

Biblical Hermeneutics For Beginners

Skeptics often ask, "If the Bible is God's Word, why are there so many different interpretations of what He supposedly said?"

Those who accept the Bible as the Word of God believe that God has spoken to us unambiguously. We believe that there is only one "right" interpretation of any given Biblical passage - the meaning God intended when He "breathed" His word into the human author. If this view is correct, it follows that of the many "different interpretations" skeptics refer to, there must be only one that is valid. That is, while a particular passage may have many *applications*, it must have only one *meaning* - the one the author (through inspiration of the Holy Spirit) intended.

How, then may we determine the proper interpretation of Scripture? The science of Biblical Hermeneutics - in all it's varied "schools" - seeks to provide a methodology to answer that question.

Biblical hermeneutics is the science that teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Word of God. Proper hermeneutics provide us tools to help ensure that we are basing our interpretations on the truth as God has revealed it, while avoiding error to the greatest degree possible.

Using sound hermeneutic principles is not optional for the true disciple of Christ. The Apostle Paul enjoins us to "be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

An Introduction to

I. Definition of Hermeneutics

A. What in the world are Biblical Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics, the study of the general principles of biblical interpretation. For both Jews and Christians throughout their histories, the primary purpose of hermeneutics, and of the exegetical methods employed in interpretation, has been to discover the truths and values of the Bible. (from Encyclopedia Britannica)

Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation concerning the books of the Bible. It is part of the broader field of hermeneutics which involves not just the study of principles for the text, but includes all forms of communication: verbal, nonverbal and written.

B. Four Other Terms You Really, Really Need to Know

Revelation The act of God the Holy Spirit unveiling or uncovering truths that man through his own intellect, reason, and investigation cannot discover for himself.

Inspiration The act of the Holy Spirit superintending the writing of the truths that God wants man to know. I use the term "superintending" to indicate that God uses the personality, experience, vocabulary, and writing style of the author. Inspiration is divine guidance, not dictation. By superintending the Biblical authors, God ensures that His revelation is recorded accurately and without error.

Illumination The act of the Holy Spirit to convict the reader of the truth of Scripture and lead the reader to an "extra-exegetical" understanding of the general truth of God's Word.. By "extra-exegetical," I don't mean to imply that the Holy Spirit is not involved in the process of exegesis (the interpretation of a given

passage), but that illumination is properly understood to be an aspect of the convicting role of the Spirit, to soften the heart. God speaks to us through His written Word. The Holy Spirit helps us to know that what we are reading is indeed God's Word.

Interpretation The prayerful application of Scriptural principles by which the illuminated student of God's Word comes to an understanding of Scripture that corresponds as closely as humanly possible to the inspired meaning. The Holy Spirit reveals general truths about God; the student, convicted of these general truths, applies hermeneutic principles to arrive at the proper meaning of specific passages.

II. Why We Need Proper Hermeneutics

A. The Fundamental Principles of Biblical Understanding (Howard Hendricks, *Living By The Book*)

1. observing the text (Romans 12 exercise)
2. interpreting the text (diagramming; John 3:16)
3. applying the text (information without application leads to abortion)

B. Four Barriers to Biblical Understanding We Don't Think About (David L. Barr)

1. We speak a different language (Under the weather; perking up)
2. We live approximately two millennia later (Psalms 144:12-15)
3. We bring different expectations to the text (who cares about genealogies? Moabite curse; Amalek a grandson of Esau)
4. We approach the reading of the Bible with significantly different literary expectations than those in reading other forms of literature and writing (**poems rhyme, but not so with OT poetry; Isaiah : mispat/mishot, sadikah/ saikah**)

C. Some Erroneous Approaches Commonly Practiced Today (May Surprise You)

1. Proof-text Method

In the proof-text approach, verses and short sections of text are used to support a particular topic or position. Compared with the historical-grammatical method, interpretations based on the proof-text method are often isolated from the context surrounding the verse. Critics claim it often neglects the historical setting and type of literary genre. They also claim that the proof-text approach can be utilized in support of heterodox teachings, and that applications tend to be allegorical in nature.[10]

E.G. 2 Chron. 7:14 is not an American promise

2. Reader-response method

In the reader-response method, the focus is on how the book is perceived by the reader, not on the intention of the author. For those who regard the text as divinely inspired and seek to determine the intention of the divine author tend to stay away from this method because of the many interpretations, often contrary to scripture, that arise from a reader response of the text without any formal foundation of the text.

What This Text Means to Me...

The view that all one must do is pray and read the Bible, and the Holy Spirit will provide the proper interpretation, or the view that one's own, idiosyncratic interpretation of Scripture is just as valid as that any other ("what this text means to *me*...") renders the interpretation non-falsifiable. That is, if I say that the Holy Spirit provided me with *the* interpretation, or *my* interpretation, it is impossible for anyone to demonstrate that I have wrongly divided the Word. The

"truth" I have arrived at is self-contained and ultimately incommunicable to you. You will have to "experience" the same personal revelation, and even then, we may wonder if our two experiences really were identical, or if there were subtle differences that may affect our interpretation. This hermeneutic methodology (or really *lack* of methodology) provides ample opportunity for me to twist Scripture to my own destruction, and to that of any others who would follow my interpretation (2 Peter 3:16).

The noble-minded Bereans in Acts 17 diligently searched the Scriptures, seeking to learn if the Gospel Paul was preaching to them was true. We may be certain that they held a common view - an "orthodox" interpretation of the Scriptures they read - by which they measured what Paul was saying. This interpretation, if contemporary Rabbinic writings are any measure, was a careful application of principles like the ones we shall be considering.

3. Historical-Critical Method

The historical-critical method is an interpretative technique employed by many academic Bible scholars in secular universities, as well as some modernist Christian theologians. The method utilizes higher criticism in an attempt to discover the sources and factors that contributed to the making of the text as well as determining what it meant to the original audience. The historical-critical method treats the Bible in the same way as other human texts and, embracing a naturalistic methodology, precludes interpretations which allow prophetic foresight on part of the authors.[11] Historical-critical scholars as such are also typically less interested in determining what the text means for people today.[citation needed] For these reasons traditional scholars and conservative Christians tend to reject the method.

The Liberal Schools of Interpretation. Theological liberalism is prevalent today. Liberal theologians do not accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and reject the verbal inspiration of the Bible.

This is not the place to provide a thorough critique of liberalism in Bible Studies and its various critical methods (Source, Form, Historical Critical, etc.). I note here, however, that once one abandons the verbal inspiration of the Bible, one's own intellect becomes the determining factor in questions of truth. Relativism is the inevitable result, which, when extrapolated to its logical conclusion, is unable to prove anything with certainty, let alone one's preferred liberal interpretation.

4. Allegorical Method

The Allegorical Schools of Interpretation This method of interpretation developed among the Hellenized Jews and Christians who were strongly influenced by Platonic philosophies. Clement of Alexandria and Origen are two early church "fathers" who viewed Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, as being symbolic rather than literal.

The allegorical school teaches that beneath each verse of scripture (beneath the obvious) is the "real" meaning of the passage. Hidden in each sentence or statement is a symbolic spiritual meaning.

The Roman Catholic Church allegorizes some passages of Scripture. For example, the Catholic Church views the bread and wine of Melchizedek in the Book of Genesis, the manna in the wilderness, and the oil in the diet of Elijah, as allegorical "types" of the Catholic Mass.

This method of interpretation was rejected by all of the Reformers. Luther called it a scourge. Calvin called it Satanic. Those holding to the principles of the Reformation generally regard this method of interpretation as undermining the power and impact of the literal Word. That is not to say that the Reformers

rejected all allegorical interpretations, but argued instead that allegorical or symbolic passages were contained in clearly defined contexts, such as the Book of Revelation.

5. Devotional Method

Schools of Interpretation. The devotional schools emphasize the edifying aspects of the scriptures and their interpretation, with the goal of developing one's spiritual life.

This method often advocated the reading of the scriptures as a means of obtaining a mystical experience. The Bible is said to be useful for devotion and prayer, but need not be studied. Critics of the devotional school argue that while the Bible is uniquely able to spiritually edify and is the primary means by which God conforms us to the image of His Son, this school's methodology can lead to idiosyncratic interpretations which have little to do with the truth of Scripture.

III. Approaches (techniques) for Proper Hermeneutics

A. The Foundational Approach in Proper Interpretation

The historical-grammatical method is a Christian hermeneutics process that strives to discover the Biblical author's original intended meaning in the text.[1] It is the primary method of interpretation for scholars in the major branches of Christianity: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox.[2][3] The terms grammatico-historical, historico-grammatical and historical-cultural are regarded as synonymous with historical-grammatical.

E.G. Who wrote the book of Genesis? Who was the intended audience, and what was the purpose of the author's rendering?

The process for determining the original meaning of the text is through examination of the grammatical and syntactical aspects, the historical background, the literary genre as well as theological (canonical) considerations.[4] The historical-grammatical method distinguishes between the one original meaning of the text and its significance. The significance of the text is essentially the application or contextualization of the principles from text.

The original meaning of texts

The aim of the historical-grammatical method is to discover the meaning of the passage as the original author would have intended and what the original hearers would have understood. The original passage is seen as having only a single meaning or sense. As Milton S. Terry said: "A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture." [5]

Technically speaking, the grammatical-historical method of interpretation is distinct from the determination of the passage's significance in light of that interpretation. Taken together, interpretation of the passage along with determining the meaning defines the term (Biblical) hermeneutics.[9]

Ultimately the interpreter must try to think theologically. This involves thinking exegetically (to understand the precise meaning), thinking systematically (in order to correlate facts thoroughly), thinking critically (to evaluate the priority of the related evidence), and thinking synthetically (to combine and present the teaching as a whole).

B. Approaches for Proper (Techniques of) hermeneutics

In the interpretation of a text, hermeneutics considers what language says, supposes, doesn't say, and implies. The process consists of several steps for best attaining the Scriptural author's intended meaning(s). One such process is taught by Henry A Virkler, in *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (1981):

1. Lexical-syntactical analysis: This step looks at the words used and the way the words are used. Different order of the sentence, the punctuation, the tense of the verse are all aspects that are looked at in the lexical syntactical method. Here, lexicons and grammar aids can help in extracting meaning from the text.
E.G. 1 John
2. Historical/cultural analysis: The history and culture surrounding the authors is important to understand to aid in interpretation.
E.G. Understanding the Jewish sects of the Palestine and the government that ruled Palestine in New Testament times increases understanding of Scripture. And, understanding the connotations of positions such as the High Priest and that of the tax collector helps us know what others thought of the people holding these positions.
3. Contextual analysis: A verse out of context can often be taken to mean something completely different from the intention. This method focuses on the importance of looking at the context of a verse in its chapter, book and even biblical context.
E.G. Prov. 22:6
4. Theological analysis: It is often said that a single verse usually doesn't make a theology. This is because Scripture often touches on issues in several books.
E.G. Gifts of the Spirit are spoken about in Romans, Ephesians and 1 Corinthians. To take a verse from Corinthians without taking into account other passages that deal with the same topic can cause a poor interpretation.
5. Special literary analysis: There are several special literary aspects to look at, but the overarching theme is that each genre of Scripture has a different set of rules that applies to it. **Of the genres found in Scripture, there are: narratives, histories, prophecies, apocalyptic writings, poetry, psalms and letters. In these, there are differing levels of allegory, figurative language, metaphors, similes and literal language.**
E.G. The apocalyptic writings and poetry have more figurative and allegorical language than does the narrative or historical writing. These must be addressed, and the genre recognized to gain a full understanding of the intended meaning.

C. Top Ten Principles of Biblical Interpretation

The Principles of Biblical Interpretation

There are certain principles that will help us to accurately handle the Word of Truth. These principles are embedded in the scripture itself. We do not need to go beyond the boundaries of the Bible to discover these laws and maxims that are used to determine the meaning of scripture. The Bible interprets itself (scripture interprets scripture).

Principle #1: The Literal Interpretation Principle

We take the Bible at face value. We generally take everyday things in life as literal or at face value. This is a common sense approach. Even symbols and allegories in the Bible are based on the literal meaning of the scripture; thus the literal meaning is foundational to any symbolic or allegorical meaning.

The golden rule of interpretation is: "When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual, meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.
E.G. "What does 'go' really mean?"

Principle #2: The Contextual Principle

D.A. Carson has been quoted as saying, "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." By "proof text," of course, Carson means the abuse of a single verse or phrase taken out of context to "prove" a particular view. The word "text" is derived from the Latin word, which means to "weave." The context is that which accompanies the text. The Word of God is a perfect unit. The scriptures cannot be broken; they all hang together, a perfect unity. We must look and consider the verses immediately before, after, and around the passage. We must consider the book of the Bible and the section of the Bible in which the passage occurs. The Bible must be interpreted within the framework of the Bible.

E.G. "gay clothing" in James 2:3

Principle #3: The Scripture Interprets Scripture Principle

We may rest assured that God did not reveal an important doctrine in a single, ambiguous passage. All essential doctrines are fully and clearly explained - either in the immediate context, or somewhere else in the Bible. This principle is best illustrated by what is known as "topical Bible study." There are two essential 'rules' for applying this principle: 1) The context of the two passages must be the same; and 2) The plain passage must be used to guide our interpretation of a less clear passage - not the other way around!

E.G. Gal. 3:6-12; comp. w/ Gen. 15:6ff and Deut. 11:29; and chapters 27-28

E.G. Gen. 14:8; comp. w/ Psalms 110:4, and Heb. 7

Principle #4: The Progressive Revelation Principle

The Word of God is to be understood from the Old Testament to the New Testament as a flower unfolding its petals to the morning sun. God initiated revelation, but He did not reveal His truths all at one time. It was a long and progressive process. Therefore, we must take into account the then-current state of revelation to properly understand a particular passage. For example, an interpretation of a passage in Genesis which assumed a fully delineated view of the "new Covenant" would not be sound. As the saying goes, "The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed."

E.G. Savior revealed: Gen. 3:15; Joseph, Moses, then Christ

E.G. Faith revealed: Gen. 15:6; Num. 21:1-9; Eph. 2:8-9

Principle #5: The Accommodation Principle

The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an accommodation of Divine truths to human minds: God the infinite communicating with man the finite. The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible was also created in space, in time, and in history so that man could understand it. The truths of God made contact with the human mind at a common point, the Bible, to make God (and, indeed, all of reality) knowable. We must be careful, then, not to push accommodating language about God and His nature to literal extremes. God does not have feathers and wings (e.g., Psalms 17:8); nor is He our literal Father in the same sense our earthly father is.

E.G. Suzerainty Vassal treaty and Ex. 20

E.G. Psa. 91 (wings); Psa. 103:13 (father)

Principle #6: The One Interpretation Principle

Every verse in the Bible has only one interpretation, although that verse may have many applications. The one correct interpretation is that which mirrors the intent of the inspired author.

E.G. Luther's "interpretation" of the Good Samaritan story

This Samaritan of course is our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who has shown his love toward God and his neighbor.

The man who here lies half dead, wounded and stripped of his clothing' is Adam and all mankind. The murderers are the devils who robbed and wounded us, and left us lying prostrate half dead. We still struggle a little for life; but there lies horse and man, we cannot help ourselves to our feet, and if we were left thus lying we would have to die by reason of our great anguish and lack of nourishment; maggots would grow in our wounds, followed by great misery and distress.

30. The priest signifies the dear sainted fathers before Moses; the Levite the priesthood of the Old Testament. All these however have accomplished nothing by their works, and have passed by on the other side like this priest and Levite.

32. But Christ, the true Samaritan, takes the poor man to himself as his own, goes to him and does not require the helpless one to come to him; for here is no merit, but pure grace and mercy; and he binds up his wounds, cares for him and pours in oil and wine, this is the whole Gospel from beginning to end. He pours in oil when grace is preached, as when one says: Behold thou poor man, here is your unbelief, here is your condemnation, here you are wounded and sore. Wait! All this I will cure with the Gospel. Behold, here cling firmly to this Samaritan, to Christ the Savior, he will help you, and nothing else in heaven or on earth will. You know very well that oil softens, thus also the sweet, loving preaching of the Gospel gives me a soft, mild heart toward God and my neighbor, so that I risk my bodily life for the sake of Christ my Lord and his Gospel, if God and necessity require it.

33. But wine is sharp and signifies the holy cross that immediately follows.

34. Then the Samaritan lifts the wounded man on his beast. This beast is Christ the Lord himself, he carries us, we lay upon his shoulders, neck and body. There is scarcely a more lovely picture in the entire Gospel, than where Christ the Lord compares himself to a shepherd, in Luke 15, who carries the lost sheep on his shoulders back to the fold. He still continually carries his lost sheep thus at the present day.

35. The stable or inn is Christianity, here in this world, where we must remain for a short time. The host is the preacher of the Word of God and of the Gospel, who is to nurse and care for us.

Principle #7: The Harmony of Scripture Principle

No part of the Bible may be interpreted so as to contradict another part of the Bible. The Christian presupposes the inerrancy and harmony of Scripture as a necessary result of a perfect Creator God revealing Himself perfectly to Mankind. Proper application of hermeneutical principles will resolve apparent conflicts. The key here, of course, is the word "proper," for exegetical fallacies can easily result from a zealous but ill-informed attempt to "save" Scripture from an apparent contradiction.

E.G. How long are the days in Genesis 1 & 2 (sun created on 3rd day)? The use of "day" in Gen. 1-2 must be 24 hours long, irrespective of 2 Pet. 3:8-10 (consider Ex. 20:8-11)

Principle #8: The Genre Principle

Genre is a literary term having to do with the category or "genus" of literature under consideration. Proper interpretation must take the general literary category of any given passage into consideration. Are we dealing with poetry or prose? Are we dealing with history or prophecy? It is important that when we interpret the Word of God, we understand as much as possible the author's intent. For example, if the author is writing history - the genre of the Pentateuch of Moses - it would not be proper to interpret a single reference (such as the speech of Balaam's ass) as a poetic personification, unless a variety of contextual markers compelled us to do so.

Here are some books of the Bible and their respective genres:

Psalms - Poetry

Proverbs - Wise Sayings

Isaiah - History and Prophecy

The Gospels - Biography and History

The Epistles - Teaching and Doctrine

Revelation - Eschatology and Prophecy

Principle #9: The Grammatical Principle

The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. While we have several highly accurate translations of the Bible in English, all translation involves a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the translator. Thus, the study of word meanings, grammar, and syntax of the original languages is important for a proper understanding of Scripture. This doesn't mean that every student of the Bible must learn Hebrew or Greek. There are a number of tools available - lexicons, Bible dictionaries, detailed exegetical commentaries - that can provide a deeper understanding of crucial passages.

Principle #10: The Historical Background Principle

The Bible was composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While they are universal in application, the truths in the Bible can most fully be realized only when taking the surrounding culture and history into account. For example, when Jesus is called "the first fruits" (1 Corinthians 15:20), we may have some understanding of this title from the Old Testament, but a study of Jewish religious practice in the first century can provide a deeper understanding of why Paul chose *this* title in *this* passage, as opposed to another title with the same general meaning of "first."

Conclusion

Interpretation of Scripture will never be an exact science. The beliefs we bring to the text - our theological presuppositions - will inevitably color our interpretation to some degree. In fact, "pretended neutrality" - the attribution of bias to one's opponent while implying that one is theologically neutral - though common in apologetic circles, is an exegetical fallacy as potent as any other. By applying the principles briefly delineated in this paper (and expanded in the resources, below), we can minimize the possibility of error and bias. We can never eliminate our presuppositions (nor should we, if they are Scripturally sound), but we can "test all things" - including our interpretations - and "hold to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Some helpful links:

[Hermeneutics](#)

Probe Ministries, Don Closson

[The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics](#)

Biblical Studies Foundation, Daniel B. Wallace, Th.M., Ph.D.

[Biblical Hermeneutics](#)

Andrew Kulikovsky

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_hermeneutics

[hermeneutics \(principles of biblical interpretation ...](#)

www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/263195

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