

We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this book to us in care of zreview@zondervan.com. Thank you.



How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

Copyright © 1981, 1993, 2003 by Douglas Stuart and Gordon D. Fee

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fee, Gordon D.

How to read the Bible for all its worth / Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 0-310-24604-0

1. Bible—Study and teaching. I. Stuart, Douglas K. II. Title

BS600.3.F44 2003

220.6'1—dc21

2003013623

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, Today's New International Version*®. TNIV®, copyright © 2002, 2004 by International Bible Society, and the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB and NASU are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the *New Revised Standard Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked GNB are from the *Good News Bible*. Copyright © 1976 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from *The New King James Bible Version*. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible*. Copyright © 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and are used by permission of copyright owner. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NEB are taken from the *New English Bible*. Copyright © 1961, 1970 by the Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations marked REB are taken from the *Revised English Bible*. Copyright © 1989 by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press.

Scripture quotations marked NJB are taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible*, copyright © 1985 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd. and Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Interior design by Tracey Moran

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	8
<i>Abbreviations of Translations</i>	9
<i>Preface to the Third Edition</i>	11
<i>Preface to the First Edition</i>	13
1. Introduction: The Need to Interpret	17
2. The Basic Tool: A Good Translation	33
3. The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextually	55
4. The Epistles: The Hermeneutical Questions	71
5. The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use	89
6. Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent	107
7. The Gospels: One Story, Many Dimensions	127
8. The Parables: Do You Get the Point?	149
9. The Law(s): Covenant Stipulations for Israel	163
10. The Prophets: Enforcing the Covenant in Israel	181
11. The Psalms: Israel's Prayers and Ours	205
12. Wisdom: Then and Now	225
13. The Revelation: Images of Judgment and Hope	249
<i>Appendix: The Evaluation and Use of Commentaries</i>	265
<i>Index of Names</i>	276
<i>Scripture Index</i>	277

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod	Exodus	Isa	Isaiah
Lev	Leviticus	Jer	Jeremiah
Num	Numbers	Lam	Lamentations
Deut	Deuteronomy	Ezek	Ezekiel
Josh	Joshua	Dan	Daniel
Judg	Judges	Hos	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kgs	1–2 Kings	Obad	Obadiah
1–2 Chr	1–2 Chronicles	Jonah	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic	Micah
Neh	Nehemiah	Nah	Nahum
Esth	Esther	Hab	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph	Zephaniah
Ps/Pss	Psalms	Hag	Haggai
Prov	Proverbs	Zech	Zechariah
Eccl	Ecclesiastes	Mal	Malachi

New Testament

Matt	Matthew	1–2 Thess	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Phlm	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb	Hebrews
Rom	Romans	Jas	James
1–2 Cor	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet	1–2 Peter
Gal	Galatians	1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Eph	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil	Philippians	Rev	Revelation
Col	Colossians		

A.D.	<i>anno Domini</i> (in the year of [our] Lord)	et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
B.C.	before Christ	etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and the rest
ca.	<i>circa</i> , about, approximately	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	NT	New Testament
ch(s).	chapter(s)	OT	Old Testament
ed.	edited by	p(p).	page(s)
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	vol(s).	volume(s)
		v(v).	verse(s)

Introduction: The Need to Interpret

Every so often we meet someone who says with great feeling, “You don’t have to interpret the Bible; just read it and do what it says.” Usually, such a remark reflects the layperson’s protest against the “professional” scholar, pastor, teacher, or Sunday school teacher, who by “interpreting” seems to be taking the Bible away from the common man or woman. It is their way of saying that the Bible is not an obscure book. “After all,” it is argued, “any person with half a brain can read it and understand it. The problem with too many preachers and teachers is that they dig around so much they tend to muddy the waters. What was clear to us when we read it isn’t so clear anymore.”

There is a lot of truth in this protest. We agree that Christians should learn to read, believe, and obey the Bible. And we especially agree that the Bible need not be an obscure book if studied and read properly. In fact we are convinced that the single most serious problem people have with the Bible is not with a lack of understanding but with the fact that they understand most things too well! For example, with such a text as “Do everything without grumbling or arguing” (Phil 2:14), the problem is not understanding it but obeying it—putting it into practice.

We are also agreed that the preacher or teacher is all too often prone to dig first and look later, and thereby to cover up the plain meaning of the text, which often lies on the surface. Let it be said at the outset—and repeated throughout—that the aim of good interpretation is not uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has ever seen before.

Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to “outclever” the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deeply buried truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias). Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a text may not often seem unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task.

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the “plain meaning of the text.” And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart.

But if the plain meaning is what interpretation is all about, then why interpret? Why not just read? Does not the plain meaning come simply from reading? In a sense, yes. But in a truer sense, such an argument is both naive and unrealistic because of two factors: the nature of the reader and the nature of Scripture.

The Reader as an Interpreter

The first reason one needs to learn *how* to interpret is that, whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter. That is, most of us assume as we read that we also understand what we read. We also tend to think that *our understanding* is the same thing as the Holy Spirit’s or human author’s *intent*. However, we invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas. Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text.

Thus, when a person in our culture hears the word “cross,” centuries of Christian art and symbolism cause most people automatically to think of a Roman cross (†), although there is little likelihood that that was the shape of Jesus’ cross, which was probably shaped like a “T.” Most Protestants, and Catholics as well, when they read

texts about the church at worship, automatically envision people sitting in a building with “pews” much like their own. When Paul says, “Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Rom 13:14 NKJV), people in most English-speaking cultures are apt to think that “flesh” means the “body” and therefore that Paul is speaking of “bodily appetites.”

But the word “flesh,” as Paul uses it, seldom refers to the body—and in this text it almost certainly did not—but to a spiritual malady sometimes called “the sinful nature,” denoting totally self-centered existence. Therefore, without intending to do so, the reader is interpreting as he or she reads, and unfortunately all too often interprets incorrectly.

This leads us to note further that in any case the reader of an English Bible is already involved in interpretation. For translation is in itself a (necessary) form of interpretation. Your Bible, whatever translation you use, which is your *beginning* point, is in fact the *end result* of much scholarly work. Translators are regularly called upon to make choices regarding meanings, and *their* choices are going to affect how *you* understand.

Good translators, therefore, take the problem of our language differences into consideration. But it is not an easy task. In Romans 13:14, for example, shall we translate “flesh” (as in KJV, NRSV, NASU, ESV, etc.) because this is the word Paul used, and then leave it to an interpreter to tell us that “flesh” here does not mean “body”? Or shall we “help” the reader and translate “sinful nature” (as in the NIV, TNIV, GNB, NLT, etc.) or “disordered natural inclinations” (NJB) because these more closely approximate what Paul’s word really *means*? We will take up this matter in greater detail in the next chapter. For now it is sufficient to point out how the *fact* of translation in itself has already involved one in the task of interpretation.

The need to interpret is also to be found by noting what goes on around us all the time. A simple look at the contemporary church, for example, makes it abundantly clear that not all “plain meanings” are equally plain to all. It is of more than passing interest that most of those in today’s church who argue that women should keep silent in church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 at the same time deny the validity of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the very context in which the “silence” passage occurs. And those who affirm on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 that

women as well as men should pray and prophesy usually deny that women must do so with their heads covered. For some, the Bible “plainly teaches” believers’ baptism by immersion; others believe they can make a biblical case for infant baptism. Both “eternal security” and the possibility of “losing one’s salvation” are preached in the church, but never by the same person! Yet both are affirmed as the plain meaning of biblical texts. Even the two authors of this book have some disagreements as to what certain texts “plainly” mean. Yet all of us are reading the same Bible, and we all are trying to be obedient to what the text “plainly” means.

Besides these recognizable differences among Bible-believing Christians, there are also all kinds of strange things afloat. One can usually recognize the cults, for example, because they have an authority in addition to the Bible. But not all of them do; and in every case they bend the truth by the way they select texts from the Bible itself. Every imaginable heresy or practice, from the Arianism (denying Christ’s deity) of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, to baptizing for the dead among Mormons, to snake handling among Appalachian sects, claims to be “supported” by a text.

Even among more theologically orthodox people, however, many strange ideas manage to gain acceptance in various quarters. For example, one of the current rages among American Protestants, especially charismatics, is the so-called wealth and health gospel. The “good news” is that God’s will for you is financial and material prosperity! One of the advocates of this “gospel” begins his book by arguing for the “plain sense” of Scripture and claiming that he puts the Word of God first and foremost throughout his study. He says that it is not what we *think* it says but what it *actually* says that counts. The “plain meaning” is what he is after. But one begins to wonder what the “plain meaning” really is when financial prosperity is argued as the will of God from such a text as 3 John 2, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV)—a text that in fact has nothing at all to do with financial prosperity. Another example takes the plain meaning of the story of the rich young man (Mark 10:17–22) as precisely the opposite of “what it actually says” and attributes the “interpretation” to the Holy Spirit. One may rightly question whether the plain meaning is being sought at all; perhaps the plain meaning is simply what such a writer wants the text to mean in order to support some pet ideas.

Given all this diversity, both inside and outside the church, and all the differences even among scholars, who supposedly know “the rules,” it is no wonder that some argue for no interpretation, just reading. But as we have seen, this is a false option. The antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation but *good* interpretation, based on commonsense guidelines.

The authors of this book labor under no illusions that by reading and following our guidelines everyone will finally agree on the “plain meaning,” *our* meaning! What we do hope to achieve is to heighten the reader’s sensitivity to specific problems inherent in each genre, to help the reader know *why* different options exist and how to make commonsense judgments, and especially to enable the reader to discern between good and not-so-good interpretations—and to know what makes them one or the other.

The Nature of Scripture

A more significant reason for the need to interpret lies in the nature of Scripture itself. Historically the church has understood the nature of Scripture much the same as it has understood the person of Christ—the Bible is at the same time both human and divine. “The Bible,” it has been correctly said, “is the Word of God given in human words in history.” It is this dual nature of the Bible that demands of us the task of interpretation.

Because the Bible is *God’s Word*, it has *eternal relevance*; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is God’s Word, we must listen—and obey. But because God chose to speak his Word through *human words in history*, every book in the Bible also has *historical particularity*; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written (and in some cases also by the oral history it had before it was written down). Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the “tension” that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*.

There are some, of course, who believe that the Bible is merely a human book, and that it contains only human words in history. For these people the task of interpreting is limited to historical inquiry. Their interest, as with reading Cicero or Milton, is with the religious ideas of the Jews, Jesus, or the early church. The task for them, therefore, is purely a historical one. What did these words

mean to the people who wrote them? What did they think about God? How did they understand themselves?

On the other hand, there are those who think of the Bible only in terms of its eternal relevance. Because it is God's Word, they tend to think of it only as a collection of propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed—although invariably there is a great deal of picking and choosing among the propositions and imperatives. There are, for example, Christians who, on the basis of Deuteronomy 22:5 (“A woman must not wear men's clothing”), argue that a woman should not wear slacks or shorts, because these are deemed to be “men's clothing.” But the same people seldom take literally the other imperatives in this list, which include building a parapet around the roof of one's house (v. 8), not planting two kinds of seeds in a vineyard (v. 9), and making tassels on the four corners of one's cloak (v. 12).

The Bible, however, is *not* a series of propositions and imperatives; it is not simply a collection of “Sayings from Chairman God,” as though he looked down on us from heaven and said: “Hey you down there, learn these truths. Number 1, There is no God but One, and I am he. Number 2, I am the Creator of all things, including humankind”—and so on, all the way through proposition number 7,777 and imperative number 777.

These propositions of course are true, and they are found in the Bible (though not quite in that form). Indeed such a book might have made many things easier for us. But, fortunately, that is not how God chose to speak to us. Rather, he chose to speak his eternal truths within the particular circumstances and events of human history. This also is what gives us hope. Precisely because God chose to speak in the context of real human history, we may take courage that these same words will speak again and again in our own “real” history, as they have throughout the history of the church.

The fact that the Bible has a human side is our encouragement; it is also our challenge, and the reason that we need to interpret. Two things should be noted in this regard:

1. One of the most important aspects of the human side of the Bible is that, in order to communicate his Word to all human conditions, God chose to use almost every available kind of communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses.