Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#5—Interpreting the Bible—Part IV[1]
"Normal" Interpretation
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April 1, 2007

A few days ago I heard an appeal for money based on Mal 3:10-11. Here is the wider passage from the King James translation:

> [7] Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept *them*. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? [8] Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. [9] Ye *are* cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, *even* this whole nation. [10] Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that *there shall* not *be room* enough *to receive it*. [11] And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. [12] And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts.

The interpretation of vv. 10-11 was that people listening to the broadcast should give tithes and offerings to the ministry being promoted. If listeners would give, then God would in turn give them a lot materially. The 'devourer' here is Satan, who wants to stop people from giving to this cause. If they would give, listeners would be rebuking Satan and gaining for themselves material wealth. The conclusion: Give to this ministry!

There are several things wrong with the interpretation and the application. First, the promises are for Israel, not for people during this age. Second, the NIV translators do not see any reference to Satan in v. 11, because they have "I will prevent pests from devouring your crops." Third, tithing is a practice commanded under the law. The New Testament replaces it with giving in response to grace.

Even without identifying these specific errors of interpretation, we sense that there is something quite strange about this approach to the passage. Someone is trying to get from the passage something that just isn't there. They haven't taken the passage at face value.

Understanding "messages"

In everyday communication we determine the meaning (and thus gain information about) a whole utterance that we hear or a text that we read by means of all the clues contained in the message.[2] Interestingly enough, linguists have discovered that it is quite difficult to show just how all the clues are recognized or even to show what they are. Language is now believed to be much more complex than it was felt to be even a few decades ago. But somehow, by a gift of God, we are able to recognize clues very rapidly, combining in our minds the components of the given message.

In doing this we are constantly making adjustments as information is given, linking new with old, setting parts of the message against what we know of the world, what we know about the speaker, what we believe

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[2] A very interesting analysis of communication is de Beaugrande, Robert and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1981), 15, 140.

he shares in common with us, and what he may be assuming.[3] We determine the meanings of smaller components—words, for example—by comparing them with existing information, working back and forth.

For instance, if someone tells me he went to the "bank," I might be puzzled, especially if I know that he often visits a river area and also makes transactions at a financial institution. However, if he later specifies that it was the First National that he went to, I rule out the possibility of his having been near water.[4] Further, if I were told that someone banked in his automobile, I might think of a drive-in teller, but could also reasonably think of navigating a corner on two tires. I arrive at these conclusions by utilizing information I know about the world and information that surrounds the specific information I am concentrating on.

This shows that we determine the "meaning" of words or groups of words on the basis of wider stretches of the utterance they occur in. Ultimately the meaning of those parts is determined by the whole.

It is just this kind of process that we must duplicate in working with the text of the Bible. Our task is made difficult by several factors: we are culturally and linguistically removed from the biblical world and biblical texts; we do not know all we would like to know about the language and culture of biblical times; we do not have a guidebook for interpretation. In human communication between speakers of the same language, we usually have little difficulty accurately receiving messages. *How* we do that is not yet understood, and there is a branch of linguistics and literary analysis—*text linguistics*—that is devoted to the attempt to discover how people understand texts and utterances.[5] In any case, it is generally more difficult to work with a written document than to take in a spoken utterance and of course it is much more difficult to work with a translated document from which we are removed in time.

However, there is sufficient information in the Bible for us to understand its message, although comprehending it may take a long time. As we approach the text with its clues, we attempt to interpret it in the only way we know how, as a written document, as a book—for we are familiar with books. We try to use all the signals contained in the language of the revelation to determine the meanings of words, groups of words and ultimately the whole message. But because of our limitations and the inherent problems, we frequently come to points where we do not know which of often several possible meanings to attach to a unit in the text. And so we are forced to try to decide, for instance, whether Jesus is really a door, or a vine, or a shepherd, or what kind of "dining" is meant in Rev. 3:20 or what the word *bound* means in 1 Cor. 7:15 in regard to an abandoned spouse. And there are myriads of other difficulties.

Since we have no divinely given guidebook to assist us, and the text we are dealing with is a book, we begin by approaching it as we would any other written document, looking from individual clues (an article, a conjunction, a verb tense, a case suffix) to larger segments (phrases and sentences), to macro-elements (paragraphs, chapters, books, testaments) and ultimately the whole message.

Assumptions that we all make

In communication theory it is axiomatic that as hearers we attempt to maximize the content of the message given to us.[6] We assume that every part is important, and only neglect parts if the speaker or writer seems to ramble through incoherence or laziness in organizing the message. All other things being equal, we assume 1) that all parts contribute to the total message (although some features are more central than others, and not all parts contribute equal amounts of information); 2) that parts will not contradict each other (we ask for repetition or clarification if they seem to); and 3) that the message is a unity. If we did not do these things we

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[3] de Beaugrande and Dressler, 140.
[4] de Beaugrande and Dressler, 146.
[5] de Beaugrande and Dressler, 208.
[6] de Beaugrande and Dressler, 7.

would not do very well at all at communicating. Speaker and hearer could not work together. Furthermore, the hearer—or reader, as the case may be—assumes that he can count on any signal unit to be consistent in meaning or content with (1) the overall message, (2) the world of background information shared by speaker and hearer and (3) the particular circumstances of speaker and hearer at the moment. In normal conversation, when something that is not in keeping with these standards is perceived, we usually ask for a repetition.[7]

In approaching the Bible we can expect to get the most information if we proceed in the same way. We maximize the parts, that is, we do not want to leave anything out, either a word, a paragraph, a chapter or a testament, in working through a particular text. Every part is to be measured against the other to get the meaning of each part, for we are dealing with the phenomenon of language, which carries information as a system.

Further, we cannot allow any part to be inconsistent with another, for our expectation of a normal text is that it will be coherent, that it will not have any conflicts. (Contrast this with the assertion a generation ago by some conservatives to the effect that the Bible may contain errors and is therefore in contradiction with itself.) And so we freely compare one part with another, adjusting as we go.

We must admit that any generation of Bible interpreters sees what seem to be contradictions, places where the Bible does not seem to be internally consistent, or even externally consistent, as with dates provided by external historical sources. Because of the assumptions in our last study about the nature of the Bible (a revelation from God who would not deceive) we must refrain from final judgment. Ultimately, the Bible will be seen to be in accord with truth, although along the way we may have to live with a difficulty or may learn a great deal more about what it says, or even alter our views of what it says.[8]

For example, many years ago some interpreters asserted they had grounds for doubting that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles because those books show elements of style that appear to vary from what is called Pauline elsewhere in the New Testament. On the basis of such "discrepancies," a rather large segment of the New Testament was reduced to the status of pseudonymic writing. Now, if the Pastorals claim to be written by the Paul who wrote the Epistle to the Romans, etc., the assumption has to be that we are missing some information and time will provide what we need to bring, in our thinking, the style of the Pastorals into harmony with that of other Pauline writings. As a matter of fact, more recent scholarship has tended to show that assumptions about uniformity put New Testament writers in straitjackets that we would not allow in other kinds of literature. People speak and write differently on different occasions. Linguists call this flexibility *register*. In this case literary and linguistic conclusions have given clear support to the assumption of Pauline authorship of the Pastorals.

This kind of process, involving assumptions about the coherence of texts, non-contradiction and consistency has been called literal interpretation.That is an unfortunate term, for the same word is used of translation which does the opposite of what we are describing. A literal translation *fails* to adjust the meanings of words or groups of words to their surrounding, and so actually loses parts of the message. Perhaps a better term for this kind of interpreting process would simply be *normal* interpretation, approaching the Bible the way we would any other book.

Since this approach in normal speech communication seeks to discover the meaning of words by examining micro- and macro-elements, it constantly adjusts on the basis of information that is perceived to be relevant.

[7] de Beaugrande and Dressler, 88.
[8] For a classic discussion showing the author was decades ahead in his thinking, see Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964),168-226; see also Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 32-34.

With biblical interpretation, of course, we are not always certain what is relevant to the determination of meaning for particular points in the text. Yet we have no other way to proceed.

One of the corollaries of all of this, of course, is that we must continually reexamine our earlier findings. When we believe that we have reached firm understanding about the meaning of a word or phrase, we look around to see if that will necessitate the adjustment of any conclusions we made earlier. The process never ends, unlike face-to-face communication. We are always obligated to interpret the parts by the whole and to maximize the parts as meaningful units in the whole message. This, of course, is just another way of stating our working premise. In this way we open up the most Scripture, and we do not knowingly allow any part to contradict another.

Study Questions

1. What is your initial reaction to the interpretation of Mal. 3:10-11 that I cited?

2. Assume that you are a competent speaker of English and are listening to a competent speaker of English. What do you do when you do think that you do not understand parts of the message he is providing to you?

3. If you hear the word 'field' without any context, what connections do you make, that is, what do you think of or what meaning do you assign to it? Give them in the order of their coming to mind. Do this without consulting any else, because their answers are likely to be different from yours. There is no right answer.

Do the same with the following:

1. store
2. pine
3. bark
4. priest

4. **<u>Without looking elsewhere</u>**, provide an interpretation of the following:

At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, *and* two at Parbar.

Now turn to 1 Chron. 26:1-19 and provide an interpretation.