



Rules of Interpretation

Introduction

As with any written work, interpretation is something that must be done to understand what you have just read. When you read a book, you must interpret the meaning the author is trying to convey to the reader at that point and time. Many times when we read the assembly instructions of the new toy, or tool we just bought, we are left to interpret some of the information the author gave us. Likewise, God's truth will only be found by careful interpretation of the scriptures.

In this lesson we will look at some common sense rules that have been developed over many centuries. These rules of interpretation are not "special rules" belonging only to Bible study. They are identical to the rules that we ordinarily employ in our daily interchange of thoughts between any two rational persons. While none of these rules are definitive, they are very solid approach to the study of the Bible. When we apply these rules to Bible study, they are nothing more than a means of disciplining the mind to allow the Bible to mean what it must mean, not what "we" want it to mean.

So now let's take a look at the name and briefly discuss the thirteen rules of interpretation.

1. Ordinarily, Every Passage Has But One Meaning

In any letter, discourse, book, or conversation this rule is true, *unless* the author is seeking to mislead or confuse the reader or maybe hide their own ignorance. We expect a writer to mean what he says, no more and no less. However, when dealing with the study of scripture, there are exceptions to this rule that in do not contradict it.

Sometimes a prophecy was given that had an immediate meaning as well as a remote meaning i.e. more than one fulfillment. Many times the former served as a pledge for the latter. In [Psalms 16:10](#), David seems to speak of himself in a time of danger when he says, "***For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.***" David trusts God to deliver him from the hands of his enemies. However, in [Acts 2:27](#) the apostle Peter reveals that David spoke of the resurrection of Christ. Thus, David prophesied truth of the coming Messiah through the same words that held personal significance for his own day.



Rules of Interpretation

2. The Most Simple And Obvious Meaning Of Any Passage Is Usually The Correct One

You've probably heard it before: *The simplest explanation is usually the right one*. Detectives use this rule to figure out who is the most likely suspect in a murder case. Doctors use this rule to determine the illness behind a set of symptoms. This line of reasoning is called **Occam's razor**. It's used in a wide variety of ways throughout the world as a means to slice through a problem or situation and eliminate unnecessary elements. Here are the two parts that are considered the basis of Occam's razor, as they originally appeared in Latin:

The Principle of Plurality - Plurality should not be used without necessity

The Principle of Parsimony - It is pointless to do with more what is done with less

Taken together, they represent the basis of humanity's investigation into the universe. The way we see our environment is largely based upon Occam's razor and there's no telling what kind of world we would live in today without Occam's razor.

So let's use this concerning scripture. Truly if God is speaking to man in his own language, directing it to man's own power of thinking, and involving his own normal experiences on earth, does it not seem reasonable that we should just look for the simplest interpretation of a text, unless otherwise indicated? When we come to a passage that has more than one interpretation, the simplest one most likely to be what the Lord intended. **Occam's razor**.

For example, there are several passages in the New Testament referring to "water" as it relates to a Christian's conversion and spiritual life. Consider the passage [John 3:1-13 \(v 5\)](#). To some, the word water used here really means "word" while to others, it means exactly what it says. This rule leads us to the more obvious meaning of a passage and is something we should always do, unless the context forbids it. This same rule is used throughout any type of writing or conversation as "reasonable" and we should use it accordingly to the interpretation of scripture.

3. Always Allow An Author's Own Explanation Of A Passage To Stand Beyond Any Other Explanation

It is a self-evident fact that a person has a right to explain the way in which he is using an expression. Surely the author knows what he means better than anyone else does. Take the word "perfect". Ordinarily, to us the word means "sinless" or "without error." However, the word can also mean "grown up," or "to mature in their



Rules of Interpretation

spiritual life.” Take a look at [Hebrews 6:1](#), we know that the writer is urging the Christian to grow unto “perfection” in this latter sense. How? By reading the closing verses of the fifth chapter ([Hebrews 5:12-14](#)). Note that the author fully explains how he is using the word in this set of scriptures.

4. Always Interpret A Passage In Harmony With The Context

By context, we mean the entire section of written thought in which the passage is found. (see the example used in rule 3) It includes that which immediately precedes and follows and all parts properly connected to it. It may be a paragraph, a chapter, a large section, or the entire writing. The writings of Scripture demonstrate a continuous, logical flow of thoughts, and a passage should never be “forcibly” pulled out of this order and forced into the mold of some other thoughts.

5. An Interpretation Of A Passage Should Always Conform To The Environment Of The Author

When the inspired writer recorded the words of the Bible, even though the Holy Spirit gave him the message, he used the conditions of life as he knew them to frame the revealed message. He drew upon the customs of his day, the circumstances surrounding his life, and the nature of his own personality. That’s why the books of the Bible have different styles of writing and use various expressions and examples, all the while revealing only what the Lord intended. We should always take time to understand the Environment of the author and the his writings. Many sources are available for this study and we will discuss them in a later lesson.

6. Each Passage Must Be Interpreted In Harmony With All Other Passages

This is the normal law of consistency in truth – truth must harmonize with truth! God’s Word is “truth” ([John 17:17](#)), and any one portion of it must coincide with everything else He says. God never contradicts Himself! No two writers have exactly the same minds, nor do they express truth exactly alike. Therefore, when there seems to be a contradiction between the meanings of passages, one or more of the *interpretations* must be incorrect, not the scripture. Our desire must be to seek harmony and consistency.

For example, in [Romans 3:28](#) we read, “A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” and [James 2:24](#), “By works a man is justified, and not by faith only” are presented as being in conflict. Are They? Read the entire context of both and you will see where they are really complementary, not contradictory. In the light of the authors’ purposes, they support one another. For this to happen they must be interpreted in harmony, with each other.



Rules of Interpretation

7. One Passage Will Often Explain Another Passage

The Apostle Paul says that the wisdom of the Holy Spirit teaches us to compare “spiritual things with spiritual” ([1 Corinthians 2:13](#)). This can be or seem to be somewhat difficult to understand. Don’t be disturbed over a difficult verse or verses just continue steadfastly in your study. Many times another passage will shed light on the difficult passage and bring about a clearer level of understanding. There are several instances in the New Testament where this happens. However, we need to bring out a word of caution at this point. Using one passage to explain another can be overdone by “forcing” comparisons that are not relative. An example of this is using ([Ps 150:3-5](#)) along with ([Eph 5:19](#)) in an attempt to justify instrumental music in our worship to God.

8. A Passage Must Be Interpreted In Harmony With Any Idioms It Contains

An Idiom is an expression, word, or phrase that has a figurative meaning that is comprehended in regard to a common use of that expression that is separate from the literal meaning or definition of the words of which it is made. “Caught in the Middle”, “Hold down the Fort” and “Hit the Sack” are all examples of idioms in the English language. The Bible was written in the common languages of man (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and is filled with expressive idioms. Thus our understanding of the meaning of a passage depends upon our understanding the idioms used in it. For example, a type of repetition was frequently used in the Hebrew language to give emphasis, as in ([Genesis 22:17](#)) “*That in blessing I will bless thee*”. Another kind of idiom is found in the “love” and “hate” expressions. When we read, “*I loved Jacob, and I hated Esau*” ([Malachi 1:2-3](#)), it does not mean the contrast of opposites, as the words literally indicate, but it merely denotes a comparison of one being loved “more than” the other.

9. All Passages On Any Given Subject Must Be Studied

Truth has many sides. Each passage, though true, does not always give all the truth or the “entire story”. Usually a passage has a particular design of presenting clearly one facet of truth or of combating some significant extreme view that people are susceptible to. No one should ever draw a general conclusion on any Bible subject until all passages concerning it have been collected, considered, and compared. There is probably no better illustration of this than the subject of conversion. In defining the steps of salvation that a sinner must take, passages on faith such as ([John 3:16](#)) and ([Acts 16:31](#)) have been emphasized as the only required steps to be saved. At the same time, verses on repentance ([Luke 13:3](#), [Acts 2:38](#); [Acts 17:30](#)); on confession of faith ([Matthew 10:32](#); [Romans 10:9-10](#)); and on baptism ([Mark 16:16](#), [Acts 2:38](#);



Rules of Interpretation

[Acts 22:16](#)) have been ignored. Remember that only the sum total of passages on a given subject will give complete understanding ([Psalm 139:17](#); [Matthew 4:4](#); [2 Timothy 3:16](#)).

10. Observe The Proper Balance Of Scriptural Truth

Many false doctrines have arisen because some passages have been exaggerated or overemphasized, while others have been slighted. As honest Bible students we need to carefully weigh out our conclusions and be sure to balance the truth as God would have us. Sometimes a passage itself contains signs of emphasis or urgency, this being done by repetition, sentence structure, and the words themselves. This is not always evident in an English translation, and so the average student may have to use a reliable commentary or several English translations for help in understanding these fine shades of meaning.

11. Let Plain Passages Determine Difficult Passages

There are some difficult passages of Scripture that can sometime seem obscure or hard to understand. ([2 Peter 3:16](#) for example) They may seem to have more than one meaning. Which is the correct one? When you find this situation, *always* choose the one that harmonizes with the more plain or easier passages on the same subject. Use definitive passages to help you understand the ones that are more obscure. Nicodemus found it difficult to grasp what Jesus meant by the expression “born again” ([John 3:3-6](#)). However, he pressed for a clearer explanation. Today we can do the same by examining the written word that God has given us.

12. Rightly Divide The Book, The Dispensations, The Covenants, And The Settings

([2 Timothy 2:15](#)) tells us; *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”* This rule helps us to see the true meaning of this passage.

(a) The Book

The two main divisions of the Bible are the Old and New Testaments. Basically, the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were written to guide people before the coming of Christ, while the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are to guide all people since the coming of Christ. The word “testament” means “will”. There is great significance in the words “old” and “new”. God established the “Old Testament” primarily for the Jewish nation of Israel while Christ established the “New Testament” in order to bring salvation to “all” ([Gal. 3:26-28](#)).



Rules of Interpretation

(b) The Dispensations

Patriarchal Age – The word “patriarch” means “father”. In this age, God began to deal with man as the head of his family. Instead of revealing a written code of law and a system of worship, He spoke to the fathers through visions, dreams, and angels. Because of the limitation in nature of God’s revelation during this long age. It has been called the “Starlight Age”.

Mosaic Age – Here the name springs from the great lawgiver, Moses. During this period God expanded His method of dealing with man by choosing a nation (Israel). Man was now ready for more revelation from God; hence this age is often called the “Moonlight Age”. Through Moses, God set down a definite written code for social, political, and religious life, with the Ten Commandments as its center.

Christian Age – The name here refers to Christ, the “author and finisher of our faith” ([Hebrews 12:2](#)). The chief characteristic here is that God now turns from a family and a nation to the whole world. Now the grand purpose of God is fulfilled through His Son: the redemption of all mankind on earth (those who are willing to be saved by the Gospel or “perfect law of liberty” ([James 1:25](#))). Thus, this age is often called the “Sunlight Age” – the present age in which we now live. More than nineteen hundred years have transpired thus far.

(c) The Covenants

The two main covenants in the Bible are: (1) Old Testament and (2) New Testament. One of the chief causes of misunderstanding the Bible has been the failure to rightly divide these covenants and put them together to build or defend a doctrine. The mixing of the covenants can do nothing else but produce chaos and confusion. Jesus lived under the Old Testament (Covenant). When he died on the cross, this brought an end to, and the fulfillment of ([Matthew 5:17](#)) the law ([Colossians 2:14](#); [Hebrews 10:9-10](#)). This could be similar to a labor union contract. No matter how good the one is, a better one is written and ratified later on and takes the place of the old one.

(d) The Settings

In order to arrive at a correct interpretation of a passage or passages of Scripture, it is important to put the Scripture in its rightful place, according to the period of time and the covenant involved. This involves the important issue of seeing it in its original, thus true environment.



Rules of Interpretation

13) Rightly Divide The Language

In speaking to man God used human language, the language man uses in his everyday life. The Lord has used all types of languages known to man – from literal fact to figurative statement, prose to poetry, story to sermon, history to prophecy, and law to example. Many, times the Lord wished simply to state facts, name persons and places, relate incidents, issue commandments and warnings, or draw conclusions. Such things should be taken literally, just as we do in our daily conversations. To be constantly searching for hidden meanings and fancy figures of speech would be useless. Too many Bible readers have forgotten this obvious truth, and so they exert wasteful and fruitless energy in forcing many literal words and expressions to issue forth deep, spiritual meanings never intended. Remember, a good portion of the Bible is in plain, literal language!

Assignment:

Choose any 3 of the 13 rules of interpretation and show how you can use them in a part of the New Testament.