

CHAPTER I

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

In II Peter 1:20-21 we are informed; ". . . *no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit.*"

This statement not only flatly affirms the fact of divine inspiration of the scriptures, it gives us a definite clue as to how to study them. It is not the task of the Bible student to interpret but to exegete.

Exegesis is a strange word to most of us. It is from the Greek *exegeomai* which means literally; "to lead out, to unfold." In contrast, to interpret is to "explain the meaning of . . . to have or show one's own understanding, to construe."

To study scripture, by the process of exegesis, is to apply certain scientific principles of investigation in the attempt to arrive at the thought which was in the mind of the inspired writer when he wrote. It is a safe assumption that "the Bible means what it says" when one has applied these principles and ascertained what it does say.

Interpretation, or explaining the meaning according to one's own understanding, should never be attempted until after the interpreter has made a careful exegesis of the passage to be explained. God did not give us a set of generalities which may be interpreted according to our own pre-conceived theology. Through inspired men. (the exact method of inspiration is beside the point), He said something definite. It is the task of the Bible scholar to find out what is said.

To accomplish this, one must learn to carefully apply the principles of exegesis, much the same as they would be applied to any other writing . . . especially a writing as old as those which make up the sixty-six books of the Christian Scripture. Because of the age of the Biblical writings, exegesis becomes largely a matter of removing the differences in language, circumstance, custom, etc. which divide the ancient from the modern world. The Bible, and especially, the New Testament, was written in the language which was common to those who first read it. The *Koine* Greek in which the New Testament was written and into which the Old Testament had been translated was the common language of the street and market and household. The mode of self expression, the idioms and figures and allusions used were familiar to those who read. Hence it may be assumed the first readers of Scripture readily understood what may seem a dark saying to the most profound modern English-speaking Bible student. The rules, or principles of exegesis suggested here are the means by which these

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differences are removed, and the simple yet profound thoughts of God recorded in the Bible made apparent to us.

RULE NO. 1 . . . Use a dictionary. Most Americans are unfamiliar with the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible, and so must rely on English translations. For this reason, it is inadvisable to limit oneself to a single translation. Every translation has its strengths and its weaknesses. By comparing several the student of the English Bible is much more likely to arrive at the thought presented in the original than he is if he uses only one translation.

No matter which translation, or translations one uses, the words in it represent in the opinion of the translator, the best possible transferal of thought from the original scripture text to the language of the reader. It is best not to assume that you know what a particular word means, especially if it is a key word in a verse or passage. An *unabridged* dictionary will usually give, as the first meaning of a word, the meaning of that word in the language from which we have borrowed it.

For an example; the Greek word *baptismo* may be defined in general American usage as "the application of water in the name of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit." (As a matter of fact it is so defined in the MEMBERSHIP MANUAL of the Methodist Church.) WEBSTER'S NEW WORLD DICTIONARY OF THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE, on the other hand, gives the original meaning as "a dipping in (Gr. immersion)." Since God chose to record His Word in Hebrew and Greek, rather than English, it is never safe to be uncertain of the meaning of key words.

The translators of our English Bibles have used words which they believe best represent the original language. By using an unabridged dictionary as a study aid, you may be sure that the English word means to you what it meant to the translator.

RULE NO. 2 . . . Pay attention to grammar. Grammar is nothing more nor less than the organized presentation of thought. The translators usually do not attempt to follow the grammatical construction of the original, because to do so would result in a translation very difficult for an English speaking person to read.

However, just as in the choice of individual words, so in the grammatical constructions, the translators have attempted to represent the *thought* of the original.

Many people do not like to study grammar. Even in elementary

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and high school they found it very tedious. This is unfortunate because it is impossible to understand a written thought without applying the rules of grammar, either consciously or instinctively. In any event, the serious student of the Word of God cannot afford to ignore this basic rule of exegesis. A very helpful tool to refresh yourself on the rules of English grammar is *Plain English Handbook*, McCormick-Mathers Publishing Company.

RULE NO. 3 . . . Mind the context. Words mean *nothing*, or rather, they may mean *anything* out of a specific context. The word context means literally "to weave together." The thoughts of various words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters are woven into one complete whole. To take a word or a verse out of context is to cut out a small piece from a plaid garment. It does not accurately represent the whole pattern of thought presented by the Author of the book from which it was taken; and so may be made to say something entirely different than which the Author would have us learn.

A rather humorous illustration of the importance of context comes to mind: A verse of Scripture says "muzzle not the oxen that treadeth out the corn." Another verse says "for of such is the kingdom of haeven." The logical conclusion from these two verses is that there are oxen in heaven" . . . the Bible says so." Of course the Bible does not say so unless these particular verses are wrenched out of context. The proof texts of every denominational creed and of every religious cult claiming to be Christian are used in just this way, and with much more serious consequences than the ridiculous conclusion that there are oxen in heaven.

Or take for instance the word "run". In modern parlance it may mean "to move rapidly"; it may refer to a score in a baseball game; or it may refer to a snag in a nylon. The words of the Bible are like that. They mean many things out of context. But in a particular subject in a given set of circumstances they mean only one thing.

RULE NO. 4 . . . Study historically. The books of the Bible were written to real people, at a time and place in history. Their lives were lived under conditions very different from those of twentieth century America.

The culture was the culture of the orient, the middle east, the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans. The language was that of the "Partheans and Medes and Elamites and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, in Judea, and Capadocia and Asia" (*Acts 2:9-10*) and dozens of

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other places and peoples which fall like strange sounds on the ears. They lived in the days of Sargon and Shallamanezer and No-Amon and Caesar and Herod. Their concepts of deity were formed in the crucible of Baalism and Jehovah worship, and all the varying degrees of pantheism which fall between. They pledged allegiance not to "The United States of America and to the republic for which it stands," but to Babylonia and Memphis and Athens and Rome . . . and to the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. David was not a little boy who killed a giant in Sunday School, but the great king of Israel in whose image it was hoped the Messiah would come and establish His kingdom as the final world power in the never ending sequence of world powers.

It is amazing, and thrilling to see the Scriptures come alive with real people in real situations . . . and it's relatively easy to transport oneself back into Bible times. For a few dollars one can buy HALLEY'S BIBLE HANDBOOK, and for a few more dollars THE WYCLIFFE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF BIBLE LANDS. For what most Christians spend on a few years of vacations and fishing and golf and convention going, one can actually visit the lands of the Bible. Nothing will add the dimension of history to Bible study quite so quickly and profoundly as a few weeks in the land where it all happened. Short of a college education with a Bible major it is doubtful if anything is more valuable to the Christian who would understand the Bible.

RULE NO. 5 . . . Study analytically. There is no more sure way of being certain of one's understanding of a given passage of Scripture than to compare one's conclusions concerning this passage with what the Bible in general teaches on the same subject. If your conclusions concerning a passage clash with what you have learned from the rest of the Bible about the same subject it is time to review *both*. Either you have misunderstood this passage, or you have overlooked something in what the rest of the Bible says. *The Bible does not contradict itself.*

There is an inherent danger in this particular rule of study. To study analytically *before* having applied the other rules of exegesis is to run the risk of misunderstanding the whole Bible on a given subject. One has a tendency, unless one is on his guard, to ignore the historical circumstances and the context of certain verses and fall into the trap of skipping about looking for proof-texts. This is the fundamental weakness in such mythology as premillennialism, adventism, etc.