrences of the kingdom of God in the Gospels are parallel to this, as a comparison of Matthew 11:11 with Luke 7:28 shows, but we must not infer from this that these expressions are synonymous, but as the lesser is included in the greater, the two can now be parallel as far as the Divine purpose is expressed in the Gospel records. The final realisation of God's kingdom upon the earth awaits the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11-16; Matt. 24:29-31). At that time, the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever (Rev. 11:15).

What is the character of this kingdom? Is it spiritual or literal and visible, or a combination of both? That it starts in a spiritual sense is made clear by such passages as Matthew 21:31, where Christ declared to the chief priests that publicans and harlots were entering the kingdom before them. If God's kingdom is ever to be realised on earth or in heaven, then its subjects must have changed hearts and minds and God always begins with the inward and works outwards. Consequently the kingdom of God begins with the new birth (John 3:3), and basically the 'kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost' (Rom. 14:17). Here the spiritualiser and amillennialist will heartily agree, but Scripture makes it plain that this, of itself, is not the complete fulfilling of the kingdom; it is only its beginning. A moment's reflection will surely make clear that if every inhabitant of, say, a large city were saved and practically exhibiting the Christian life, there would be sure to be a practical effect on the outward conditions of that city. Going wider, if a whole nation became truly saved believers in Christ, it would be sure to have an overwhelming effect upon that nation and its daily life, and also upon every nation who had any contact with it. Going wider still, when the knowledge of God shall cover the earth, 'as the waters cover the sea' (Hab. 2:14), the effect on the world in its actions and practical business relationships will be tremendous. It will be nothing less than a colossal revolution. Such a kingdom could not possibly be confined to the mind and heart alone. The final realisation of the kingdom of heaven upon earth is therefore both inward and spiritual, outward and literal, and to see anything less than this is to fall short of the Biblical conception.

However, the kingdom as used in relationship to the Church which is Christ's Body is in the spiritual realm entirely. This church has a homeland which exists not on earth, but in heaven (Phil. 3:20). It is urged not to set its mind on earthly things (Phil. 3:19), but on those things above where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God (Col.

3:1,2) and where, in Christ Jesus, they are potentially seated (Eph. 2:5,6). All such have already been 'translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love' (Col. 1:13). The apostle Paul speaks of the future hope of this church as at the Lord's appearing and His kingdom, and looks to being preserved unto His *heavenly* kingdom (2 Tim. 4:1,18). There is a present realisation, and because of this and its heavenly sphere of blessing, it must not be confused with the earthly sphere of the kingdom that we have been considering, which is yet to come to pass when the Son of Man comes in His kingdom (Matt. 16:28). There is a heavenly aspect of the kingdom of God (Col. 4:11) relating to the out-calling and building up of the Body of Christ, and an earthly aspect of this kingdom where the nation of Israel largely figure and these must be distinguished, although both find their centre in the Lord Jesus Christ. The subjects of the earthly kingdom are spoken of as 'inheriting' or being 'heirs of the kingdom', 'receiving the kingdom' and 'sons of the kingdom', but we never read in the New Testament of receiving the church, or being heirs or sons of the church. We must remember, too, that the kingdom of heaven, when the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven, is the subject of Old Testament prophecy, whereas the Body of Christ was a secret 'hid in God' from past ages and generations of people (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:24-27), and therefore unknown till God chose to reveal it.

There are some who, seeing this, and realising the need of not confusing these two aspects of God's redemptive purpose, speak of distinguishing between the Kingdom and the Church, as though the word Kingdom is kept in the New Testament to Israel and the earth, and never used concerning the Church the Body of Christ. This is not so, and such language is not accurate and precise enough. We should distinguish, most certainly, between the *earthly* phase of the kingdom and its subjects and the *heavenly* phase of the Body of Christ with its citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20), always remembering that finally these will be linked under the Headship of Christ in the dispensation of the fulness of the seasons, when all things in heaven and earth will be gathered under Him (Eph. 1:9-10) by reason of His mighty redemptive work on the cross.

From what we have seen therefore, the interpretation of the parables of the kingdom of heaven relates to the earthly aspect of God's kingdom, of which the redeemed people of Israel are the Divine channel. To try and force the heavenly people in here, the Body of Christ as an interpretation, is to confuse 'the things that differ', and mix up God's earthly plan with the heavenly aspect of it. There are no parables, or hiding of the truth in the Pauline letters which relate to the Body of Christ, but the very reverse. In Colossians 1:24-27, the apostle links his special ministry given to him by the ascended Christ with the Church, the Lord's Body, likening it to a dispensation or stewardship which God had given him, to unfold the great Secret concerning this church, which up till now had been hidden in God (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26) but now is *made manifest* to His saints. To whom God *wishes to make known* what is the riches of the glory of this secret, which is Christ among you (Gentiles), the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

### Conclusion

At the beginning the question was asked: 'Is there some way of interpreting the Word of God, so that human opinion is ruled out, and Divine understanding given? We believe that the practical application of the guiding principles previously indicated will do this as far as it is humanly possible; moreover, these principles are a basis upon which all evangelicals who honour the Bible as the inspired Word of God should be able to agree. Only when treated in this way can the Holy Scriptures speak with authority and say: 'Thus saith the Lord'.

Not only this, but such a method of interpreting the Word is a great bulwark against error. The various false cults which surround us today could not have come into existence had they kept to historico-grammatical principles, and every one of them violates these in some way or another.

The whole set-up of Christendom with its sects and divisions could not have developed as it has done had Christians from century one onwards handled the Scriptures along these lines; likewise the differences among evangelicals, especially on prophecy, could largely have been avoided by adherence to these rules of interpretation. There can only be one true interpretation of any passage of Scripture, although after this has been settled, applications may be made as long as they are consistent with the truth governing this age of grace in which we live. The result of such interpretation will be to distinguish in Scriptural truth (1) that which is permanently true for all time and (2) that which is true only for a limited period. In (1) we should class sin and the Divine remedy for it, salvation in Christ and its attendant doctrines of redemption, atonement and sanctification. In (2) we should put, among other things, the law given through Moses with its ceremonial, and the constitution of the people of Israel. There was a time when the rite of circumcision was truth; so much so, that of any who disobeyed it, God said: '...



that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant' (Gen. 17:14). This was a Divine command and could not be broken with impunity. Yet when we come to the epistle to the Galatians we read:

'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that *if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing*' (Gal. 5:1-2).

No believer today brings an animal sacrifice to God when he has been overtaken in a fault, but there was a time when failure to do this would have been disobedience, which would have been directly punished by God. It was truth in Old Testament times, but it is not true today.

Clause (1) may be termed basic or fundamental truth, and clause (2) dispensational truth. Some need to be reminded that the word dispensation *oikonomia* is a Scriptural word which occurs eight times in the New Testament. It is not a human invention. It is often confused with the word 'age' and treated as though it is a period of time. Some have taught that there are seven dispensations which they equate with time divided up into seven periods. This is a mistake, as time, basically, does not enter into this word. Three times it is translated 'stewardship' in Luke 16:2,3,4, and 'edifying' in 1 Timothy 1:4, and the root idea is of one who is put in charge of the administration of a household, an overseer or bailiff. Twice the apostle Paul declares that *he had been given* a dispensation (Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25). No period of time had been entrusted to him, but a body of truth connected with the Church, the Body of Christ, had been committed to him by the risen and ascended Christ Jesus, and for this he was its steward or minister, as these verses testify.

Because some have misunderstood or abused the word dispensation, this does not justify the rejection of dispensational truth as error. In every class and society there are those who act in an unbalanced way. One might as well reject Christianity because some have been such poor practical exponents of it. It should surely be obvious that these two aspects of Scriptural truth must be distinguished or confusion is bound to result. Nor must one be stressed and the other forgotten, otherwise an erroneous conception of God's Word will dominate the mind. In practice, every one who accepts the Bible as the Word of God and the regulator of their daily life is bound to be a dispensationalist. The very fact that such do not make any attempt to carry out animal sacrifices for sin, as mentioned before, shows that they regard such regulations as not being truth for today, however much they believe the Bible, and however true these commands were in the Old Testament times. The Mosaic ritual of the law was a dispensation, or administration of Divine truth, for a limited period only, and Moses was its steward. It was not basic for all time and has been superseded since the coming of the great Antitype, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who has fulfilled the type and shadow of the ceremonial law.

A practical following out of the historico-grammatical system of interpretation will assuredly lead to a distinguishing between these two most important aspects of revealed Truth, leading to a greater clarification and understanding of the great redemptive purpose of God. In fact it will lead to a practical realisation of what the apostle Paul prayed for the Philippian believers, a spiritual perception enabling such to 'try the things that differ' (1:10, margin) or as the main text 'approve things that are excellent'. When things differ, they do so not only in external ways, such as shape and size, but in internal quality, and it is only by recognising and distinguishing these that we can get the best. Abraham was a practical example of this attitude of mind. God had unconditionally given him and his posterity an earthly inheritance (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:12-18). The Epistle to the Hebrews records by inspiration what the Old Testament leaves out, namely that to Abraham God gave a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, very much as the apostle John received in Revelation 21. Chapter 11 of Hebrews describes this as a '*better country*' (11:16), and a city which God has built (v. 10).

Abraham 'tried the things that differ' and found what was 'more excellent'. 'Better' is one of the key words of Hebrews; there are seven things described by God as 'better' (Heb. 1:4; 7:7,19; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:35). If we want the best, then we shall have to consider carefully and prayerfully the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians where the high-water mark of revelation is reached. If Abraham had been like many Christians today, he would have failed to distinguish between earthly and heavenly revelation, and would have missed the better things God had in view for him.

To many, the meek who shall inherit the *earth* (Matt. 5:5), and the citizenship that now exists in the *heavens* (Phil. 3:20), are all one and the same thing. The spirit of discrimination that Abraham exercised is completely

lacking in them. If this sort of attitude is right, then we might as well give up all serious Bible study, for words have no meaning.

Others see the part and imagine it is the whole. There are systems of Bible interpretation that envisage all the redeemed being blessed in future on the earth, while another interpretation finally puts all the redeemed in heaven and has no place for an earthly kingdom. Both are wrong and have only a part of the Divine picture. What they need, and what we all need, is to have our minds stretched and enlarged to grasp more of the fulness of God's mighty plan of redemption and reconciliation that touches the highest heavens as well as the earth beneath (Col. 1:20), finding its final fulfilment in 'new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness' (2 Pet. 3:13). The understanding of many of us is clouded because of our poverty of conception. We have a God that is too small, and a divine purpose that is little more than parochial.

When Paul urged Timothy to keep in the forefront of his mind the object of receiving God's approval, he was told this was bound up with 'rightly dividing the Word of Truth' (2 Tim. 2:15), showing that the way we handle and interpret the Word of God is of supreme importance, and God's future assessment of our Christian testimony and whether we meet Him with joy or shame, depends upon our obedience to this command. We believe that if we carry out the guiding principles before enunciated, we shall be doing just this, and in doing so, we are allowing God's Word to mean exactly what it says, and *every statement of Scripture can be taken in the setting in which we find it without alteration, addition or subtraction.*

It then ceases to be the word of man, but is in truth the Word of God. The critic may say that such a system is 'divisive', that it 'chops the Bible up into unrelated parts' and destroys the organic unity of Scripture. But rightly applied, this is not true. One could retort that the critic who recognises the division of the Old and New Testaments, has chopped the Bible into halves.

When we 'rightly divide the Word', we shall recognise the basic doctrine of redemption and the final Headship of Christ that binds together the callings of the redeemed and the spheres of blessing, as well as noting the distinctions that God has made.\* Ephesians 1:10 looks forward to a future dispensation of the fulness of the seasons when all heaven and earth are gathered under the headship of Christ, expressing a unity that will be unbreakable and eternal. 'United yet divided' expresses the position, and to ignore one and hold to the other is unscriptural and can only lead to imbalance, and a partial or clouded view of God's great goal. It is quite pathetic to see how some expositors in their over-anxiety to overthrow 'dispensationalism', erect a great man of straw, someone's particular brand of dispensational teaching, and then proceed with great show to knock it down, and imagine when they have done this that the dispensational approach to the Scriptures has been proved erroneous and overthrown. This is usually the attitude of the amillennialist, but amillennialism is a denial of the historico-grammatical system of exposition, at least as far as prophecy is concerned and, as such, it is an unsound and inconsistent method of study, with its allegorisation, opening the door wide to human opinion and error. A further example of this can be seen in the amillennial treatment of the two resurrections of Revelation chapter 20. The first is held to be spiritual, taking place at the salvation of the sinner; the second, the general physical resurrection of all the dead of all time. It is well to note the comments by Dean Alford on this passage in his *Greek New Testament*, and he had no leanings toward the dispensational viewpoint:

'It will have been long ago anticipated by the readers of this commentary, that I cannot consent to distort its words (that of the passage) from their plain sense and chronological place in the prophecy, on account of any consideration of difficulty, or any risk of abuse which the doctrine of the millennium may bring with it. Those who lived next to the apostles, and the whole church for 300 years, understood them in the plain, literal sense, and it is a strange sight in these days to see expositors who are among the first in reverence of antiquity, complacently casting aside the most cogent instance of consensus which primitive antiquity presents. As regards the text itself, no legitimate treatment of it will extort what is known as the spiritual interpretation now in fashion. If, in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned, where certain *psuchai ezesan* at the first, and the rest of the *nekroi ezesan* only at the end of a specified period after the first - if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean spiritual rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from

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\*See *The Unfolding Purpose of God*, chapter 15, by the same author.

the grave - then, there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything. If the first resurrection is spiritual, then so is the second, which I suppose none will be hardy enough to maintain; but if the second is literal, then so is the first, which in common with the whole primitive church and many of the best modern expositors, I do maintain, and receive as an article of faith and hope'.

These are sane and weighty words, and there is no doubt that Dean Alford has the majority of sound scholars with him. Hardly anywhere else is the futility of amillennial interpretation shown up more than in its handling of Revelation chapter 20.

The amillennialist may call the pre-millennialist's views of the future 'carnal' and 'unscriptural', but he needs reminding that spiritual things are not necessarily better than the material. There is such a thing as spiritual wickedness (Eph. 6:12). When God put Adam and Eve into the garden of Eden, was this carnal because it was material and on the earth? And when the earthly part of God's kingdom is realised and becomes like Eden again, is this to be dubbed carnal? The literal material and earthly is not to be avoided *per se* for this *savours of the Gnostic abhorrence of the material*, and any approach to this Satanic system of error, so prevalent in the early centuries of Christianity, must be avoided at all costs. The basic and dispensational approach to the Scriptures, keeping these in balance, will save us from this. Such a method of interpretation is sane and reverent, honours the Word of God and allows it to speak with all its authority, and is in no sense a system foisted upon it.

We return to a point we have already stressed, because of its extreme importance. All Scriptural interpretation must finally be Christological, in other words, the Lord Jesus Christ must be the centre and circumference of it all. To get bogged down with interpretive, doctrinal or dispensational details and to miss Him is to miss everything. The great redemptive purpose of the ages is centred in Him (Eph. 3:11), and the time is yet to be when every being in heaven, and earth and under the earth will give Him His rightful place and acknowledge Him as Jehovah and Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). Our main task is to preach Him (Gal. 1:15,16) as the only remedy for the needs of the individual, the world and creation at large. We can only do this effectively when we handle the Word of God aright and have it richly within us (Col. 3:16), and in His strength, grace and wisdom seek to make it known. A partial or faulty understanding of the written Word can only lead to an imperfect knowledge of the living Word. That is why hermeneutics, or the science of interpreting the Holy Scriptures, is of such great importance to every believer, whether a leader or teacher or otherwise. We should not count it a labour, a bore, or as being too difficult to get to know the principles which govern correct interpretation. Rather this should be something that is eagerly sought after, and we trust that this study, in some measure, has helped towards this goal.

In conclusion, the honest interpreter will always keep a supreme regard for *truth at all costs*. Nor will he forget the words of the Saviour: '... Sanctify them through Thy Truth: *Thy Word is Truth*' (John 17:17), nor His constant reverence for the Holy Scriptures (Matt. 5:17,18; John 5:46,47; Luke 10:25-28; Matt. 22:29) whose primary aim is to 'make wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3:15). To interpret the Scriptures is a high and holy task. God will not hold guiltless any who carelessly handle or tamper with His Word, substituting the folly and error of man for His wisdom and His Truth.

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