

10 Bible Interpretation: Using Common Sense

Once a man approached me and said that he wanted to ask me a question. It seemed most serious and so we stepped aside to talk privately. This man had attended church a few times and had been to some Bible studies. He was a smoker, divorced and was living with a woman he was not married to. What might he want to ask me? Perhaps he wanted to ask me what he should do concerning the woman he was living with. Perhaps he wanted to know how his sins could be forgiven.

“Yes, how can I help you?” I asked.

“I want to know,” he said, “When Moses was talking to God on the mountaintop, was the rock under his feet the color blue?”

The Bible was given for moral purposes. Its purpose is to lead people to the way of salvation. It was not given to create conversation or curious investigation of useless information. If you have a smoking problem which is destroying your body which is the temple of God, why are you spending your brain power on what color was the rock under Moses’ feet? If the rock was blue will that give you victory over tobacco? If the rock wasn’t blue but brown, will that make living with a woman you are not married to suddenly all right?

After you begin to live a righteous life, then you can satisfy your mind with curious things in the Bible.

Some people don’t consider the context in which something is written when they interpret the Bible. They jump from text to text and put ideas together that don’t belong together. Preachers often use this example of how *not* to read the Bible.

A man opens the Bible looking for instruction from God. He reads, “Then he [Judas] threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.” Matthew 27:5.

He opens the Bible again to another place and read, “Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10:37.

Doctrines of the Bible are not written out in a list. The Bible must be studied as a whole. One prophet adds a piece of the puzzle. Another prophet adds another aspect. These concepts are then brought together to make a doctrine.

Isaiah 28:10 For precept *must be* upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little."

However each text must be considered in its context and its relation to the whole of scripture.

But many people want to build a doctrine on one or two texts.

For example, many people believe that when a person dies their soul goes to heaven or hell immediately after death. To prove this, many point to what Jesus said to the thief when they were hanging on crosses.

Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

They say, "There you have it! Jesus said He would be in paradise with the thief that very day."

But wait a second. That is not all that the Bible says on the subject. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary. Let's look at the record of their conversation.

John 20:12-17 And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. ¹³ Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." ¹⁴ Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing *there*, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and *to* My God and your God.' "

Jesus said He had not yet ascended to the Father. Which verse is correct? They cannot both be right? We need to understand that when the book of John was written, there was no punctuation. So Bible translators punctuate the sentence according to their understanding. Because people have a preconceived idea that a person goes to heaven or hell immediately after death, the translators write it that way. Let's look at the word order in the Greek.

Luke 23:43 "And he said to him, 'Assuredly to you I am saying today with me you will be in the paradise.'"

If you put the comma in this sentence after the word 'today' then it reads,

Luke 23:43 'Assuredly to you I am saying today, with me you will be in the paradise.'"

This gives a meaning that fits perfectly with the passage in John. Jesus did not go to heaven the day He died.

We have the same example in Turkish

Work like your father don't be a donkey. If we put a comma after the word father it reads, "Work like your father, don't be a donkey." But if we put the comma after the word "work" it reads a little differently. "Work, like your father don't be a donkey."

If we build a doctrine on only one or two texts we can make mistakes like this. But if we read the whole Bible and compare scriptures we will be guided correctly.

This leads us to talk about translations. No translation is perfect. The languages are different. But if you are looking to know God and do His will, you will find salvation to eternal life in any respectable translation. The important doctrines of scripture are so strong you will not be lost because you read one translation instead of another.

Generally we see two different types of translation: dynamic translations and word for word translations. There are advantages and disadvantages in each. In a dynamic translation the translator does not translate each word of the original one-to-one into the modern language. Rather they try to communicate the meaning. They might not translate the same original language word the same way in every sentence. The advantage of this is that it is easier to read. The Kutsal Kitap version of the Bible is more of a dynamic translation. The translators did a good job in most places. The disadvantage of this type of translation is that you are more dependent on the theology of the translator. They have their own biases.

In a word-for-word translation the translator tries to communicate the original words and sentence structure more closely. They more often use the same modern word for the same ancient word. The advantage of this is that you can more easily do word searches. For example, you may want to study how the Bible uses the word “law.” If the translators used the same modern word every time the word “law” appears in the original, then you can compare scriptures with scriptures more easily.

For example, let’s go to Ephesians 2:14.

Ephesians 2:14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,¹⁵ having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace,

The word ‘law’ here in the Kutsal Kitap translation is translated as Holy Law. The word ‘holy’ is not in the Greek. There is an asterisk there in the Turkish Bible pointing you to the dictionary at the back of the book. When you look at the dictionary in the back of the Kutsal Kitap it defines the expression Holy Law means the list of laws given by Moses. The translators added the word ‘holy’ to try to make it easier for the reader to understand which law is being referred to. But you need to understand that in that dynamic translation the translator is making a decision about which law is being referred to. Does the expression “Holy Law” include the Ten Commandments? It is not clear from the definition given by the Kutsal Kitap translators.

There were several types of laws in the Old Testament. There were civil laws and ceremonial laws and there were the Ten Commandments. Paul’s readers would have understood by the context which law he was talking about. Does this mean you can’t trust the Kutsal Kitap

translation? I am not saying that. If you want salvation to eternal life you will find Christ in the Kutsal Kitap translation. I am saying that you need to use common sense and be a good student. We use this translation here in this church. But we also study and use other translations. When there is a disagreement between translations we know that the translators came across a difficulty and it needs careful study.

The Kitab-ı Mukaddes is more of a word-for-word translation than the Kutsal Kitap. But for modern Turks it is harder to read and uses some old words.

The Bible writers used figures of speech.

Matthew 24:27-28 "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ²⁸ "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

Jesus is probably not talking in verse 28 about real vultures (eagles in NKJV cited above) eating the bodies of those killed at Christ's second coming. It is probably a figure of speech or a proverb. When you see vultures you know there is a dead body nearby even though you don't see the body. When you see all the signs Jesus pointed out, you know the second coming is near.

When you study the word of God, look for basic principles of right and wrong. Don't make extreme interpretations. Don't take ideas from the movies and television and put it in your understanding of the Bible. Let the Bible interpret its own expressions. Counsel with others who study the Bible.

Proverbs 11:14 Where *there is* no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors *there is* safety.

Melek and I knew a man who read the prophecies of the Bible and understood political events at the end of time and how they relate to Christ's second coming. He learned about the importance of the Sabbath in last day events. But as he shared these truths he began to criticize and condemn those who didn't immediately agree with him. His discussions were filled with shouting and accusation. He had correct knowledge of some things, but he did not have the love of Christ in him. Eventually he drifted into big sins but still thought he was a faithful man. He was completely deluded. If your Bible interpretation does not have the love of Christ in it, then you need to begin again. The purpose of the Bible is make people moral men and women full of love for God and others. In the words of Jesus,

Luke 10:26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading *of it?*"