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# Importance of Hermeneutics

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Interpretation is the act of uncovering the meaning of a text. The Bible was written by various authors to different audiences over the stretch of some 1500 years, over 2000 years ago. Several historical and linguistic changes have occurred since then making it difficult for readers to correctly understand the actual intent of the author who wrote the particular passage in the Bible. Therefore, biblical interpretation today becomes even more important in order to grasp what God wants us to understand.

Of course, the doctrine of Illumination teaches us that it is impossible to understand supernatural truths without the light of the Holy Spirit. [1Corinthians 2:12-14](#) teaches us that spiritual things cannot be comprehended by human wit and reasoning; they can only be received through the Spirit of God. However, at the same time, learning and faith are both essential in understanding the meaning of Scriptures ([2Pet. 3:16](#)).

## **Translation, Interpretation, and Bible Versions**

Scholars of Hermeneutics (Science of Interpretation) now understand that translation is itself an act of interpretation; for, in the act of translation, the translator first attempts to understand the meaning of the text which he then translates into a language (or version) that is understandable to others. In modern times, therefore, several versions have come up based on their various approaches to translation. Some of these versions like the KJV are more literal while others like the NIV are not word-to-word translations but such that attempt to translate the understood meaning of the text.

Compare the following passage in the NKJV and the NIV, for instance:

*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ([Rom 8:5 NKJ](#))*

*Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ([Rom 8:5 NIV](#))*

In the original Greek, the word used for flesh is *sarx*; however, the NIV translators saw the term as meaning "sinful nature", based on their doctrinal understanding of Scriptures and chose to use the word "sinful nature" instead of "flesh" here. More variations may be found when comparing with other versions. Of course, not all interpreters would agree to translating *sarx* as "sinful nature", since it literally means "flesh".

Certainly, not everyone (including most Christian ministers today) is well-versed with Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; they make use of translations to understand Scripture. To a great extent, the translations are reliable; however, in some cases they are not; and, especially with regard to doubtful passages, reliance on translations alone can lead to badly developed doctrines or interpretations. Take for instance the issue of the following passage:

*Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. ([Joh 20:17 KJV](#))*

Seeing that, later on, Jesus permits His disciple to touch Him ([John 20:27](#)), some have interpreted the passage above to mean that perhaps Jesus had ascended to the Father and come back in between His appearance to Mary and His appearance to His disciples. However, later translators saw the importance of bringing out the true sense of the meaning of the word *haptomai*, translated in the KJV as “touch”. See the versions below:

*Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; ([Joh 20:17 NKJ](#))  
Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. ([Joh 20:17 NRS](#))*

These later versions try to more graphically illustrate the scene that the verb *haptomai* seems to paint. From these versions, it seems that Mary was already clinging on to Jesus, perhaps not willing to lose Him again, and Jesus was telling her to stop holding on to Him, because He was not gone yet and was still to be with them for some time. In fact, He wouldn't ascend till He had met the disciples and had commissioned them.

Sometimes, manuscript variations can also affect interpretation. Let's take for instance the case of [Revelation 5:9](#) in which the 4 Living Creatures and the 24 Elders sing this song:

*"You are worthy to take the scroll,  
And to open its seals;  
For You were slain,  
And have redeemed **us** to God by Your blood  
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,  
And have made **us** kings and priests to our God;  
And **we** shall reign on the earth." ([Rev 5:9-10 NKJ](#), *emphatics mine*)*

Because the song uses personal pronouns such as “us” and “we”, previous commentators identified the singers as believers bought by the blood of Jesus, i.e. as the Church in heaven. However, other manuscripts and their dependent translations challenge this interpretation.

*"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God **saints** from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made **them** to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and **they** will reign on earth." ([Rev 5:9-10 NRS](#), *emphatics mine*)*

Of course, not everyone again is expected to be a pundit of the languages and of textual criticism; however, everyone can certainly be careful to understand that biblical interpretation is not just a matter of arbitrary whim and personal sense. Also, in modern times, we have several resources for proper Bible study and for proper historical-grammatical interpretation at our finger tips. Free softwares such as E-Sword and TheWord for desktops and MySword for mobile phones and tablets bring all such resources right at our finger tips.

Thus, proper biblical interpretation is necessary not only for translation of Scriptures but also in order to rightly understand and to know the true message of Scriptures.

## **Biblical Interpretation as the Watchdog against Heresies**

Right biblical interpretation follows proper principles and methods of interpretation or hermeneutics (dealt with in other articles in this issue). Without the tools of proper interpretation one can become the victim of heretical interpretation. Take for instance this passage from the New World Translation Bible of the Jehovah Witnesses:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.” ([John 1:1](#), NWT)*

Notice the phrase “the Word was a god” which is a twisted translation of the Greek *kai theos en ho logos*, which should literally translate as “and God was the Word”, but by virtue of the context is rendered as “and the Word was God”. However, the literal translation challenges the Jehovah Witness doctrine that doesn’t accept the doctrine of Trinity; therefore, it was twisted into “the Word was a god” to match their doctrine. That is one example of the many ways in which Scriptures are twisted; such twisting must be exposed by the use of proper biblical interpretation.

Most general heretical teachings do not even require one to look into the Greek and Hebrew in order to expose them. Proper application of the right hermeneutical principles helps to uncover the author’s meaning. Of course, also, it is possible that people expert in Greek and Hebrew may not be able to comprehend spiritual truths that are easily comprehended by children of God led by the Spirit of God. However, that is not an excuse for undermining the importance of rigorous biblical exegesis and interpretation. As stated earlier, without such rigorous interpretation, not even the translations could be possible.

## **Biblical Interpretation for Spiritual Edification**

Understanding, assimilating, and obeying the Scriptures is crucial to one’s spiritual development. [Hebrews 5:11](#) talks about things that are hard even to explain, because they require development of spiritual faculties on the part of the listener. For instance, it will be hard to explain trigonometry to someone who hasn’t yet mastered the numbers. Similarly, the writer of Hebrews tells us that there are some who still can only feed on milk and haven’t exercised their faculties enough to be able to assimilate the meat of God’s word.

*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. ([Heb 5:12-14](#) NKJ)*

Those who are of full age (mature) are those who not only can discern and comprehend spiritual truths but also are able to understand and assimilate them when they are explained by others. But, those who aren’t mature cannot make sense of teaching that constitutes solid spiritual food.

*However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ([1Cor. 2:6](#) NKJ)*

Spiritual understanding and edification doesn’t just come from academic proficiency; for if it was so the rulers of this age, who knew the original languages and the principles of interpretation “would not have crucified the Lord of glory” ([1Cor.2:8](#)). Spiritual understanding comes from the Spirit ([1Cor.2:10-16](#)). The

Bible talks of spiritual blindness that prevents people from seeing what God reveals in His Word ([2Cor.3:14,15](#)). This blindness can only be removed when one turns in repentance and faith towards God ([2Cor.3:16](#); [4:3,4](#)).

Obviously, then, Biblical interpretation is not, in this sense, similar to interpretation of any other book in the world; because the Bible is given for our spiritual edification and not just for historical information or intellectual stimulation. The Austrian philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein talked about language games. Each game is a world of its own with its own rules that may not apply to some other game. Similarly, we can say that biblical interpretation has its own set of rules, and one of the requirements for proper biblical interpretation is that the interpreter is spiritual, because “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” ([1Cor. 2:14](#) NKJ). Thus, biblical interpretation is by itself a distinct discipline and its goal is not merely to understand the human author’s intent but to understand the mind of the Holy Spirit who moved holy men to write the Scriptures.

*“no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”* ([2Pe 1:20-21](#) NKJ)

Therefore, biblical interpretation is crucial for the understanding of Scriptures. It helps one to enter the “setting in life” of the writer and his audience, to progressively understand the meaning of Scriptural terms, to exactly comprehend the purport of God’s word, and to find direction and strength for living a godly life of faith in this world. Biblical interpretation helps to translate God’s word into a language that the contemporary youth is familiar with. It is, therefore, an essential duty of a Christian minister. It also helps to expose heresies and assist God’s servant in “rightly dividing the word of truth” ([2Tim.2:15](#)).