

Oral Interpretation - Historical Notes for 2024.09.22

1) The Age of the Divided Kingdom:

Judah - southern kingdom, tribes of Judah and Benjamin, capital in Jerusalem
Israel (or Ephraim) - northern kingdom, 10 remaining tribes, capital in Samaria

2) Map People Groups in and Around the Promised Land:

The Canaanites were various people groups and city states in the Promised Land.

The northern and southern kingdoms' immediate neighbours/enemies:

Phoenicia (Tyre and Sidon), Philistia, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Aram/Syria.

3) Map ANE Empires: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon

Later empires - the Medes and Persians, earlier empires - the Hittites.

4) The Political History of the Age of the Divided Kingdom:

The political history of Judah and Israel during this time period is complex, but it can be briefly summarized. Israel and Judah and their immediate neighbours (Phoenicia, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Aram/Syria) were often under pressure from the surrounding great powers (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon), or they were the vassals of these great powers. Sometimes God's people and their immediate neighbours were fighting among themselves. At times they were under pressure from a great power and also fighting each other. Even the northern and southern kingdoms sometimes took up arms against one another.

5) The Historical Books and the Spiritual History of the Divided Kingdom:

The historical books of Kings and Chronicles assess the history of the northern and southern kingdoms through a spiritual lens. They ignore most of the political, economic, military, and social aspects of history unless they relate to the spiritual focus. Do the kings, priests, prophets and people love God with all their hearts and love their neighbours as themselves, or do they not? Do they think and act like Canaanites, or as the Chosen People of God who choose to guide their lives by the Law as the way to express their faith in God? The historical books of the period focus mostly on the behaviour of the kings of Judah and Israel, while the prophetic books often reveal how those nations' other leaders and their people thought and behaved, usually following the examples of their kings.

The spiritual history of Judah and Israel in Kings and Chronicles is simple. The Bible describes the northern kings as either very evil or not quite so evil, though two (Tibni and Shallam) reigned so briefly that no judgement is recorded. The southern kings were evil (12), good (5), or started out good and turned bad (3). Manasseh was a very bad king because, although Chronicles reports his repentance, the effect of his evil completely overshadowed it. The important actions of the various kings were spiritual in nature. The good kings encouraged people to obey the Law through their own examples, and they actively fought against idolatry. The evil kings led Israel and Judah into sin by ignoring the Law and by encouraging idolatry. Both nations gradually became increasingly evil. God was patient for hundreds of years, but finally judgement time came. God exiled Israel through the Assyrians in 722 BC. He exiled Judah through the Babylonians in 586 BC because of their increasing spiritual adultery.

Oral Interpretation and Application

We want to understand the meaning of the passage for the first audience so that we can "drive this meaning home to our present society with the same impact it had when it was originally written."¹ Oral interpretation insists "we ought to get passionately and personally involved in what we read."² Indeed, we cannot read Scripture without being involved, one way or the other.

1. Being Properly, Not Improperly, Involved in the Passage

The goal in reading the Bible out loud for self-understanding is to be properly involved when we read the Bible, for we can be very easily improperly involved. Let us discuss improper ways of being involved before talking about proper involvement.

Reading for self-understanding does not mean controlling our understanding of the passage with our own ideas. That is "*eisogesis*". *Eisogesis* has the prefix "eis" which in Greek means "into". *Eisogesis* means that we read into the text something that is not there in the original writer's mind. Instead, the idea comes from our own mind. Our ideas are too much involved in understanding the passage.

For example, when we read Romans 1:1 ("Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ,"), we might think of servants in Africa, India and England during colonial times, or of the victims of the African slave trade. Paul does not want us to think of the social status of the slave, he wants us to think of the slave's redemption. Paul has in mind those who were bought by a master who paid for them with His own life. When he calls himself a slave or servant, Paul is indicating his loyalty to his Master, the One who owns him, who bought him with His own blood. We are not slaves or paid servants who work for our wages. We are slaves of Christ who purchased our freedom from the kingdom of darkness where we were slaves to sin. Paul uses the slave metaphor to illustrate something about our relationship with Christ.

Reading out loud for self-understanding involves being passionately and personally involved in what we read. It does not mean that our involvement can produce a meaning so personal that the truth of the word is lost. The reader and his own ideas are too much involved in understanding and applying the text. The meaning of the original author and the meaning of the text itself are almost completely left out.

2. Making God's Words Our Words

Oral interpretation encourages the interpreter to be "passionately and personally involved" in understanding what the Bible meant to the original readers and what it means for us today. Oral interpretation encourages us to put ourselves into the lives of the people in the Biblical passage. Sproul says this type of approach "is a kind of empathy by which we try to 'crawl into the skin' of the characters we are reading about."³ We can ask ourselves questions about the text to help us do this. What clues does the text itself yield that will help us understand what the people in the passage thinking and feeling? Obviously, we cannot say for sure what they are thinking or feeling, but as we reconstruct the situation by asking the right questions, we can begin to empathize with the characters.

¹ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963, p. 56.

² R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1977, p. 66.

³ Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, p. 66.

3. The Author, The Text, and The Reader

To help us understand and apply the words of the text we are studying, we must relate three aspects that determine meaning in any part of the Bible. First, there is the meaning the author intended his readers to get, as the Holy Spirit guided him. Second, there is the meaning derived from text itself, the word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. Third, there is the meaning as understood by the reader of the text, who can be guided by the Spirit. How does this connect with our hermeneutical method?

A) The Authors' Intended Meaning

The divine and human authors of Scripture always wrote with an intended audience in mind. For example, Moses wrote Deuteronomy to the Israelites who were about to enter Canaan. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. We need to ask historical, cultural and literary questions to understand the writer's intended meaning for his audience. Why did Paul write to the Corinthians? What was the historical and cultural situation when Moses wrote Deuteronomy for the Israelites? When Solomon wrote his proverbs to instruct young people, how did the parallelism in the proverbs help to reveal their meaning?

B) The Text Itself

The Divine Author of Scripture has given us the whole Bible. Each book and passage are part of the Good News about salvation through Christ. Therefore, our interpretation of one passage must be consistent with the other parts of the Bible. One author's intended meaning, about the Messiah for example, is not the whole story about the Messiah. Moses knew that God would send someone to defeat Satan (Gen. 3:15), but he probably did not know much more than that (see Gen. 49:10 and Deut. 18:15-19). Later, as part of the principle of God's Progressive Revelation of the Bible, the Holy Spirit inspired other people to tell Israel more about the Messiah (such as where He would be born, Micah 5:2). A fuller understanding of Messiah will put together all the verses about Him.

In addition, there seem to be a few examples of the Holy Spirit including more in a text than the human author realized at the time of writing. Compare the sign of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 with Matthew's use of it in his gospel (1:22-23). The fuller meaning of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 does not come only from the human author's intended meaning. It also comes from the Holy Spirit's intended meaning as brought to light by Matthew. Isaiah focused on a boy named Immanuel to prophesy what God would do in his own time. Matthew focused on the meaning of the name Immanuel to show how Isaiah 7 was fulfilled by the virgin birth of Christ in his time.

C) The Reader of the Text

The third aspect of meaning comes from us as readers of the Bible. We bring our culture, our knowledge of our church's traditional interpretations of the passage, and our personal experiences to the task of interpretation. These factors influence our first reading of the passage. We should be humble enough to acknowledge that our first ideas about a passage might need improving. "Pride is dangerous when interpreting the Bible. We need to be willing to listen to other people's interpretations. Just as iron sharpens iron, so hearing what others have to say about a passage will help to sharpen our own thinking." If we are humble, then these three factors can help us in our interpretation of a passage.

D) *Readers Are Limited and Aided by Culture, Tradition, Experience*

When we apply our Biblical knowledge to our own situation, we need to recognize that we are limited by our humanity. We are limited in three ways. First, we are limited by our culture. When Western Christians read Paul's instructions to Timothy about elders and deacons being "the husband of but one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2), they assume Paul is saying that elders and deacons cannot be divorced and remarried. Africans assume Paul is forbidding polygamy. Since our cultures are different (Western countries do not practice polygamy), our assumptions are different. But what did Paul intend to say?

Second, we are limited by our church traditions. We start our study of interpretation with a mind that has already learned some correct theology and some inadequate theology. This comes from church tradition as we have learned it from parents and pastors, as well as others. Church traditions and theology are human efforts to live and think as God wants us to. But no human effort is perfect. There is always room for improvement in our theology, no matter how experienced and educated we are.

Third, we are limited by our personal experiences. For example, suppose a young believer belongs to a church that has split over whether Christians ought to speak in tongues. That painful experience affects his theology one way or another. If he's against speaking in tongues, he may be strongly against anything charismatics say because he believes "they destroy churches" by advocating tongues. If he's in favour of speaking in tongues, he may be against anti-charismatics because he believes "they destroy churches" by forbidding tongues.

As readers, we need to understand how our cultures, our church traditions, and our personal experiences affect the way we read the Bible. Sometimes these factors distort our interpretation. But these three factors can also help us when we understand them and use them for God's glory. The more our cultures, traditions and personal experiences are like Biblical cultures, traditions and personal experiences, the better we will understand the Bible. We need to study these three factors, so we know when they are similar to those in the Bible and when they are different. Noticing the differences alerts us to the need for care in application.

For example, Israel's Law covered all aspects of life, much like Sharia law tries to do for Muslims. Islam is a theocracy, a religious political system. OT Israel was also a theocracy where it was the duty of the king and his government to rule according to God's Law. We live in a democracy with a ceremonial monarch, a very different political system. "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful ..." but to be useful in our setting many OT laws would need to be applied indirectly, rather than directly.

Summary: Oral interpretation is simply a way to understand and apply God's word through repeatedly reading it out loud while asking questions of the text. These questions help us understand the text, how the text applied to the original audience and how it can be applied to us. Reading this way properly involves us in the ideas and emotions of the people in the text. We do our very best to understand the human and divine authors' intention in writing. We also investigate the other relevant passages that the Divine Author has given us. As readers of the sacred text, we strive to understand both ourselves, and our limitations, to avoid errors of interpretation. We can also use those same limitations (our cultures, church traditions, and personal experiences) to help us interpret the Bible.