

BIBLE INTERPRETATION

E. J. Waggoner

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“A Few Principles of Interpretation”

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The SIGNS OF THE TIMES is an expository journal.

The main object for which it was established was to present Scripture truth in the simplest and clearest manner possible. During the coming year it will be our endeavor to make it meet this object more fully than ever before, and as a preliminary, we wish to lay down for our readers a few of the principles which we shall invariably follow in our interpretation, and which, if followed, in a prayerful and candid spirit, cannot fail to lead a person to a proper understanding of the sacred word. (SITI January 6, 1887, page 6.1)

1. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. We accept this fully, and apply it to the entire Bible. The Bible does not simply contain the truth, but it is the truth, and the whole truth. Aside from the Bible there can be no moral or spiritual truth and light. And whatever disagrees with the Bible, whether it be in the realm of morals or of science, must be false. The principle here laid down must underlie all sound Biblical exegesis. If this be not admitted, it can be of no use to any to study the Bible. (SITI January 6, 1887, page 6.2)

2. The Bible is one connected, consistent, harmonious book. It is composed of many books, but these books form only one Book. They are not independent one of another. This Book was written by many different persons, yet it has only one author, and that is the Spirit of God. The different parts are inspired by the same Spirit, and have one purpose; there is a vital connection between them. They are characterized by oneness of thought. As Christ prayed that his disciples might be one, so that the world might know that the Father had sent him (John 17:21), so the perfect harmony between the various parts of the Bible is proof that it came from God. If we accept the Bible as the inspired word of God we must expect to find it harmonious throughout, for God cannot deny himself. So whoever wishes to study the word of God with any degree of satisfaction, must first fix in his mind the fact that the Bible cannot contradict itself. (*SITI* January 6, 1887, page 6.3)

As a corollary to this principle it might be stated that the Bible does not need to be “harmonized.” To attempt that is a thankless task, because the Bible is already harmonized. It is an instrument that was tuned by the Almighty himself, and every string vibrates in harmony with every other. All that the Bible student has to do is to study the harmony that already exists. If two texts seem to be contradictory, the student may rest assured that he does not understand one or the other, or perhaps either one. But when the position which he holds on one text is upheld by other texts bearing on the same point, and is not contradicted by any other text; that is, when a position taken in regard to any text is consistent with the entire Bible, that of itself is evidence that that position is correct; for the Bible could not agree with a false position.

(SITI January 6, 1887, page 6.4)

3. The Bible must interpret itself. By the Bible man may be “*thoroughly* furnished unto all good works;” hence it cannot need the addition of matter outside of itself. (*SITI* January 6, 1887, page 6.5)

4. One part of the Bible cannot be fully understood when taken by itself, apart from its connection, or without reference to the remaining portion of the Bible. This might also be called a corollary to the second proposition laid down. If the Bible is one connected whole, then all the parts are necessary to the formation of that whole. There is a mutual dependence between all the parts, and therefore in considering one part, attention must be given to the other parts. True, we *may* not misunderstand one portion of the Bible even though we study it by itself; but it is certain that we cannot have a complete understanding of it until we study it with reference to the Bible as a whole. This principle is as true of an entire book of the Bible as it is of a single text. There is no book of the Bible upon which light is not thrown by every other book in the Bible. To say that any two books in the Bible have no connection, is almost equivalent to saying that the Bible is not all inspired by the same Spirit. (*SITI* January 6, 1887, page 6.6)

5. Terms used in one place in the Bible, with a certain signification, must have the *same meaning* attached to them *in every other place* where they occur, provided the same subject is under consideration. If this be not true, then we have no certain means of knowing what the Bible teaches. Let us apply this principle. In the eighth chapter of Daniel we find a symbolic prophecy in which certain days are mentioned. Now to say that these days mean literal days of twenty-four hours each, would make nonsense of the prophecy, for we should have several great kingdoms covering a period of only a little more than six years. But in Ezekiel 4:3-6 we find another prophecy, also symbolic, in which a day is expressly declared to stand for a year. So we conclude that in every prophecy where a day is used as a symbol, it signifies a year. (*SITI* January 6, 1887, page 6.7)

In like manner we find horns used as a symbol in the seventh and eighth chapters of Daniel, in both of which chapters they are plainly declared to symbolize kingdoms. Therefore we justly conclude that whenever in the Bible a horn is used as a symbol, it represents a kingdom or nation. (*SITI* January 6, 1887, page 6.8)

Let the reader study these principles well, and get them fixed in his mind, and they will help him out of many a difficulty in his study of the Bible. We think these principles are sufficient for present consideration. Next week we shall present a few more that are equally important. W. (*SITI* January 6, 1887, page 6.9)