

Book Review

A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules
Stein, Robert H.

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994) ISBN 0-8010-2101-4, paperback, 305 pages, \$12.99

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Anyone who has tried to provide sanity and order to the hermeneutical montage that surfaces during home Bible studies will welcome this eminently readable book by Robert Stein. He writes for those new to the field of biblical interpretation, avoiding wherever possible technical terms and jargon, and clearly defining his terms when such language is unavoidable. Stein's primary purpose is to instruct students of the Bible in the basic principles of biblical interpretation that will enable them to determine the meaning of the Scriptures. The ultimate goal is not only to understand what the biblical author intended to say, but how the modern reader might arrive at its contemporary relevance and respond to its teaching.

To achieve his goal, Stein has divided his book into the classical divisions of general and special hermeneutics. Part 1 is devoted to the discussion of the "general rules of interpretation" that would apply broadly to biblical literature regardless of literary type or genre. Part 2 deals with the "specific rules" that apply to various literary types that occur within Scripture. Stein borrows the metaphor of "game" to address the principles and practice of biblical interpretation, focusing on the rules of the game, and how the game changes with each new literary form of Scripture.

Most should find Part 1 illuminating and practical. Stein discusses verbal communication theory, not in the abstract,

but in a most practical and intelligible manner (i.e., without the intrusion of highly technical issues that distract and confuse the uninitiated). However, the advanced student of hermeneutics will be able to discern the undercurrents of debate to which Stein is responding. For example, his introductory chapter, "Who Makes Up the Rules," clearly alludes to the controversy over the "locus of meaning." More precisely, it addresses the debate over which of the components of communication determines meaning: author, text or reader. As an evangelical who is committed to the authority of Scripture, Stein clearly and cogently argues that the "meaning" of the biblical text is the "conscious, willed intent of its author" (26-32). However, Stein is not unaware or uninformed about the larger hermeneutical debate that posits both the structure of a text and the presuppositions of the reader as factors that also determine meaning. His response and position is to maintain the distinction between the "meaning" of a text and its "significance," (identified as the readers response to the text), a distinction championed by E. D. Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, Press, 1967). Stein not only upholds this distinction, but argues that it is a logical necessity if the plausibility of meaningful public communication is to be maintained (chapter 2- "Defining the Rules").

Pentecostals and Charismatics alike should applaud the fact that an entire chapter is devoted to “the Spirit and Biblical Interpretation” (chapter 3). Stein acknowledges the Spirit’s role in inspiring the texts of the Bible, aiding the Church in recognizing and forming the biblical canon and illuminating the text for the modern reader. However, he does not offer any new insights concerning how the Spirit aids the interpretive process beyond what is traditionally maintained: that is, that the Spirit moves us to a level of “knowing” or understanding that transcends a rational or cognitive apprehension of truth. Unbelievers without the indwelling presence of the Spirit can, along with believers, achieve a rational understanding of the Scripture. The Spirit’s contribution to the Christian is identified primarily with his influence upon the will, in understanding and facilitating a proper response of faith (65-71).

Part 2, while not complete in its treatment of literary genre, is amply instructive. Stein targets the major genres or subgenres of both the Old Testament (law, prophecy, narrative, proverbs and poetry) and the New Testament (narrative, parables, epistles and prophecy). He also manages to deal with essential rules and guidelines related to the interpretation of the major biblical genres. Some might wish that Stein had provided a list of interpretive guidelines, rules or principles (as he does in chapter 9) for each genre. Instead he leaves them implicit in the section titles and expounded by the content.

What the reader will find helpful, especially when using this book for teaching purposes, is its numerous scriptural examples, timely illustrations and clarifying schematics. Teacher and student are served by the discussion questions at the end of each chapter. These serve to review and summarize the content and further illustrate and apply the interpretative guidelines and

principles presented therein. Unfortunately, the glossary at the back of the book is too limited. While selectivity is necessary and appropriate, the reasons for inclusion of non-technical terms (e.g., “author”) and exclusion of more unfamiliar ones (e.g., “commissive”) are puzzling. In addition, many of the terms have definitions so brief as to provide very little clarity without the aid of an appropriate context or illustration.

All features considered, Robert Stein has given us a most illuminating and helpful tool for guiding students of the Bible to a clear path leading to a more accurate interpretation and application of the Scriptures.