

Interpreting the Bible

by John Newton

John Newton explores the complexities of interpreting the Bible, emphasizing the importance of divine inspiration and historical context.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, 2 Peter 1:21

Topics: "Biblical Interpretation", "Holy Scripture"

Description

John Newton, in a letter to a friend, discusses the importance of not underestimating any part of the Bible, emphasizing that even seemingly trivial historical passages hold significance as they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. He acknowledges his limitations in understanding the deep spiritual meanings of Scripture but finds certainty in the factual events recorded in the Bible. Newton highlights the value of studying Old Testament history for drawing observations suitable for preaching, trusting in the authenticity of the Bible's accounts to provide insights into human nature and scriptural truths.

Transcript

October, 1778.

My Dear Friend,

Your letters are always welcome; the last doubly so, for being unexpected. If you never heard before of a line of your's being useful, I will tell you for once, that I get some pleasure and instruction whenever you write to me. And I see not but your call to letter-writing is as clear as mine, at least when you are able to put pen to paper.

I must say something to your queries about 2 Sam. 14. I do not approve of the scholastic distinctions about inspiration, which seem to have a tendency to explain away the authority and certainty of one half of the Bible at least. Though the penmen of Scripture were ever so well informed of some facts, they would, as you observe, need express, full, and infallible inspiration, to teach them which the Lord would have selected and recorded for the use of the church, amongst many others which to themselves might appear equally important.

However, with respect to historical passages, I dare not pronounce positively that any of them are, even in the literal sense, unworthy of the wisdom of the Holy Ghost, and the dignity of inspiration. Some, yea, many of them, have often appeared trivial to me; but I check the thought, and charge it to my own

ignorance and temerity. It must have some importance, because I read it in God's book. On the other hand, though I will not deny that they may all have a spiritual and mystical sense, (for I am no more qualified to judge of the deep things of the Spirit, than to tell you what is passing this morning at the bottom of the sea,) yet if, with my present modicum of light I should undertake to expound many passages in a mystical sense, I fear such a judge as you would think my interpretations fanciful and not well supported. I suppose I should have thought the Bible complete, though it had not informed me of the death of Rebekah's nurse, or where she was buried. But some tell me that Deborah is the law, and that by the oak I am to understand the cross of Christ: and I remember to have heard of a preacher who discovered a type of Christ crucified in Absalom hanging by the hair on another oak. I am quite a mole when compared with these eagle-eyed divines; and must often content myself with plodding upon the lower ground of accommodation and allusion; except when the New-Testament writers assure me what the mind of the Holy Ghost was, I can find the Gospel with more confidence in the history of Sarah and Hagar, than in that of Leah and Rachel; though, without Paul's help, I should have considered them both as family squabbles, recorded chiefly to illustrate the general truth, that vanity and vexation of spirit are incident to the best men, in the most favoured situations. And I think there is no part of Old Testament history from which I could not (the Lord helping me) draw observations, that might be suitable to the pulpit, and profitable to his people; so I might perhaps from Livy or Tacitus.

But then, with the Bible in my hands, I go upon sure grounds: I am certain of the facts I speak from, that they really did happen. I may likewise depend upon the springs and motives of actions, and not amuse myself and my hearers with speeches, which were never spoken, and motives which were never thought of, till the historian rummaged his pericranium for something to embellish his work. I doubt not but were you to consider Joab's courtly conduct only in a literal sense, how it tallied with David's desire, and how gravely and graciously he granted himself a favour, while he professed to oblige Joab; I say in this view you would be able to illustrate many important scriptural doctrines, and to shew that the passage is important to those who are engaged in studying the anatomy of the human heart.

I am, &c.

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