

Stein, Robert H. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998. 219 pp. \$16.99 paper.

## **Introduction**

Can anyone justify the writing of another book on hermeneutics? Robert H. Stein, the Mildred and Ernest Hogan Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Louisville, Kentucky, believes he can. Therefore, he has written a book on the study of the Bible entitled *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. The work is actually a welcome addition to the previous works written. It proves helpful to those at the basic and the advanced levels.

## **Summary**

Stein surmises his goal clearly in the preface, “This book is an attempt to present in a nontechnical way a text that will help the reader understand what the goal of reading the Bible should be and how this goal can be achieved” (9). Later in the introduction the author reiterates,

It is hoped that this book will help the reader understand what is involved in the interpretation of the Bible. It will seek to do so by helping readers acquire an interpretive framework that will help them understand better the meaning of biblical texts and how to apply that meaning to their own life situation (13).

His goals are as noble as they are practical.

The book is divided into two main sections. The theory behind the work is as follows: in order for the writers of Scripture to communicate effectively with their readers, they must adhere to certain rules of communication. Likewise, if the reader

expects to understand what the author of the biblical text is attempting to communicate, the reader must also play the game by the same rules. Part 1 of the book addresses these *general rules* of interpretation. Part 2 addresses the *specific rules* for the individual games of interpretation.

Part 1 is made up of four chapters. In Chapter 1, the author seeks to answer the question, “Who makes up the rules?” He does so by giving an introduction to the discipline known as hermeneutics. Stein begins by pointing out that in all communication there are three distinct components that must be present for communication to occur: the author, the text, and the reader. In the terminology of the linguist, these components would be known as the encoder, code, and the decoder, or the sender, the message, and the receiver (18). The main goal of interpreting the Bible is to discover the meaning of the text being studied (18). That meaning is conveyed by the author, through the text, to the reader. After dealing with the various objections to the author being the determiner of meaning, Stein clarifies the various roles of the author, text, and reader.

In Chapter 2, Stein seeks to define the rules of the game. He does so by clarifying the vocabulary and definitions involved in the discipline of Bible interpretation. Logically, this is a necessity. “If the terms used in the process of interpretation are used imprecisely, confusion will result” (37). With this as a premise, several terms and definitions are given. A summary of the key terms and definitions given are as follows. The *meaning* of a text is that pattern of meaning the author willed to convey by the words (shareable symbols) he used (38). *Implications* are those meanings in a text of which the author was unaware but nevertheless legitimately fall within the pattern of meaning he

willed (39). *Significance* refers to how a reader responds to the meaning of a text (43). It involves the will (45). The reader/receiver must say “Yes” or “No” to the meaning and/or implication of the text. The *subject matter* refers to the content or “stuff” talked about in a text (46). Stein points out that a clear distinction must be maintained between the subject matter found in the text and the meaning that the author gives to this subject matter (46-47). *Understanding* refers to the correct mental grasp of the author’s meaning (48). Since there is a single meaning that the author willed, each individual who understands this meaning will have the same mental grasp of the author’s pattern of meaning (49). *Interpretation* refers to the verbal or written expression of a reader’s understanding of the author’s meaning (49). Stein explains that although understanding and interpretation are closely related, they are quite different. Understanding precedes interpretation. Understanding involves thinking and is “mental” whereas interpretation is “verbal” (50). *Mental acts* refer to the experiences the author went through when writing the text (52). Stein points out that “what these authors consciously willed to convey to their readers can be known. Their willed meaning is available to us and can be understood, because we possess their text. But their private experiences are not available. Unless an author chose to share such experiences with his readers, they are inaccessible” (53). The *norms of language* are the range of meanings allowed by the words (verbal symbols) of a text (54). But in order to be understood, an author must stay within these possibilities. The *norms of the utterance* is the specific meaning that the author has given to a word, phrase, sentence, and the like in a text (55). When an author uses a word in a text, it only means one thing. The task of interpretation is to discover this one specific meaning (the norms of the utterance) (55-56). *Literary genre* refers to the literary form

being used by the author and the rules governing that form (56). Knowing the literary conventions of the author's day will assist in arriving at a correct interpretation. *Context* refers to the willed meaning that an author gives to the literary materials surrounding his text (57). Thus, the context refers to the shared pattern of meaning willed by the author in the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters surrounding his text (57). After reviewing these definitions and the impact they can have on proper interpretation, the reader should be convinced of their importance.

In Chapter 3, the writer speaks to the question, "Can anyone play this game?" The chapter is an insightful discourse on the interplay of the Holy Spirit and biblical interpretation. Stein addresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the processes of inspiration, formation of the Bible, and its interpretation. Included is a stimulating discussion of 1 Corinthians 2:14 and a non-believer's ability to understand a text without responding appropriately to it.

Chapter 4 begins to differentiate between the games (or literary types) found in the Bible. Here there is a distinction made between the two main types of language. The first type, *referential language*, is that which seeks to describe or pass on information. It seeks to be nonemotional in nature (73). The second type, *commissive language*, has the main goal of evoking decisions, conveying emotions, eliciting feelings, and arousing the emotions (73). These language types extend to different kinds of literary forms, as well as to the very words within those forms (74). A proper understanding of these forms of language and the literary forms they represent will assist in achieving a proper understanding of Scripture.

Part 2 addresses the specific rules of proper genre interpretation. It makes up the 9 remaining chapters. In these chapters, Stein explains the rules for the game of wisdom (proverbs), prediction (prophecy), rhythm (poetry), jargon (idioms), exaggeration (hyperbole), comparison (parables), stories (biblical narrative), and correspondence (epistles). The final chapter is dedicated to the explanation of treaties, laws, and songs. The chapters adequately explain and illustrate the varying types of Bible genre.

### **Critical Evaluation**

This book is strong in several areas. It is a work that covers a wide target audience. It is basic enough for the beginner, but detailed enough for those with formal training. Its non-technical nature makes it an easy read. Surprisingly, there are no footnotes or endnotes. These would have been helpful for direction in further study. However, the author did include a brief, but solid, bibliography of other sources to consult. The Scripture index will prove helpful to those seeking to review some of the author's numerous scriptural examples.

The writer's points are stated clearly and illustrated sufficiently. The diagrams make the concepts easier to grasp. Definitions of key terms play a pivotal role in achieving proper interpretation and limiting confusion in the process. Stein does a commendable job in communicating the fundamental idea that the *meaning* of a text is determined by what the author willed to convey by the words (shareable symbols) he used.

This reviewer found the section on the work of the Holy Spirit especially interesting. The discourse about the ability of the unbeliever to understand Scripture

without responding properly was explained well and illustrated wonderfully. It was worth the price of the book.

Concerning weaknesses of the book, there are few. Not all readers will agree with the author's assessment that all the signs in Joel 2:28-32 were fulfilled at Pentecost (92-93). Nor will all agree with his conclusions concerning the figurative nature of prophetic language (94-95). But these weaknesses are few in comparison with the strengths of the work as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

Having read *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, this reviewer sees no need to question Robert H. Stein's contribution to the already plentiful supply of books on interpreting the Bible. In fact, in light of its goals, it is one of the better reads on the subject. It is the opinion of this reviewer that Stein has been successful in presenting a nontechnical text that will help the reader understand what the goal of reading the Bible should be and how this goal can be achieved. This "rulebook" is recommended to anyone who wants to know how to play the game of interpreting the Bible.