

# Interpretive Principles

So you have your Bible in hand. Now, what are the basic principles to observe as you begin to study it? Let me list some for you, then discuss each one. Please check out the references given for illustration on your own, as we seek to illustrate and apply these principles, will you?

## **Principles of Bible Interpretation**

### 1. Listen to Your Teacher!

Approach your study with a teachable, expectant attitude, desiring to be taught of God.

### 2. *Discover the Writer's Intent*

Put yourself in the writer's sandals, and setting aside your preconceptions, aim to recover the writer's intent--including the intent of the ultimate Author, which sometimes goes beyond even the understanding of the human writer (e.g., 1 Peter 1:10-12 on the prophets).

### 3. Interpret Literally

Accept the usual, literal sense of the words unless you have reason to believe they are figurative or allegorical. Interpret figurative language in the same way we use it in normal speech.

### 4. Observe the Context

Interpret in the light of the setting. Harmonize with the local and larger context, also the total context of biblical truth.

### 5. Relate to the Historical/Cultural Setting

Interpret with the historical and cultural setting in mind. It can make a great difference as to how we understand what is being said.

### 6. Consider the Literary Mold

The literary mold in which the language is cast is often crucial to our interpretation. Is it poetry? If so, that makes a difference, e.g., the Psalms.

### 7. Observe the Author's Scope and Plan

Every portion of the scripture does not cover every subject, so we must interpret in accord with the author's scope and plan, being consistent with the aim of God's total revelation.

### 8. Compare Scripture with Scripture

View corollary passages alongside the passage you are studying. Clear up problem areas with

the clear teaching of other passages relating to the same subject.

## 9. Study Word Meanings and Grammar

Our normal tendency is to assume more than we really understand, thus arriving at a superficial view. We must observe word meanings and grammatical relationships *carefully*.

## 10. Remember, God Speaks in Human Terms

Recognize God's gracious accommodation of our limited, finite understanding by the use of human language in terms that men can grasp.

## 11. Use the Original Languages

In difficult interpretive problems, check the original language as the final authority. Many times (though not always), this will give the added light we need.

Now let's look at these interpretive principles in somewhat greater detail.

## **Basic Principles of Bible Interpretation**

### 1. Listen to Your Teacher!

It always amazes me to recall that God himself wants to be our teacher. His word on the subject is this:

And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you *have no need to have anyone teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things*, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him (1 John 2:27 NASV, italics mine).

By this we understand that the Spirit of God, who lives in each believer, is our private tutor. Though God has given us pastors and teachers for our good (Eph. 4: 11, 12), they are in addition to (and no substitute for) the Holy Spirit. This means that the humblest believer in Christ may be taught of God through his Word, even when human teachers are lacking.

The Lord Jesus makes it abundantly clear in these words,

When the Spirit of truth comes, *he will guide you into all the truth*; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:13, 14, italics mine).

Though the primary application of these words is to the eleven disciples whom he was addressing in this upper room scene, our Lord makes it clear that the Spirit's ministry of teaching would extend to all believers in Christ. For he says:

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word (John 17:20).

### 2. Discover the Writer's Intent

Much Bible study is done to verify men's preconceptions, since all of us bring our personal opinions and biases with us. But honesty demands that we start with a clean page on which God may write his thoughts. If we can use our sanctified imagination to put ourselves in the writer's place and see things through his eyes, we will open up the windows of our minds to let in the light of God's truth. If God has really spoken through the pen of the human author, let's not try to rewrite the script. Proof-texting, i.e., quoting only those biblical texts

which are useful to prove our own preconceived opinions and theological biases, is a favorite trick of the cultists and only succeeds in confusing the issue. We don't want to play that game. On the other hand, it is truly remarkable what we can discover when we *let God say what he has said*. We need to adopt this attitude:

...and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, *that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God* (1 Cor. 2:4, 5, italics mine).

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; *we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word*, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God (2 Cor. 4:2, italics mine).

### 3. Interpret Literally

We should view the Scripture just as we would any other writing, accepting the words at face value without the imposition of hidden meanings. This is the general rule, to which there are notable and recognizable exceptions, such as allegory and typology. Figures of speech are to be interpreted in the literal significance that the figure conveys. We will look at these special considerations in more detail in Chapters 7 through 9.

When the Scripture says, "*Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*" (1 Thess. 5:16-18), we don't have a problem of interpreting the language, but rather one of how to *apply* the truth. We accept the literal meaning of the words. How we can *do* what it commands we must discover in the context: "Do not quench the Spirit," [for he is our strengthener to enable] "do not despise prophesying," [for preaching and teaching are the vehicle he uses to encourage us] "*but test everything;*" [for our thinking is askew and we are being fooled by an enemy if we are defeated on these issues] "*hold fast what is good,*" [for that is what will save the day] "*abstain from every form of evil*" (1 Thess. 5:19-22). Abstain, because indulging in evil gets us into trouble. The punch line is verse 24, "*He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*" This assures us that the Lord is active in our behalf to enable us to do all he commands. So we take language in its literal sense when it is used like this.

But when we read, "*I am the vine, you are the branches*" (John 15:5), we recognize figurative language and seek the literal meaning of the figure. As we observe the context we read also, "*Abide in me, and I in you*" (John 15:4) and easily recognize that our Lord is talking about a *shared life*, since a branch is a living part of the vine, receiving the flow of life from it.

### 4. Observe the Context

The content immediately surrounding the text being studied always bears significant relationship to it which usually determines its meaning. This is by far the most important rule of Bible interpretation. Grammar and syntax are important, but in relative weight the context is the heavier import. Linguist Anthony Burgess states humorously that studying grammar is "utter madness." It appears to be a science but doesn't behave like one, one reason being that grammarians tend to look at language the way it ought to be rather than the way it is. So we must always view a passage or verse (1) in its immediate setting; (2) in the larger context of the chapter or book in which it stands; and (3) in the light of the total context of biblical revelation. Remember that though we see it in its parts and divisions, God wrote *ONE Book*, not sixty-six. The unity and interweaving design of the Bible makes clear that it is one Book with sixty-six chapters.

For example, we have just considered part of John 15. To relate verses 4 and 5 to the local context, we need to recall that this is the upper room scene, in which Christ was instructing and encouraging his men in view of his departure, and laying the foundation for the yet-future beginning of the church. The theme in this chapter is fruit-bearing, i.e. how to have a fulfilled and productive life. His major thrust is the declaration, "...apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5), and his aim is to get them (and us) to rest in his sufficiency, as a branch relates to the vine which sustains it.

Next, we set it in its place in John's Gospel, finding that the action is just before our Lord went to the cross. Then we recall that John's declared purpose for writing is "*...that we might have life in his name,*" that is,

through the name of Jesus (John 20:31). So we have related our text to the Gospel of John.

We can go on from there to recognize that what Christ began he commissioned the apostles to complete, so we can relate what Christ said in the upper room to what the Apostle Paul wrote in his New Testament letters. I've tried to do this, and the result is in chart form for you to assess. You can undoubtedly add much to this chart; it is more suggestive than exhaustive. Here we have related to the larger biblical context and observed that it all fits together. God wrote *ONE* Book, using many penmen.

<i>What CHRIST said . . . in the Upper Room</i>	<i>SUBJECT</i>	<i>What PAUL said . . . in his N.T. Letters.</i>
<p><i>JOHN 13—A SERVANT HEART: LOVE ONE ANOTHER</i>            "A new commandment . . . that you love . . . as I have loved you." v. 34</p>	<p><i>BODY LIFE</i>            Helping one another to keep in fellowship with Christ.</p>	<p>"Have this mind . . . which is your Christ Jesus, . . . who taking the form of a servant . . . obedient unto death . . . cross." Phil. 2:5-8</p>
<p><i>JOHN 14—PERFECT PROVISION</i>            (a) <i>FOR THE FUTURE</i>            "In my Father's house are many rooms . . ." v. 2            (b) <i>FOR THE PRESENT</i>            "I will pray the Father . . . He will give you another counselor . . . the Spirit of truth . . ." vv. 16, 17</p>	<p><i>REDEMPTION IN ETERNITY</i>            "at home" with the Lord.   <i>IN TIME</i>            "at home" in the body.            2 Cor. 5:6-8</p>	<p>"In (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace . . ." Eph. 1:7            "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . ." Gal. 2:20            ". . . shall we be saved by his life" 5:10</p>
<p><i>JOHN 15—ADEQUATE RESOURCES A SHARED LIFE—Vine and branches.</i>            "He who abides in me, and I in him . . . bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." v. 5</p>	<p><i>NEW COVENANT USEFULNESS DEPENDENCE</i></p>	<p>"We have this treasure in earthen vessels show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." 2 Cor. 4:7            ". . . our competence is from God, has made us competent . . ." 2 Cor</p>
<p><i>JOHN 16—OVERCOMING OPPOSITION</i>            ". . . whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." v. 2            ". . . the Counselor . . . will convince the</p>	<p><i>SPIRITUAL WARFARE</i>   <i>ACTIVE HATRED</i></p>	<p>"Put on the whole armor of God, that may be able to stand fast against the attacks of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual hosts of wickedness . . ."</p>

- world (1) *Concerning sin* (missing out on life, no reality, no fulfillment)
- (2) *Righteousness* (value systems wrong, so no sense of worth), and
- (3) *Judgment* . . . (don't know Satan's hold has been broken, so no freedom) v. 7-11

CHRIST HAS DEFEATED  
SATAN

LOVE WINS

Eph. 6:11-13

“(Christ) disarmed the principalities powers, and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross” Col. 2:15

Therefore, “. . . if your enemy is hungry feed him . . .” Rom. 12:20

## 5. Relate to the Historical and Cultural Setting

We are prone to interpret everything we read in terms of our twentieth century Western culture, since that's the sphere in which we live. It takes a conscious effort to research and absorb some of the data that will make our thoughts conform to the time and culture of the writer. Much of this can be accomplished through the use of Bible Dictionaries, and books on the history and archeology of Old and New Testament times. Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus, the Messiah* is a classic work on the cultural features of biblical times. Old and New Testament introductions also help us get the feel and flavor of life in Bible times. The bibliography in the Appendix will give you further source materials on this subject.

To illustrate the principle we have before us: it is helpful, when studying the Book of Hebrews, to remember that it was written while the temple was still standing in Jerusalem. This makes clear the need for the strong appeal to these early Hebrew Christians to "go forth to him [Jesus] outside the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Heb. 13:13, 14). And, "We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat" (Heb. 13:10). There was strong temptation for these early Christians to be drawn back into the "shadows" of the temple worship forms and away from the reality of Christian faith.

Observing this, we can better understand the strong warnings in the book. After all, it was written *to the Hebrews* of the first century. Our interpretation should be based on this historical/cultural setting, with application to our contemporary Western scene flowing out of that interpretation. It then becomes obvious that there are many similar situations where modern men and women halt short of true faith, settling for religious ritual instead. The same strong warnings can then be applied properly to present situations. The following outline illustrates how applicable this truth is, almost twenty centuries after its writing.

### DON'T MISS MELCHIZEDEK!

We need to advance from the Aaronic priesthood (the Law) to the Melchizedek priesthood, which portrays the adequacy and resources of Christ as our risen, living Lord. In view of Christ's availability to us as our great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, to strengthen us for every test and supply our every need, consider these warnings from Hebrews:

#### 1. THE DANGER OF DRIFTING, Hebrews 2: 1-3

*The Problem: Inattention*

The possibility of drifting.

*The Test: Are You Listening?*

#### 2. THE DANGER OF AN UNBELIEVING HEART, Hebrews 3: 12-19

*The Problem: Hearing, but not Believing*

The possibility: hardening of the heart.

*The Test: How Well Do You Rest?*

3. THE DANGER OF PROLONGED IMMATURITY, Hebrews 6: 1-8

*The Problem: Being Long -Time Babies*

The possibility: missing the value of the Melchizedek priesthood.

*The Test: Are You Really Going Anywhere?*

4. THE DANGER OF MISSING REALITY--Seeing just the shadow, Hebrews 10:26 - 31

*The Problem: Failing to Respond to Grace*

The possibility of spurning the Son.

*The Test: How Real Is Jesus Christ to You?*

5. THE DANGER OF CONTRADICTION, Hebrews 12:15-29

*The Problem: The Practical Denial of Christ's Lordship*

The possibility of refusing him the right to give orders.

*The Test: How Well Do You Worship through Obedience to Christ?*

"Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb. 13: 15,16).

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the *eternal covenant*, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, *working in you* that which is pleasing in his sight, *through Jesus Christ*; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20, 21).

6. Consider the Literary Mold

The Bible is history, prophecy, prose narrative, poetry, discourse, persuasive argumentation, exhortation, instruction, illustration, and more. It includes the use of parables, proverbs, fables, riddles, enigmas, symbols, and various kinds of analogies--virtually every kind of figurative use of language. Sound interpretive study will view each scripture in the mold in which it is cast.

Poetic language is obviously more colorfully figurative than prose language forms. When the psalmist says,

Bless the Lord, O my soul!

O Lord my God, thou art very great!

Thou art clothed with honor and majesty

who coverest thyself with light as with a garment,

who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent,

who hast laid the beams of thy chambers on the waters,

who makest the clouds thy chariot,  
who ridest on the wings of the wind,  
who makest the winds thy messengers,  
fire and flame thy ministers (Ps. 104:1-4).

we easily recognize poetic expression designed to give us a sense of the greatness and majesty of God in his creative supremacy over the natural world.

On the other hand, when we read:

Follow the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (2 Tim. 1:13, 14),

we see that it is not poetry, but a strong charge from Paul to Timothy, being commanded with all the weight of Paul's apostolic authority.

Again, we easily recognize the story-form narrative style of the Gospels and receive them as eyewitness accounts.

#### 7. Observe the Author's Scope and Plan

Every book of the Bible does not treat every subject. On the contrary, each book covers a limited scope of subject matter which is not always announced by the writer, but is always discernible if we observe carefully.

The plan of a book is that orderly progression of thought the writer had in mind when he wrote.

A panoramic view of the book as a whole is needed to ascertain these features. This means reading and re-reading until our observation and analysis uncover the writer's intent and trace his thought pattern. At first glance, some books of the Bible seem to have no progression or order, but I have discovered that deeper study invariably reveals the outline. Quite often the problem is ours, not the writer's, in that we have gained only a superficial view of the scope and plan imbedded in the text. There is no substitute for careful, diligent study to gain this information. And when we finally see it, it often forms the outline that frames the book in our minds and begins to make it ours.

For instance, the scope of John's Gospel is clearly the presenting of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God. His aim in this testimony is to lead his hearers to faith in Christ, that they might have the eternal life he offers. We see this stated in:

...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31 ).

By reading the book this statement is confirmed.

John's first epistle has quite another aim. It is written that we might enjoy the reality of fellowship with Christ and the assurance that brings to our hearts. We see this in 1 John 1:3 and 4, and

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.

and

I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

Paul's letter to the Romans is aimed at the logical exposition of the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1-5), and his plan is to show that the whole world (pagan, moralist, and religionist) stands guilty before God (Rom. 3:1-20), so that any who come by faith in the One who died for us and rose again might be justified by faith, apart from works.

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom. 3:20-25).

...Jesus our Lord...was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:24, 25).

The plan of the Book of Romans then includes how the gospel works out in life (chapter 5-8); explains how Israel fits into God's purposes in the gospel (chapters 9-11); appeals for a life style consistent with the character of the One who redeemed us (chapters 12-15); and concludes with personal greetings to some who have responded to the gospel (chapter 16), with a final benediction focused around the new information the gospel reveals and its importance to all men (Rom. 16:25-27).

The scope of Peter's letters (1 and 2 Peter) is the problem of suffering Christians, and his plan is to unfold to us how we can cope with all that life throws at us.

We often outline a book to show its plan. Several examples of this are included in Chapter 12, and in the Appendix.

## 8. Compare Scripture with Scripture

There are many complementary passages in the Bible which shed light on each other. The interpreter must read them all to gain the composite picture. The Old Testament is frequently quoted in the New Testament, and we seriously err if we do not read the whole content of the passage being quoted. We must remember that most of the New Testament writers were Jews who knew their Old Testament scriptures as you and I probably never will. Their minds gathered the quoted material from memory, whereas you and I don't have it stored away to recall. So we must read the full account from the record.

## 9. Check the Old Testament Reference

To illustrate the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament: for years I had read 1 Corinthians 14 without noticing the Old Testament quotation in verse 21. Here the apostle quoted Isaiah 28:11 with reference to speaking in tongues.

...By men of *strange tongues* and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to *this people*, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord ( 1 Cor. 14:21, italics mine).

As I finally took the time to read the Old Testament reference which I found in the margin of my Bible, I discovered some remarkable facts: (1) Isaiah 28 is a picture of the terrible judgment of God on his disobedient people; (2) intermingled in the judgment scene are references to the gracious ministry of God through his Son, like:

In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people (Isa. 28:5).



Also,

Behold I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: "he who believes will not be in haste" (Isa. 28:16).

Note "the remnant" in verse 5 and the obvious reference to the Lord Jesus in verse 16, as confirmed by Peter in 1 Peter 2: 6-8. So, in Isaiah 28, we have *mercy* in the midst of *judgment*.

Then, notice that according to 1 Corinthians 14:21, God is speaking through the strange tongues to "this people," which clearly refers to Israel. I see here the purpose for which God has given the gift of tongues--to be a "sign" (verse 22) to those first century Jews, a sign that God was acting in judgment against their stubborn unbelief, with mercy available to them in the midst of his wrath.

It becomes most significant, then, that "tongues" on the day of Pentecost (as recorded in Acts 2), have a distinct and unique purpose: to alert the Jews that their day of privilege was over, and that God was now welcoming Jew and Gentile alike by faith in the Lamb of God who takes away sin and saves sinners, whether Jewish sinners or Gentile sinners, on the ground of his death and resurrection. Thus, "tongues" marked the end of God's dealing with the world through the nation Israel, and the beginning of the new era of the church. Much more could be said to pursue this clue from the Old Testament, but perhaps this is enough to illustrate the point.

### Topical Bible Study

An expansion of this principle is topical Bible study. Since the total content of the biblical revelation on any one topic is scattered through the Bible, we must gather all the information to get the total comprehensive view. Topical Bibles like Nave's, or Thompson's Chain Reference Bible, or the connected references in the Scofield Bible and its subject index, help us in this kind of study. Tracing through the total biblical information from Genesis to Revelation on a particular subject is a rewarding experience.

Comparing parallel passages is another helpful way to gain interpretive insight. It makes sense to read accounts of the same events recorded in all the gospels, as one account will give information not recorded in the other, and thus give a much clearer picture of the content of both. There are harmonies of the Gospels that can help us to fit things together from the gospel records (see the Bibliography for these.)

### 9. Study Word Meanings and Grammar

This subject is dealt with in some detail in the next chapter on the Interpretive Process, pages 55 and 56, so we will not deal further with it here. Also you should check through Appendix A to review basic English grammar and chapter 10, giving you some grammatical and word study data from the Greek text of the New Testament.

### 10. Remember, God Speaks in Human Terms

Many interpretive problems can be avoided if we remember that God has scaled down his communication of truth to man's level. The Bible is anthropomorphic, i.e., God's eternal truth is brought down to human level and expressed in human terms.

Did I say I dislike big words? Well, I do, unless they are given meaning. This one, anthropomorphic, is a very descriptive term that says a lot if we simply define it. It's derived from two Greek words: *anthropos*, man, and *morphe*, form. It means "ascribing human form or attributes to beings or things not human, especially to a deity." In this mode of expression, God has stepped down into our shoes so that he can speak to us on our level of understanding.

So when we read "God repented" in Exodus 32:14, we understand that he is speaking in man's terms, and *from our viewpoint* he seems to have changed his mind. But if we review the character of God as revealed in the Scriptures, we find that he knows everything before it happens and never has to change his mind. He has

all the information on any subject and never needs to second-guess himself like we do.

And when we read "God came down" as Exodus 3:8, we recognize this as the language of appearances. Since he is omnipresent, he was always there, but he uses this expression to convey the idea that now he is giving his full attention to the matter in question. These are anthropomorphisms.

## 11. Use the Original Languages

Many interpretive difficulties will be readily resolved by investigating the words behind the English text. For the unskilled in biblical Greek or Hebrew, it is still possible to get behind the English text to the original language through the use of available exegetical tools in English. (And, just so I don't fog the atmosphere with meaningless words--exegetical means "to raise up out of," i.e., to expose the meaning.) It is truly remarkable how much has been done in English to furnish us with good exegetical tools.

### Grappling with Greek

*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* is a veritable gold mine of information about New Testament Greek, which one can use without knowing a word of Greek. Every serious student of the Bible should have this volume. To illustrate its value, when we encounter the word *mystery* in the New Testament we can discover from Vine, among other things, this fact:

Mystery--a spiritual truth revealed in the Gospel. In the ordinary sense a mystery implies *knowledge withheld*; its scriptural significance is *truth revealed*. In the New Testament it denotes...that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit. (1)

Two things one must realize about this book: (1) It is compiled from the vocabulary of the King James Version, so one must have that text from which to work; and (2) every time the author inserts a paragraph mark (¶) at the end of an entry it means he has cited every occurrence of the Greek word in the New Testament. This is a tremendous help, as it gives us a ready reference on one page which saves us much time and effort checking through the concordance.

### Hebrew Word Study

The rough equivalent of this book for the Old Testament is Pick, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Words for English Readers*. We can use this book, or we can turn to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* for information on the Hebrew of the Old Testament. We can learn a great deal from Hebrew words without being able to read Hebrew. For instance, Hebrew names have meanings that often shed light on Old Testament passages.

In the well-known story in Daniel 3, the three Hebrew children are called Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, which are Chaldean names given them by the king's eunuch (Dan. 1: 7). But we read there that their Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Checking *Strong's Concordance*, we find in the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary portion (in the back) that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are Chaldean names whose significance the concordance does not reveal, though other sources relate them to Babylonian deities, while:

Hananiah means *the Lord has favored*. (see #2608, Strong's Concordance Hebrew entry)  
Mishael means *who is what God is?* (see entry #4332) and Azariah means *the Lord has helped*. (see entry #5838) The *iah* on the end of these names is the root of Jehovah, or Yahweh, the Lord God, and the suffix *el* on Mishael is the Hebrew word for the Almighty, referring to God.

As we read their story in Daniel 3, their names shine with meaning relating to the narrative: Hananiah knows the God of all grace, *the Lord who has favored*, while Mishael asks "*who is like the Almighty who is my God?*", and Azariah surely knows *Jehovah* has helped, even in a red-hot furnace--or, perhaps we should say, especially there.

*Unger's Bible Dictionary* is also a useful source of this kind of information.

## Reference

1. W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), p. 97 (under M).

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