

# Common Bible Interpretation Errors

All of us who attempt to teach the Bible are prone to make mistakes, and the most common mistakes in Bible interpretation cluster around taking verses out of their original context. In James W. Sire's book, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible*, we discover some common errors that we make and should take care to try to avoid (page numbers are for Sire's book):

## 1. Inaccurate quotation (32)

A biblical text is referred to but is either not quoted in the way the text appears in any standard translation or is wrongly attributed. (155)

## 2. Twisted translation (34)

The biblical text is retranslated, not in accordance with sound Greek scholarship, to fit the preconceived teachings of a cult. (155)

## 3. The biblical hook (41)

A text of Scripture is quoted primarily as a device to grasp the attention of readers or listeners and then followed by teaching which is so nonbiblical that it would appear far more dubious to most people had it not been preceded by a reference to Scripture. (156)

## 4. Ignoring the immediate context (52)

A text of Scripture is quoted by removed from the surrounding verses which form the immediate framework for its meaning. (156)

## 5. Collapsing contexts (58)

Two or more verses which have little or nothing to do with each other are put together as if one were a commentary on the other(s). (156)

To avoid collapsing the context of the texts we are studying is sometimes difficult. The principle is to see each text first in its own immediate and then larger contexts; | if these contexts overlap with the contexts of other texts, these other texts may be relevant. That is, if two or more texts talk about the same subject in a similar way, then when we study them together we are not collapsing the contexts. But even as we put them together, we want to keep in mind their original contexts. (61-62)

## 6. Overspecification (62)

A more detailed or specific conclusion than is legitimate is drawn from a biblical text. (157)

## 7. Word play (64)

A word or phrase from a biblical translation is examined and interpreted as if revelation had been given in that language. (157)

**8. The figurative fallacy (66)**

Either (1) mistaking literal language for figurative language or (2) mistaking figurative language for literal language. (157)

**9. Speculative reading of predictive prophecy (70)**

A predictive prophecy is too readily explained by the occurrence of specific events, despite the fact that equally committed biblical scholars consider the interpretation highly dubious. (157)

**10. Saying but not citing (76)**

A writer says that the Bible says such and such but does not cite the specific text (which often indicates that there may be no such text at all). (158)

**11. Selective citing (80)**

To substantiate a given argument, only a limited number of texts is quoted: the total teaching of Scripture on that subject would lead to a conclusion different from that of the writer. (158)

**12. Inadequate evidence (82)**

A hasty generalization is drawn from too little evidence. (158)

**13. Confused definition (90)**

A biblical term is misunderstood in such a way that an essential biblical doctrine is distorted or rejected. (158)

**14. Ignoring alternative explanations (96)**

A specific interpretation is given to a biblical text or set of texts which could well be, and often have been, interpreted in quite a different fashion, but these alternatives are not considered. (158)

**15. The obvious fallacy (99)**

Words like obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, all reasonable people hold that and so forth are substituted for logical reasons. (159)

**16. Virtue by association (101)**

Either (1) a cult writer associates his or her teaching with those of figures accepted as authoritative by traditional Christians; (2) cult writings are likened to the Bible; or (3) cult literature imitates the form of Bible writing such that it sounds like the Bible. (159)

**17. Esoteric interpretation (107)**

Under the assumption that the Bible contains a hidden, esoteric, meaning which is open only to those who are initiated into its secrets, the interpreter declares the significance of biblical passages without | giving much explanation for his or her interpretation. (159-160)

**18. Supplementing biblical authority (115)**

New revelation from postbiblical prophecies either replaces or is added to the Bible as authority. (160)

**19. Rejecting biblical authority (118)**

Either the Bible as a whole or texts from the Bible are examined and rejected because they do not square with other authorities-such as reason and other revelation-[that] do not appear to agree with them. (160)

**20. World-view confusion (128)**

Scriptural statements, stories, commands or symbols which have a particular meaning or set of meanings when taken within the intellectual and broadly cultural framework of the Bible itself are lifted out of that context, placed within the frame of reference of another system and thus given a meaning that markedly differs from their intended meaning. (160)