

**“Why Interpretation Matters”**  
**Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a**  
**Psalm 19:1–14, Luke 4:14–21**  
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The play “East of Nineveh” tells the story of two men whose faith journeys are headed in opposite directions. There is a zealous young radio E-vangelist who is in on fire for the Lord, or something, and thinks he knows it all, but the roots of his faith aren’t very deep, and so, he is about to lose what little he has. And there is an older man who has seemingly lost his faith, but his faith has deeper roots, not to mention more humility, and thus he is about to recover it.

In one telling exchange, the young man has told his radio audience that the Lord has given him a special insight into scripture. Many people have wondered what the sea-pulture is in Mark 15:46 (KJV), he says, but God has revealed to him that the sea-pulture is a great white bird that hovers over Jesus after his death, offering protection. The older man doesn’t know whether to be amused or enraged. The word is sepulchre, he says, not sea-pulture; it refers to a burial site, not a bird.

It is an extreme example, and it is a fictional story, but people in real life come up with some crazy ideas about the Bible. I can’t tell you how many books, letters and emails I have been sent from people claiming to have unlocked the key to interpreting “prophecy” which means they know when the world is going to end and which current political figure or nation will be the catalyst. I don’t read them because they begin with a false premise about prophecy and they ignore Jesus’ claim that even he doesn’t know when the world will end (Mark 13:32).

It is almost laughable, but such interpretations are dangerous. Apocalyptic readings of prophetic literature inspire people to try to hasten the end. And think of all the ways scripture has been used to wound, guilt, shame and control people. There is a reason why religion in general and the Bible in particular can be off-limits in mental health facilities. For some people, religious ideation is a source of struggle.

Consider our reading from Nehemiah. It appears to be a straightforward account of a profoundly moving dedication service. The people have returned from exile, cause for joy in and of itself, but now they are rebuilding the city and their faith, their worship space and everything around it. Think of how we might feel if we had been forced to leave this land and our church, but decades later were able to return!

As we join the story, they have just finished rebuilding the walls of the city and are ready for a dedication service that will pack the town square before the Water Gate. Texts are read and interpreted, men and women understand, all are moved, and our text says the people weep, even though Ezra the priest and scribe and Nehemiah the governor tell them not to, because this is a day holy to God. But why do they weep?

Perhaps they are simply moved by the whole occasion, especially being able to hear scripture read in public. Scripture can move us to tears. One of my mentors, Glenn Hinson, has told a story about his grandmother reading the Bible on her porch, slowly, reflectively. Every now and then, she would pause, lay the Bible in her lap and lean back with tears falling down her face, as she was moved by some verse or image. Are there not times which scripture affects us in this way?

Many scholars, from the eleventh century French Rabbi Rashi all the way to more recent scholars like Jacob Myers, have also suggested that the people weep when they hear the Torah read because they realize just how short they have fallen of the mark. God has delivered them, but they have not been faithful. And this possibility speaks to us as well. Have we not been surrounded by grace only to fall back into old ways?

But Cory Driver, a Lutheran minister and Director of Graduate Studies at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo, has named another possibility ([workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Driver wonders if perhaps some people weep because the interpretations the Levites provided were hurtful. This is the period of reform which we generally think of as being good and righteous. It's not just the city that needs to be rebuilt; it's the people's faith. But these reforms are not an unmixed pleasure.

The book of Ezra describes a dark, rainy day when the people had to gather under penalty of forfeiting their land if they did not appear (Ezra 10:7). That's one way to increase attendance! Ezra told the men

they had to divorce all non-Israelite wives and send away all mixed-race children (10:9-11). And Ezra used heads of families to investigate any marriage thought to be impermissible (Ezra 10:16). The purpose was to bring purity to the faith and nation. Foreign influence was viewed to lead people astray. But not only would these families have known deep sadness, the very idea of ethnic purity has ominous overtones.

Now these same people hear scripture read by the same leaders who interpret scripture in ways that tear their lives apart. Tears would be the appropriate response, tears of sadness and rage.

But the truth is scripture has been used many times to harm and not to heal over the years. Scripture has been used to oppress women, to argue that in God's eyes they are valued, just not as much as men. Scripture has been used to support slavery and to claim that people with dark skin are inferior. Scripture has been used to oppose science — the earth is the flat center of the universe; if God had wanted us to fly, *he* would have given us wings; if we have faith, we don't need a vaccine! Scripture has been used to demonize LGBT people and to judge anyone who has been divorced. Scripture has been used to support our views on any subject and prove that those who disagree with us are wrong. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!

Well, we are people of the book, on that much we can agree, but the Bible says many things about most subjects, though it says nothing directly about some hot-button issues. Which passages do we choose to speak to any given issue? How do we interpret these passages? And we do interpret, all of us. As Elmo Scoggin used to say, every translation is an interpretation, and so anyone who cannot read in the original languages is by definition involved in interpretation.

But we all interpret the translation we read. So, the next question is — do we use a consistent hermeneutic? Do we employ consistent principles of interpretation or do we pick and choose which passages to take literally, as in those which make us look good and others look bad; and which to view creatively as metaphor or hyperbole or just restricted in meaning to a specific time and place?

All of this is important, which is why interpretation matters. Scripture has done a great deal of harm over the years.

And yet, it has also done a great deal of good and it has the potential to do so much more if just a bit of care is taken. Scripture can tear down and wound, but it can also build up and heal, and the key lies in interpretation.

It's not there is one right view of every text and thus all others are wrong, though my theology professor Frank Tupper used to say that some answers are better than others. There are even different approaches to reading scripture, all of which are useful, as Barry Jones has helped us to understand recently on Wednesday nights. But if we exercise some discipline and responsibility, and honestly try to get to the sense of the text, without allowing our biases to shape and distort everything, scripture can heal and inspire.

Today's psalm asserts that the teaching of scripture is more desirable than gold and sweeter than drippings of the honeycomb. These are powerful images of something good and of great value.

The reading from Nehemiah ends with the people going forth in joy, renewed in their faith, and sharing food and wine with those who have nothing. Gathering around scripture inspires these people to live better lives, with more joy and greater concern for others.

The reading from 1 Corinthians presents a model of the church where everyone matters, no one's gifts are insignificant, diversity is a strength. That is a much-needed image for community in general and a light of hope and truth for the church!

And in the reading from Luke, scripture is read, scripture which talks about bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind. And then, Jesus preaches the shortest sermon on record, it is one sentence — today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. The text read from Isaiah proclaims hope for healing and deliverance, and Jesus says he is the one who will embody this hope in every way, bring salvation in every sense of the word.

These are all good things, and there is a theme here. The ultimate purpose is to build up and heal, not tear down and wound. Sometimes healing requires a word of challenge. The author of Hebrews says the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to

judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). But the ultimate purpose of all of this is healing and mercy, grace and salvation (Hebrews 4:16). The purpose of scripture is never to harm.

So, as we consider any interpretation, ours or someone else's, we might ask — what is the purpose here, of the text and interpreter? Is it to injure or heal, to attack or embrace, to destroy or redeem, to bring discord or peace, to push people away from God or bring them closer to God? The answer to these questions will tell us a great deal about whether the interpretation is close to the mark.

2 Timothy 3:16 is often quoted in conversations about the interpretation of scripture. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *so that* everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Most of the focus is on scripture being inspired, literally “God-breathed”, which is important, though the text doesn't say how inspiration takes place. It doesn't resolve those debates.

But the verse also points to the purpose of scripture, its reason for being: to equip people for good work. That makes sense if scripture has been God-breathed at every point. God's purposes are always good. Thus, so should our efforts at interpretation be.