11 - Reading and Interpreting Scripture

The Christian Resource Center

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Methods used to interpret the bible are known as "hermeneutics". It's critical that everything is interpreted as it's meant to be (literal vs. figurative, suggestion vs. command, etc.). The true interpreter of the bible is its original author, the Holy Spirit, without Whom the bible is simply a compendium of stories and information (**1ˢᵗ Corinthians 2:6-16**). There are several variables involved with the proper reading and interpretation of scripture including: context, whether it's literal or figurative, cultural significance, original language, and historical perspective. It's extremely important that we "Rightly Divide the Word of Truth" (**2ⁿᵈ Timothy 2:15**) which primarily means that we determine who the intended audience is (Israelites or Christians). All books need to be approached in a similar manner through prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit as well as using logic and common sense as not to make simple things too complex.

How to Interpret Scripture

- **Literality** – Everything in the bible should be assumed to be literal unless something mentioned here dictates otherwise.
- **Figurative** – When something isn't literal, it's figurative. Types of figurative language include:
  - **Symbolism** – use of symbols to represent objects or facts.
  - **Metaphor** – using something to represent something else.
  - **Simile** – comparison of two unlike things (like or as).
  - **Allegory** – a story containing hidden meaning.
  - **Parable** – a simple story used to illustrate a moral lesson.

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- **The Holy Spirit** – The Holy Spirit is the author of and true interpreter of all scripture. It's impossible for non-Christians to properly interpret scripture.
- **Prayer** – We should pray and ask God for direction and understanding before reading scripture.
- **Scripture** – Scripture always supports itself somewhere else in the bible. A well-grounded student of the bible will have read the entire bible from cover to cover at least several times. We need to be careful about how strongly we stand on our interpretations. We should always be able to find two or three verses to interpret and support each other on any particular matter…"By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established" (**Matthew 18:16**).
- **Logic (Common Sense)** – Don't make things more complex than they need to be. If we're allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us, things may be much simpler and clearer than we expect.
- **Genre** – The "category" a book falls into plays a minor role in its interpretation. It needs to be noted that just because a book's genre is "poetic", it doesn't mean there isn't anything literal within it or if a book is "historic" it doesn't mean there isn't anything symbolic or figurative within it…Don't limit a books breadth by its genre.
- **Audience** – Who the scripture was originally written to is extremely important. There are basically three main audiences addressed within the bible: The Israelites (Old Testament), Christians (New Testament), and all of humankind (parts of both Old and New Testaments). This is mainly what Paul is referring to in **2ⁿᵈ Timothy 2:15** when he says "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth".
- **Original Language** – All of our bibles are "translations" from the original Hebrew (Masoretic Texts for the Old Testament) and Greek (Textus Receptus for the New Testament). When we come upon a key word in a verse, it's important to look at the original language to see if it has been translated well. This is accomplished by using Hebrew and Greek concordances such as "Strong's" (written by James Strong). These link the English words back to the word used in the original language and give us its original meanings.
- **Culture** – Cultural traditions can play a role in understanding certain verses. It's important to not allow cultural traditions to be taken as requirements or commands.
- **Historical Significance** – Like cultural traditions, historical significance may play a role but needs to be applied carefully.
- **Authority** – Determining whether a verse is a "statement", a "suggestion", or a "command" is extremely important. Phrases beginning with "I urge you…" are strong suggestions while phrases beginning with "Don't" or "Be" tend to be commands. We must not interpret statements or suggestions as commands.
- **Commentaries** – We all use commentaries at some point. There's a large range of commentaries from excellent to terrible. It's important to always use at least two or three different commentaries and if you don't think you agree with them, let the Holy Spirit lead you!

Interpretive Example

This is a passage that many people skim over and never realize the true implications of what is being told to us:

(**Genesis 6:1-4**) Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. And the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.

Interpretive Process

To begin, we know this is the **Old Testament**, the original language is **Hebrew**, the audience is all of **humankind**, the genre is **historic** and these are all **literal** verses. Let's dig a little deeper…

1. I want to know the original Hebrew meaning of two terms:
   - sons of God = "bane Elohim" = angels
   - giants = "Nephilim" = giants or "fallen ones"

2. Now, I would like to know where else in scripture these terms are used to make sure I understand their true context and meaning:

Sons of God:
Old Testament - **Job 6:1;2:1;38:7** (Always used to denote angels)
New Testament – **Matthew 5:9, Luke 20:36, Romans 8:14; 8:19, Galatians 3:26** (Always used to denote Christians)

Nephilim:
Old Testament – **Genesis 6:4, Numbers 13:33**
New Testament – Never used.

3. I also want to know if there are any other scriptures that support or are in opposition to these verses:

Other supportive verses: **1ˢᵗ Peter 3:19-20, 2ⁿᵈ Peter 2:4-5, Jude 1:6**

4. Finally, I am going to review what a few expert commentators have to say about these verses before drawing my conclusion:
- Ryrie: states that the "sons of God" may be from the so-called "godly line of Seth" or possibly fallen angels.
- McArthur: states the "sons of God" are fallen angels which procreated with human women to create "Nephilim" or giants.
- Constable: prefers the godly Sethite lineage view because he believes that Jesus stated that angels can't procreate*.

*Upon closer review, Jesus only stated that "angels in heaven don't marry" (**Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25**) but He never mentioned anything about angels who leave Heaven nor did Jesus say that angels couldn't procreate.

Conclusion Based on Literal Reading of Verses:
In the days of Noah, a group of angels left heaven and came to earth because they saw how beautiful human women were and they could not control their lust. They took human women as their wives and had children with them. These children grew to be extremely powerful beings (Nephilim) which ruled the earth. Apparently, this is the main reason for the flood because God had to kill all living creatures in order to cleanse the earth of this abomination. Further historic review shows this event took place during the time the pyramids were built…

RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD