

## What are the main principles of interpretation?

This is called the study of hermeneutics and large books have been written detailing all the principles involved. However, we can break these down into a few key items.

**Context:** Many problems can be resolved by simply reading the context carefully. This means a) the surrounding verses; b) the book; c) works by the same writer; d) the testament; e) the whole Bible or the analogy of faith (Bible doctrine). Just reading the context of the surrounding verses is usually sufficient. The first Biblical mention of a word can often help discover its meaning, while fuller mentions will amplify the understanding. No interpretation can be correct if it contradicts the thrust of general Bible theology or the teaching of the writer elsewhere.

**Historical background:** Why was the verse/book written? Who was it written to? When was it written and under what circumstances? What did it mean to the original hearers? What is the cultural background? What is the historical situation of the readers? All these things have a bearing on the matter and gaining such information will help to establish meanings. Commentaries, dictionaries and so forth will help.

**Linguistic background:** This will certainly require other resources, but many are available cheaply today and often for free on the Internet (see e-sword.net). The meaning of words in the original languages is vital and this means using aids to get to the Hebrew and Greek, such as interlinears and lexicons. Greek grammar is very important and many works can help with this, such as Robertson's *Word Pictures* or Vincent's *Word Studies*. Often just understanding the true meaning of a Greek preposition resolves difficulties.

**Literary background:** It is also important to determine what kind of writing the work being studied is. Is it poetry, song, historical narrative, apocalyptic symbolism, prophetic prose, pastoral advice or didactic teaching? These should be approached differently; words can have different meanings in different genres; e.g. numbers in apocalyptic books will often have symbolic meanings. Psalms need particular care as the immediate context is not the adjacent psalm, which may have been composed many years later or earlier. Figures of speech are very important (metaphor, simile etc.) and should be evaluated as such; e.g. God does not have hands or feet. Note the emphasis of the passage.

**Christ is central:** Christ is the theme of the Bible and all must be centred upon him. Look for what passages teach about Christ above all else.

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