

Understanding Interpretation

Do not interpretations belong to God? (Genesis 40:8)

...let one interpret. (1 Cor 14:27)

The word “interpretation” is often used in casual conversation to mean trying to figure out what the Bible means in a given passage. A “theology” word such as “exegesis” (extracting the supposed “original” meaning) might come to minds of some, especially if they are text-critical-minded. But what does the word “interpretation” actually mean as used in the Bible?

As will be seen (by those who are able to see¹) from searching the scriptures, the word “interpretation” in the Bible does not mean trying to understand what the Bible means (as though it means something other than what it says, or as though its meaning has changed because of a supposed language barrier encountered when it was translated from “the originals” into English). Rather, in the Bible itself, the word “interpretation” refers to... something in one language being interpreted into another language. The language can be that of words (a tongue) or of symbols (a dream or vision).

The Bible never tells us to seek an “interpretation” of what is already given to us in our own tongue in the scriptures. Rather, the Bible tells us to seek “understanding” of the words we are reading, as they are already interpreted for us into our own tongue.

Interpretation:

Probably the first passage that would come to peoples’ minds respecting the word “interpretation” would be in the second epistle of Peter:

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private **interpretation**. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (2 Peter 1:19-21)

If we are to approach the scriptures by “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” then we should compare this passage from Peter (or rather, from the Holy Ghost) with all other passages that relate.

In the context of this study, the “all other passages that relate” would be those pertaining to the word “interpret” (interpret, interpreted, interpreting, interpretation(s), interpreter).

So, from the New Testament for starters, let’s look at all of the passages that explicitly use a form of the word “interpret”...

¹ Being able to see requires that one be born again (the mandatory prerequisite), and then after that, meeting certain other requirements: 1) Fear God; 2) Believe the one Bible; 3) Be meek; 4) Pray for understanding; 5) Obey that which one already understands; 6) Meditate upon memorized scripture; 7) Read the Bible again and again. See “Understanding the Deep Things of God.”

Matthew 1:23	Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.
Mark 5:41	And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted , Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.
Mark 15:22	And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted , The place of a skull.
Mark 15:34	And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted , My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
John 1:38	Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted , Master,) where dwellest thou?
John 1:41	He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted , the Christ.
John 1:42	And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation , A stone.
John 9:7	And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation , Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.
Acts 4:36-37	And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted , The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.
Acts 9:36	Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.
Acts 13:8	But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith.
1 Corinthians 12:10	To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues:
1 Corinthians 12:30	Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret ?
1 Corinthians 14:5	I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret , that the church may receive edifying.
1 Corinthians 14:13	Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret .
1 Corinthians 14:26	How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation . Let all things be done unto edifying.
1 Corinthians 14:27	If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let <u>one</u> interpret .
Hebrews 7:1-2	For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace;
<i>And finally, arriving at Peter...</i>	
2 Peter 1:20	Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation .

What seems apparent from Matthew through Hebrews is that in each case “interpretation” means going from one language to another. And, since the interpreter in each case is actually the Holy Ghost, the interpretation is sure and perfect.

In Genesis, notice Joseph's recognition, by rhetorical question, that interpretations belong to God...

And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? tell me them, I pray you. (Genesis 40:8)

Genesis 40 is where the first use of the word "interpret" is found. In this case interpretation means translating from heavenly words into dreams, and then from dreams into the language of the Egyptians. And of course, the Egyptian tongue (into which the dream was interpreted) had to be interpreted further, from the Egyptian tongue into Hebrew, in order to be written in the Hebrew scriptures. Notice Joseph actually doing just that – using an interpreter from the Egyptian tongue to Hebrew...

And they knew not that Joseph understood them; for he spake unto them by an **interpreter**. (Genesis 42:23)

Also notice that God said "let one interpret" (1 Corinthians 14:27). The principle that seems apparent is that the Holy Ghost does the interpreting, and gives only one (God's) interpretation in a given language...but, why? M a y b e ...

...That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God. (Romans 15:6)

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD; (2 Chronicles 5:13)

If God gives the interpretation, then by definition, that is the interpretation that is given by God (in that language). According to 2 Peter 1:20, then, God would call all *other* interpretations "private interpretations", or interpretations of men, and not of God; interpretations which therefore introduce error and confusion – in a very real way, posing the same sort of question the serpent asked in the garden,

yea hath God said...? (Genesis 3:1)

Such that down the road...

Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused... (Acts 19:32)

The context is different in that verse, but it is still applicable. If one interpretation is read from the pulpit one Sunday, and another the next, and yet another the Sunday after that, and the Christian in the pew is reading from even a different interpretation from all those (possibly), who knows what God actually said. The assembly will be confused. More to the point, seeds of doubt in God's word are sown, and Satan's voice echoes in the sanctuary, asking "yea, hath God said...?" (I've witnessed exactly that.)

If we have no other recourse (i.e., no church we can find that stands upon God' one interpretation), we can (and should) at least pray, as David did...

In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion. (Psalm 71:1)

(As a lamentation...) If only the churches would do the same ...

“let one interpret... For God is not the author of confusion...” (1 Corinthians 14:27-33)

In addition take note of the fact that even some of the scriptures themselves were already (initially) interpretations from the Holy Ghost right at the outset when they were originally penned, seeing that they were written in a tongue (language) different from that of the spoken words which they were recording.

And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people. And when he had given him licence, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying, Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence which I make now unto you. (And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence: and he saith.) ... (Acts 21:40 – 22:2)

And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. (Acts 26:14-18)

So in Acts, Luke wrote God’s one Greek interpretation of Paul’s Hebrew speech. (Acts 21-22)

Luke also wrote God’s one Greek interpretation of what the Lord Jesus said in Hebrew directly to Paul on the road to Damascus. (Acts 9)^{2,3}

In addition even to that, though not stated expressly in scripture, some people believe (not without reason) that the gospel according to Matthew and the epistle to the Hebrews were written originally in Hebrew, and then very soon (pretty much immediately) interpreted into Greek⁴ (not to mention other tongues as well, as the gospel went out and was published among all nations).

² See also Acts 14:11 – for yet another example.

³ And recall the aforementioned Genesis 40:8ff, in which the original word of God was given as a dream, which was initially interpreted into Egyptian as the spoken word of God, before it was subsequently interpreted again into Hebrew as the written word of God. For those caught up in “originals only”, what would they admit to – as being lost in going from dream to Egyptian to Hebrew? Was only the dream truly the inspired word of God, with the interpretations being merely pretty good “translations”? Or would they admit that God “inspired” the interpretations also? If so, then why stop there and not allow for God to have “inspired” the English interpretation – the King James Bible – as well?

⁴ See “Original Languages Supplement” at the end of this study.

And the word of the Lord was published throughout all the region. (Acts 13:49)

And the gospel must first be published among all nations. (Mark 13:10)

But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: (Romans 16:26)

Compare to the following from the Old Testament, recording an edict sent out by order of King Ahaseurus of the Median and Persian empire, who ruled over 127 provinces representing various peoples and languages from India unto Ethiopia ...

For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people. (Esther 1:22)

Interpreting and publishing in various languages, immediately, was already a common occurrence in the days of Esther, and was nothing new many centuries later in the days of the Acts of the Apostles. Would not God have his new testament believers publish the gospels and epistles (and the Old Testament as well) in the languages of the nations to which they were sent to teach and preach (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47), and would they not do so *immediately*? Would not the interpretation so-given, through the believers, holy men of God, be the *perfect* word of God in each of those languages? How does that comport with the modern claim⁵ that God's word *was* inspired, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative only in the original autographs? According to Acts 2, God's word is fully "inspired" in each language in which it is given; or to say it another way, God's word is perfect in the one interpretation that God gives in each language.⁶

⁵ The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, in Article X, states the following:

"We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original."
Based on the Bible, this doubt-filled Chicago Statement article is very problematic, and represents the root cause of many turning from the faith in this post-modern era of doubt and unbelief. Just think... If the Bible is inspired (strictly speaking) only in Greek and Hebrew (which we can't read), and furthermore if it's inspired (even more strictly speaking) only in the original autographs (which no longer exist), then the inspired word of God (strictly speaking) is inaccessible to us. Thus, we need Greek and Hebrew scholars and text critics to tell us what God's word says. A return to Papism.

⁶ In English, God's one interpretation is the King James Bible, which alone (of all modern English versions) descended uncatholicized from the time of the Acts of the Apostles and, as Wycliffe and Coverdale described, is "the scriptures in tongues" (the English tongue, pure in its original Gothic origin, purified throughout the morphing from Gothic to modern English, and preserved throughout by God's providential care – Psalm 12:6-7, 138:2, et.al.). "But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it." (Deuteronomy 30:14). Is it nigh unto me, or is it far removed from me in Greek and Hebrew manuscripts or in museums, or in caves (Dead Sea Scrolls) or in no-longer-extant original autographs?

Tongues

God prophesied through Isaiah that he (the LORD) would speak in another tongue.

For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people... yet they would not hear. (Isaiah 28:11-12)

Jesus added....

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. (Mark 16:17)

Paul (or rather, the Holy Ghost) interpreted Isaiah from Hebrew into Greek, and through the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues, the Holy Ghost interpreted also into new tongues: specifically, in our case, English, which had its beginnings in Gothic, and Anglo-Saxon, and so on down through the centuries eventually culminating with the King James Bible ...

In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. (1 Corinthians 14:21)

Note that God says “other tongues will I speak”. And Jesus said said “them that believe...shall speak with new tongues.” Recall from 2 Peter 1 that it is holy men of God which God uses to speak his word. Thus in Acts 2, we see those who believed upon Jesus and were in one accord, and were thus holy men of God, upon whom God sent what appeared as cloven tongues like as of fire (representing God’s word divided into different languages), which sat upon each of them (the 120) and they were filled with the Holy Ghost and began to “speak with other tongues” (languages that other people know) “as the Spirit gave them utterance,” and every man (from other nations gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost) heard them speak in his own language, “in our own tongue, wherein we were born”. Each tongue was an interpretation of God’s word given perfectly by the Holy Ghost, as they all spoke the same thing – to wit, of “the wonderful works of God”. Thus, from Acts 2, we can understand the fact that God gives the interpretation as perfectly, fully and completely as the “original”. But, he gives only one interpretation in any given language.⁷ He does, however, purify it and preserve it over time as a given language changes...

The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever. (Psalm 12:6-7).

Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. (Proverbs 30:5)

Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it. (Psalm 119:140)

⁷ God is not the author of confusion. The King James Bible can be easily recognized separately from all modern versions as the one interpretation in the English language that is given by God. It was given by holy men of God (the KJB translators – as can be discerned from their own writings), as opposed to the modern versions which trace back to unholy men (Westcott & Hort, as can be discerned from their own writings, and from them back to the original Bible corrupter... Origen). The KJB translators also consulted other Holy Bibles in other vernacular languages as a safeguard to ensure they were not tampering with the word of God as it had come down in the various languages of their day from the Holy Ghost inspired scriptures given in tongues beginning in Acts 2 and continuing with the acts of the apostles as they took and published the scriptures to all nations.

Translation

In the Bible, the word “translate” is never used in the context of going from one language to another, but rather only in the context of moving from one “place” to another...

To translate the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan even to Beersheba. (2 Samuel 3:10)

Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: (Colossians 1:13)

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. (Hebrews 11:5)

Original Languages Supplement

“... the four evangelists wrote the gospels in divers languages, as Matthew in Judea, Mark in Italy, Luke in Achaia, and John in Asia. And all these wrote in the languages of the same countries...since Christ commanded his apostles to preach his gospel unto all the world, and excepted no people or language” (John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments*, 1583, Stephen Cattley, ed., republished at London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 8 volumes, 1837, vol. 4, pp. 671, 675).

THE PROLOGUE before the book of Matthew in an edition of the Bishops’ Bible (1500s) said, “Matthew, who also was called Leui [Levi], being of a Publican made an Apostle, did first in Iurie [Jewry] write the Gospel of Christ in the Hebrew tongue for their sakes which beleueed of the circumcicion. It is uncertaine who afterwards did translate it into the Greeke tongue. Howbeit the copy of the Hebrew is kept vnto this day in the library of Cesarea, which library one Pamphilus Martyr did gather together most diligently. And the Nazarenes, which in Berea a city of Syria, did vse the same booke, gaue vs leaue to copie it out” (J.R. Dore, *Old Bibles: An Account of the Early Versions of the English Bible*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1888, 2nd edition, p. 285).

PAUL'S LETTER to the Galatians, who spoke Celtic, and to the Romans, who spoke Latin, would of necessity be written *by him* in those languages also. History professor Kenneth W. Harl (Yale Ph.D.) reminds us that it was *not* a Greek-speaking world when the New Testament was written, as some pseudo-intellectual seminary professors pretend. The Roman Empire had carried their Latin language across the empire.

Also, the barbarians and non-urban provinces often retained *their* native languages, just as they had during their conquest by the Greeks. Scriptures in Berber, Iberian, Celtiberian, Iranian, Sythian, Basque, Ligurian, Cantabrian, Parthian, Angli, Saxon, Gothic, as well as many other languages and dialects, would have been needed immediately to “preach the gospel” (*Rome and the Barbarians*, Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2004).

Addendum

[KJB Translators to the Reader]

But how shall men meditate in that, which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue? as it is written, Except I know the power of the voice, I shall be to him that speaketh, a Barbarian, and he that speaketh, shall be a Barbarian to me. [1 Cor 14] The Apostle excepteth no tongue; not Hebrew the ancientest, not Greek the most copious, not Latin the finest. Nature taught a natural man to confess, that all of us in those tongues which we do not understand, are plainly deaf; we may turn the deaf ear unto them. The Scythian counted the Athenian, whom he did not understand, barbarous; so the Roman did the Syrian, and the Jew (even S. Jerome himself calleth the Hebrew tongue barbarous, belike because it was strange to so many) so the Emperor of Constantinople calleth the Latin tongue, barbarous, though Pope Nicolas do storm at it: so the Jews long before Christ called all other nations, Lognazim, which is little better than barbarous. Therefore as one complaineth, that always in the Senate of Rome, there was one or other that called for an interpreter: so lest the Church be driven to the like exigent, it is necessary to have translations in a readiness. Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most Holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water, even as Jacob rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, by which means the flocks of Laban were watered [Gen 29:10]. Indeed without translation into the vulgar tongue, the unlearned are but like children at Jacob's well (which was deep) [John 4:11] without a bucket or something to draw with; or as that person mentioned by Isaiah, to whom when a sealed book was delivered, with this motion, Read this, I pray thee, he was fain to make this answer, I cannot, for it is sealed. [Isa 29:11]