

# Approaches to Interpreting the Bible

Modern Bible readers split into two main groups. For the sake of clarity we may refer to them as literal interpreters and contextual interpreters. Literal interpreters focus primarily on the text of the Bible. Contextual interpreters focus equally on the text and context (historical, cultural, and literary) in which the Bible has developed. Within each group there is some flexibility.

## The Literal Interpreter

An example of flexibility among literal interpreters is shown by the position taken by Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of God concerning the word day in the creation story. Jehovah's Witnesses hold you may interpret the word "day" to mean "era." Church of God members hold you must interpret it to mean 24 hours. Thus, Church of God members, following a strict biblical timetable, hold that creation took place in the year 4004 BC. Moreover, they believe it took place in the course of six 24-hour days.

People ask: "How can you hold that creation took place about 6,000 years ago, when science proves the earth is millions of years old?" The literal interpreter answers: "Read your Bible!"

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light." (Genesis 1:1-3)

Literal readers say the word "then" holds the key. It shows that "the heavens and the earth" already existed before God began his six days of work. The six days, therefore, refer only to preparing earth for human habitation.

## The Contextual Interpreter

Contextual interpreters view the Bible differently than do their literal colleagues. They believe the key to understanding it lies not in adherence to the text alone. Equally important is an understanding of the historical and cultural context in which the Bible developed and was written. This is especially true of early accounts that deal with prehistory, that foggy period of time between the appearance of humans on the earth and their first attempts to tell their story.

For example, when the Bible says that Adam lived 930 years, did the Biblical writer intend this literally? Or when the Bible says the snake talked to Eve, did the biblical writer intend to teach us something about the previous condition of snakes? Or when the first chapter of the Book of

Genesis says that man was created last, and the next chapter says he was created first, wasn't the biblical writer stating that this report is contradictory if taken literally?

The contextualists firmly believe that the Bible is the Word of God but is expressed in the words of humans. They believe that God inspired the biblical writers. God, however, did not dictate what to say. The biblical writer was a person uniquely open to God's revelation and uniquely inspired by God to express it in the language and idiom of his time.

## Go Back in Spirit

Contextual interpreters believe that they must read the Bible within the context of its historical times and cultural background. This gives a better understanding not only of the words, but also of the special meaning certain words and symbols held in ancient times. Pope Pius XII told Catholic biblical scholars:

You may go back, as it were, in spirit to those remote centuries of the East. With the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology, and the other sciences, you must determine accurately what modes of writing the ancient writers would likely use, and in fact did use.

In other words, scholars must approach the Bible from the viewpoint of ancient times, and not impose their own 20th-century viewpoint. This is simple in theory but difficult in practice.

## Modern Scholarship

In recent years, however, remarkable advances have been made in biblical interpretation. New sciences, like biblical archaeology, have cast new light on passages and stories. Never, since the biblical time itself, has so much new information been available.

As a result, a whole new understanding of the Bible is emerging. The biblical scholar is like a person who has been walking in the fog. Now the fog is lifting, and the scholar sees, in beautiful detail, things once seen only in vague outline.

(By Mark Link in *These Stones Will Shout*, Tabor Publishing)