



Angling for Interpretation

A first introduction to biblical, theological and
contextual hermeneutics

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Preface to the 2001 edition

Interpretation is part of life! We engage in interpretation everyday even though we are often unconscious of it. For example, when the traffic light is red we know we must stop. And we know what will happen if we don't! We know the right reaction, because we *interpret* the sign of the red light.

A traffic light might not be a difficult for us to interpret. Interpretation can sometimes be an extremely complex and multi-faceted process, though. It can indeed be quite tricky! Just think of the many ways in which biblical texts can be interpreted. Or the many ways in which God can be understood from our reading of the Bible. Interpretation is not only part of life – it's an integral part of life.

The aim of this guide is to provide a first introduction to biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the subject that analyses the process of interpretation. One could say that hermeneutics is the theoretical study of interpretation. As a first introduction it is primarily aimed at first-year students. Church groups may also find it useful. It is meant to be a workbook. There are plenty of exercises, examples and questions for discussion. The exercises are clearly marked with a grey background and, for reference purposes, are numbered alphabetically in each chapter. The material is presented in such a way that any person who has completed Grade 12 should be able to follow discussion.

This book is a revised version of the first part of another publication *Fishing for Jonah* (UWC, 1995), co-authored by Ernst Conradie, Louis Jonker, Douglas Lawrie and Roger Arendse. It also contains parts (mostly exercises) that appeared in *Die Bybel in fokus* ("The Bible in focus", Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 1997), co-authored by Jan Botha, Louis Jonker and Ernst Conradie.

We would like to acknowledge the inputs to this text of several colleagues, including Jan Botha, Woldemar Cloete, Douglas Lawrie and Danie van Zyl. We accept responsibility for the content of this text, especially on the issues where we opted for a particular position *despite* the advice of good friends.

Ernst Conradie

Louis Jonker

November 2000

Preface to the 2008 edition

Since the publication of the first edition of *Angling for Interpretation* in 2001, two significant developments should be noted:

Firstly, the volume of essays entitled *Fishing for Jonah (anew)*, edited by Louis Jonker and Douglas Lawrie, was published in 2005. This volume is a revised version of Part C of the earlier *Fishing for Jonah* (UWC, 1995), co-authored by Ernst Conradie, Louis Jonker, Douglas Lawrie and Roger Arendse.

Secondly, since 2004 the series Study Guides in Religion and Theology has been published through SUN PReSS. The first edition of *Angling for Interpretation* was number 4 in this series. This second edition now becomes number 13 in the series in order to keep the sequence in terms of date of publication.

The second edition of *Angling for Interpretation* is a slightly revised version of the previous edition. The most significant change has to do with some elaboration on the role of theological hermeneutics. As a result, a new section has been added, entitled “What is Christian interpretation?” (chapter 3.4) together with some adjustments to section 3.3 on the (philosophical) notion of interpretation. In the section on interpretative strategies (4.5) a new sub-section on the role of doctrinal keys was also added.

On this basis, the subtitle has also been changed, namely from “A guide to understand the Bible better” to “A first introduction to biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics”. This signals the significance of the Christian context within which the Bible is interpreted. This guide is indeed not only to biblical hermeneutics but also to theological and contextual hermeneutics. Of course, these three dimensions of hermeneutics cannot be separated from one another. They view the same act of interpretation (e.g. in a sermon) from three different angles, namely from the ways in which the Bible is used (and abused), from the ways in which the tradition is constantly in a process of transformation and from the impact that such interpretation has of on the social context within which the Bible is interpreted.

This second edition of the study guide is published in my own name, following a suggestion from Louis Jonker in this regard. I wish to again express my gratitude for his friendship and collegiality in exploring the complexities of biblical hermeneutics over many years. I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of my colleague Woldemar Cloete who has been teaching courses on biblical hermeneutics at UWC since 2000.

Ernst Conradie

May 2008

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The development of this series of study guides is an initiative of the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape. Its main purpose is to help produce affordable, readily available and contextually relevant textbooks which can be used for teaching purposes in the Southern African context. In addition, the aim of the series is to develop research tools which may be employed for postgraduate research projects in the region.

The following volumes have appeared in this series from SUN PRess thus far:

Conradie, EM & Fredericks, CE (eds) 2004. *Mapping Systematic Theology in Africa: An indexed bibliography*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 6. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Jonker, LC & Lawrie, DG (eds) 2005. *Fishing for Jonah (anew): Various approaches to biblical interpretation*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 7. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Conradie, EM 2005. *Christian identity: An introduction*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 8. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Lawrie, DG 2005. *Speaking to good effect: An introduction to the theory and practice of rhetoric*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 9. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Conradie, EM et al 2006. *Morality as a way of life: A first introduction to ethical theory*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 10. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Conradie, EM 2006. *Christianity and ecological theology: Resources for further research*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 11. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Smit, DJ 2007. *Essays in public theology: Collected essays 1*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

Conradie, EM 2008. *Angling for Interpretation: A first introduction to biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 13. Stellenbosch: SUN PRess.

CHAPTER 1

Interpretation starts from where we are

1.1 We experience a need to understand the Bible better

The Bible is a truly remarkable book. It is read on a regular basis by millions of people all over the world. The influence of the Bible on Christianity and, in fact, on the course of history (for better or for worse) is pervasive. After nearly twenty centuries, the Bible remains a best-seller. There are more copies and translations of the Bible than of any other book. It is indeed a classic text.

Wherever it is read, the message of the Bible is understood in many different ways. Reading the Bible can, at times, be a thoroughly enriching experience. However, it can also be confusing and deeply disturbing. The Bible is not always easy to understand. Let us reflect on our often conflicting experiences when we read the Bible.

Exercise 1(a)

a) How would you respond to the following easy questions on Psalm 23?

- * Would you say that you are very familiar with this Psalm? Where have you come into contact with it in the past? What has this Psalm meant to you in the past (if anything)?
- * What is your first impression when you read this Psalm (again)? Do you share the experiences that the Psalm mentions? For example: Do you also have to face enemies that you would like to spite (verse 5)?
- * Do you find anything in the text that you do not quite understand? E.g. What does the metaphor “The Lord’s my shepherd” actually mean? After all, you are not a sheep, are you?! What do the depths of darkness refer to? Who are the enemies mentioned in verse 5? What cultural customs does the Psalmist assume when he speaks of being a guest of honour?
- * Does one really need to provide satisfactory answers to these questions to understand the Psalm?
- * Why do you actually read a text like this again and again?

b) Look at the following experiences of reading the Bible. Do you share any of these? Do you know others who experience something similar?

- * I have been reading some of these texts in the Bible since my early childhood. By now I know what to expect. I am looking for something new!
- * I am not sure about the Bible. Sometimes I feel that the Bible is a very Western book. It is used by colonialists and imperialists to keep us subservient. But sometimes I recognise insights that really speak to me as an African.

- * For me, the message of the Bible is actually quite clear. I have memorised several texts from the Bible. For every situation that I find myself in, there is an appropriate text that can accompany me on the way.
- * When I listen to all these conflicting interpretations of the Bible, I become totally confused. I simply don't know what I should believe any more.
- * I feel rather helpless when I try to read the Bible on my own. All these scholars make me realise that I need a lot more background knowledge before I will be able to understand the Bible properly.
- * I do not trust whatever theologians and pastors say about the Bible any longer. They each come with their own interpretations. For example, some defended apartheid from the Bible. Now the same people are against it. And this is also derived from the Bible.
- * I read the Bible with the faith of a child. I look for comfort and guidance, insight and inspiration, peace of mind and hope. And I often find these things from my reading of the Bible. In fact, I experience an intimate personal encounter with God when I read the Bible. These experiences are precious to me. I don't want others to ridicule this or to confuse things with all those complicated theories. On the other hand, I don't want to sound naïve or uninformed.
- * We live in a time of many changes. I am trying to clarify for myself who I really am and where I am going to. I have a lot of questions about suffering, poverty and affluence, other religions, capitalism, the death penalty, abortion, etc. The Bible does not seem to provide answers to the questions that are important to me.
- * I read my Bible and I pray every day. It guides me through the day. I simply cannot do without that.
- * I must acknowledge that I read my Bible very seldom nowadays. It is still important to me, but I no longer believe in the same way I used to.
- * Some of the readings from the Bible are rather crude, almost barbaric. It is full of violence, vengeance and sexual promiscuity. I cannot read all of this to my children!
- * When I try to read some of the sections in the Old Testament, I have no idea what it's all about. It is really very foreign to me. To be honest, there are large sections in the Bible that I have never read.
- * When I page through the Bible, I often wonder whether a modern person could still believe all of this. I am not sure whether these stories of miracles, angels and demons are really true. Did everything really happen in the way it is described in the Bible?

You will probably find that several of these experiences ring true to you. Yet they are also conflicting. This guide to biblical interpretation wishes to take these experiences seriously. Its aim is to help you to become a more skilled reader of the Bible. Reading the Bible is indeed a skill that can only be acquired through practice. It is an art that has to be practised and developed continuously.

1.2 Why do we need to understand the Bible better?

Each of us knows intuitively that we need to understand the Bible better. Yes, but why exactly do we need to understand the Bible better?

There is an obvious answer to this question. Simply because it matters. It matters how we understand the message of the Bible. The Bible is not simply read for interest sake, to gain more knowledge about the Bible. To understand the Bible also implies to respond to its message. It not only has to be understood intellectually; it has to be practised. As a result, the Bible has had an enormous influence in history, in society and in our own lives. The Bible has the power to transform the world – for better but also for worse. Indeed, the way in which people understood the Bible has sometimes had a devastating impact on history. It therefore matters considerably how we understand the message of the Bible.

Let us consider some of the ways in which the Bible has an impact in various spheres of society:

Exercise 1(b)

a) Where have you last seen a Bible lying around? How many different places can you list? For example ...

- * On the pulpit
- * Next to a hospital bed
- * In the university's library

b) Where have you last seen or heard the Bible being read or quoted? For example ...

- * In a Bible study group
- * On TV
- * In parliament
- * In a lecture

There are, perhaps, especially three distinct contexts in which the Bible plays an important role:

- a) In the church;
- b) In an academic context;
- c) In various spheres of society.

The Bible does not influence us only when it is actually being read and studied. Its impact may also be detected in many indirect, often sub-conscious ways. Let us consider some of these in more detail:

We read the Bible and respond to its message:

- directly and indirectly;
- whether it is actually read or not;
- consciously or sub-consciously;
- with positive or negative responses;
- inside and outside Christian communities;
- for better or for worse.