

Appendix A: Some Thoughts to Help with Interpretation

There is an old proverb that says: "Can't see the forest for the trees." It is said of someone who gets so involved with the details that they lose sight of the big picture. A similar illustration is the story of five blind men who go to see an elephant. One feels the elephant's trunk and says: "An elephant is a snake." The second one feels the tusk and says: "An elephant is a curved spear." The third blind man feels one of the elephant's legs and says: "An elephant is like a tree." The fourth feels the elephant's side and says: "An elephant is a wall." The fifth blind man feels the elephant's tail and says: "An elephant is a rope." Each felt only one part of the elephant and they correctly reported what they felt. From time to time, they would argue about the elephant and never came to a true understanding of the whole elephant. When interpreting the Bible, it is necessary to look at both the macro (big picture) and the micro (detail) levels. If we lose sight of the big picture, then it is easy to misinterpret the details.

Our initial interpretation of a scripture passage may be wrong. We need to keep an open mind until we validate the interpretation with the big picture of the Bible and, when possible, with God's other book the creation. Creating doctrine from anecdotal evidence is always suspect, but demanding a biblical interpretation that is counter to our experience with the creation may also lead to error. Please let me share some non-biblical examples.

I've enjoyed whitewater rafting and kayaking for many years. One thing that is very helpful when floating a river is an eddy. An eddy is defined as any place where the current flows opposite the main current of the river. Eddies occur behind obstructions in both the middle of the river and along the shorelines. They are excellent places to enter and leave the river. They are also good places to stop for a rest or to let others catch up. When entering an eddy, kayakers do what is called an eddy turn. To do this, they place their paddle in the eddy current and allow the kayak to pivot around their paddle.

When I started learning to kayak, I read some books to learn from the experience of the experts. One book described the eddy turn in a kayak. When I went to the river, I put my new knowledge to good use. As I entered my first eddy, I put my paddle on the side of the boat that the book said I should. To my surprise, instead of making the expected eddy turn, I flipped upside down. I figured that it was just my error. So, the next time I entered an eddy I did the same thing, and I got the same results. I may not be a fast learner, but I do learn. When I went to enter my third eddy, I put my paddle into the eddy current on the other side of my boat and I was rewarded with a perfect eddy turn. I was perplexed as to why the book told me to put my paddle in the eddy on the wrong side of my kayak. When I got home, I reread the section describing eddy turns. To my surprise, the author described the correct placement of the paddle to make an eddy turn. I had misinterpreted what was written until I had real world experience in God's creation to guide my interpretation.

When I was just a preschooler, we had a popular toy called Lincoln Logs. They allowed us to build log cabins and forts. The basic set of Lincoln Logs came in a tall round container much like Quaker oats are still packaged in today. The first time I played with Lincoln Logs, when I was done, I went to put them away. I began to put the pieces randomly into the can, but they didn't all fit. Upset, I went to tell my mother about the problem. Her advice has served me well throughout my life. She told me to put the big pieces into the can first and then to put the little pieces into the space that was left. Mother's advice has served me well throughout my life. I've used it to pack my suitcase, I've used it when packing my car for a trip, I've used it when packing a truck when moving, and for many other tasks.

When I worked in aerospace, the government required us to have an A-level specification for the system, a B-level specification for sub-systems, a C-level specification for components, and a D-level specification for parts. A manufacturer could fabricate the parts from the D-spec without knowing anything about the component, sub-system, or system they would be used in. However, it would be very foolish to design parts without knowing their purpose, how they would fit into their component, the function of the sub-system, and the mission of the system.

It is the same with Biblical interpretation. We need to understand the global message of the Bible. It is the foundation that interpretation builds upon. The details must fit with and support the global message. If the interpretation of the details do not fit the big picture or they conflict with God's other book, the creation, then we need to keep learning and thinking about them until we do figure out what their fit and function may properly be. So, I advocate questioning everyone's interpretation, especially our own. Whether it is the Bible or science, it doesn't matter. What matters, is coming to a knowledge of the truth. Please, Make Truth God's Again!