

How to Study the Bible

The History of Hermeneutics

WHY WASTE OUR TIME WITH HISTORY?

Why spend an entire session on history. “I don’t even like history – it’s boring and has little relevance to my life. I just want to know what is true, then I won’t have to worry about any errors.”

Nice thought – poor reasoning. Such an individual will probably be very shallow and naive when it comes to dealing with family, friends, neighbors and door-knockers who hold views that “sound Christian” but in reality are merely spin-offs of heresies from history.

It’s amazing and indeed scary that attempts of some modern Christian literature, especially in the form of workbooks and study guides, that seem to be repackaging and putting a modern, conservative-looking twist to old liberal and ancient mystic means of interpreting the Scripture.

Many of these latest and greatest fads in Christian publishing present something as a *fresh* and *exhilarating* way to experience or encounter God; or a partially biblical approach to overcoming the spiritual strongholds plaguing you from your childhood experiences.

Many Christians buy these books and manuals and think that because it sounds new, it requires little time or thought in discerning the Scriptures (these authors will tell you what the Bible passages mean), and it often creates heavy emotional responses, “that it is one of the best and most helpful “studies” they have ever participated in.”

The reality is, many of these studies have simply repackaged old ideas on how to interpret the Bible (allegory, neo-orthodoxy and/or mixing secular psychology with biblical ideas).

This is just one example, but there are many advantages to knowing some of the major movements within the history of hermeneutics:

1. We Can Avoid Its _____ EXTREMES
2. We Can Reject Its _____ ERRORS
3. We Can Enjoy Its _____ ENCOURAGEMENT

As one has aptly said:

Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it.

THE MAJOR MOVEMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS

ALLEGORY

An allegorical interpretation is one where the interpreter tries to indicate that the true meaning of the text is _____ BEYOND the literal meaning of the text.

It would be helpful for us to first define allegory:

Allegory is a _____ HIDDEN or _____ SECRET meaning, unrelated to the literal meaning of the biblical text.

Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or a secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words the literal reading is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach the literal is superficial; the allegorical is the true meaning. Basic Bible Interpretation, Roy B. Zuck p. 29.

Throughout Church History there have been several groups who have used allegory in trying to determine the meaning and application of the Bible.

1. Greeks

Greek philosophy tried to come up with relevant messages behind the fanciful tales of their Greek gods. (these legend tales would form their canon of scripture to a great extent)

So, they would find hidden meanings behind why Phaedra fell in love with her stepson Hippolytus, or hidden truths behind Zeus' triumph over the three headed Typhon. Why did Ares, the Greek god of war delight in slaughtering people? Must be another meaning behind this story.

The Greeks found ways to allegorize the more famous works of Homer and Hesiod, in order to avoid embarrassment by these tales.

The Greek allegorizing affected the religious world in the way *other* religions began interpreting their Scriptures.

2. Jews

Those Jews living in Greek society (before the birth of Christ and just after), also became somewhat embarrassed by some of the immoralities found in the Old Testament and some of the human characteristics associated with God (anthropomorphisms).

Therefore they began adopting the same formula in interpreting the Bible that the Greeks used in interpreting Homer.

TWO PROMINENT JEWISH ALLEGORIZERS

Aristobulus – 160 B.C.

The Letter of Aristeas, written by an Alexandrian Jew about 100 B.C., illustrates Jewish allegorizing. It said that the dietary laws really taught various kinds of discrimination necessary to obtain virtue, and that the chewing of the cud by some animals is referring to reminiscing on life and existence. Zuck, p 30.

Philo – 20 B.C.-A.D. 54

Philo taught that Sarah and Hagar represent virtue and education, Jacob and Esau represent prudence and folly, Jacob's resting on the stone speaks of the self-discipline of the soul, and the seven-branched candelabrum in the tabernacle and the temple represent seven planets.

3. The Church Fathers

The term "Church Fathers" refers to the prominent Christian leaders, teachers and spokesmen within the Christian Church within the first few hundred years after the Apostles.

Clement of Alexandria

Influenced by Philo

Clement said any passage from the Bible may have up to five meanings:

- a) Historical (the stories of the Bible)
- b) Doctrinal, with moral and theological teachings
- c) Prophetic, which includes types and prophecies
- d) Philosophical – allegories in historical persons such as Sarah representing true wisdom and Hagar representing pagan philosophy
- e) Mystical – moral and spiritual truths.

Clement taught that the Mosaic prohibitions against eating swine, hawks, eagles and ravens (Lev 11:7, 13-19) represent respectively unclean lust for food, injustice, robbery, and greed.

In the feeding of the 5,000 (Luke 9:10- 17) the two fish represent Greek philosophy.

Origen (A.D. 185-254)

Taught a three-fold meaning of Scripture:

- Literal
- Oral
- Spiritual (allegorical)

All Scripture has an allegorical meaning to it.

In Origen's allegorizing he taught that Noah's ark pictured the church and that Noah represented Christ.

Rebekah's drawing water at the well for Abraham's servant means we must daily come to the Scriptures to meet Christ.

In Jesus' triumphal entry the donkey represented the OT, its colt depicted the NT, and the two apostles pictured the moral and mystic senses of Scripture.

Augustine (354-430)

The four rivers in Genesis 2:10-14 are four cardinal virtues and in the Fall the fig leaves represent hypocrisy and the skin covering is mortality (3:7, 21).

Noah's drunkenness (Gen 9:20-23) represents Christ in His suffering and death.

The teeth of the Shulamite in Song of Songs 4:2 speak of the church 'tearing men away from heresy.'

4. Catholics in the Middle Ages

Gregory the Great (540-604 – the first pope of the Roman Catholic Church)

He based his interpretations of the Bible on the church fathers.

Not surprisingly, he justified allegorizing by saying, 'What are the sayings of truth if we do not take them as food for the nourishment of the soul? . . . Allegorizing makes a kind of machine for the soul far off from God by which it can be raised up to Him.'

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Bernard, a leading monk, wrote extensively, including 86 sermons on only the first two chapters of the Song of Songs!

His approach to the Scriptures was a typically excessive allegorizing and mysticism.

As an example the virgins in Song of Songs 1:3 are angels, and the two swords in Luke 22:38 are the spiritual (the clergy) and the material (the emperor).

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Thomas was the most famous theologian of the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. He held that the literal meaning of Scriptures is basic, but that other senses are built on it.

Since the Bible has a divine Author (as well as human authors), it has a spiritual sense.

“The literal sense is that which the author intends, but God being the Author, we may expect to find in the Scripture a wealth of meaning. . . The Author of Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do) but also by things themselves. . . That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it.”

LITERAL

Literal interpretation is taking the text of the Bible at _____
_____ FACE VALUE

The spirit of literal interpretation is that we should be satisfied with the literal meaning of a text unless very substantial reasons can be given for advancing beyond the literal meaning, and when canons of control are supplied. Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Bernard Ramm, 45.

Literal interpretation does not deny the use of

- Symbolism
- Metaphor
- Simile
- Anthropomorphisms (Human _____ BEHAVIORS ascribed to God.)
- Anthropopathisms (Human _____ EMOTIONS ascribed to God.)

Various Literal Groups:

1. Jewish

Ezra – Nehemiah 8 (the Israelites did what the word commanded; didn't allegorize the meeting in tents)

¹ all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah— instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear^[a] and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”

¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

¹³ On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters” — as it is written.^[b]

¹⁶ So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

¹⁸ Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Rabbi Hillel (70 B.C. – A.D. 10)

Hillel established a school in Jerusalem, eventually named after him, and developed rules of interpreting the Old Testament that helped interpreters understand the original intent of the Old Testament.

2. Church Fathers

Very few Church Fathers followed a literal approach to the Bible in all of the areas of their interpretation. However, a few used a literal approach to understanding the usefulness of the Bible (i.e., Irenaeus).

3. Syrians

Note Ramm's comments:

They asserted that the literal was plain-literal and figurative-literal. A plain-literal sentence is a straightforward prose sentence with no figures of speech in it. "The eye of the Lord is upon thee," would be a figurative-literal sentence. According to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence would attribute an actual eye to God. But the Syrian school denied this to be the literal meaning of the sentence. The literal meaning is about God's omniscience. In other words literalism is not the same as letterism.

The Syrians insisted on the reality of the OT events. They accused the allegorists of doing away with the historicity of much of the OT and leaving a shadowy world of symbols. The literal and historical approach guarantees to the OT history its important reality.

Two Prominent Syrian Literalists:

1. *Theodore of Mopsuestia* – the greatest interpreter of the School of Antioch
2. *John Chrysostom* (A.D. 354-407) – Archbishop of Constantinople. Chrysostom preached over 600 expository messages and was heralded as one of the greatest commentators and Bible teachers of the Church.

4. The Reformers

The Reformers were those who were trying to “reform” the Catholic Church and move it toward a more literal use of the Bible.

John Wycliffe (A.D. 1330-1384)

Wycliffe was the first English translator of the Bible. He is credited with planting the early seeds that one day sprouted what is called “The Reformation.”

He proposed several rules for Bible interpretation:

- a) obtain a reliable text,
- b) understand Scripture’s logic
- c) compare parts of Scripture with each other
- d) maintain a humble, seeking attitude so that the Holy Spirit can instruct.

Stressing the grammatical, historical interpretation of Scripture, Wycliffe wrote that “all things necessary in Scripture are contained in its proper literal and historical senses.”

It was the Renaissance of the 14th Century in Italy that created a revival of interest in classical writings and an interest in the Hebrew and Greek texts

of the Bible. (born greatly by the invention of the printing press and accessible manuscripts)

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Luther denounced the allegorical approach to the Scriptures in strong words. 'Allegories are empty speculations and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture.' 'Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt.' 'To allegorize is to juggle the Scripture.' 'Allegorizing may degenerate into a mere monkey game.' 'Allegories are awkward, absurd, inventive, obsolete, loose rags.'

He wrote that the Scriptures 'are to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.'

His emphasis on the literal led to his stress on the original languages of the Scriptures. 'We shall not long preserve the gospel without the languages.'

The languages are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained.'

Furthermore, the grammatical, historical approach is not an end in itself; it is to lead us to Christ.

John Calvin (1509-1564)

Calvin has been called 'one of the greatest interpreters of the Bible.' Like Luther, Calvin rejected allegorical interpretations.

He said they are 'frivolous games' and that Origen and many others were guilty of 'torturing the Scripture, in every possible sense, from the true sense.'

He stressed the need for examining the context of each passage. He wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible except 14 Old Testament books and 3 New Testament books (Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation). (*Baker has a very financially accessible set*)

Calvin wrote in the preface to his commentary on Romans that ‘it is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.’

Calvin had an extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, evidenced by the fact that his Institutes include 1,755 quotations from the Old Testament and 3,098 from the New.

Some of Calvin’s rules of Bible interpretation included:

1. He insisted that the illumination of the Spirit was the necessary spiritual preparation for the interpreter of God’s Word.
2. He rejected all allegorical interpretation.
3. Scripture Interprets Scripture
4. Independence – no dogmatic theology forced him to accept a position – only if exegesis yielded it.
5. He suggested that the exegete ought to investigate the historical settings of all prophetic and Messianic Scriptures.

DEVOTIONAL

Here is where the “mystics” come in.

“Mysticism” is the belief that a man can have a direct knowledge of and communion with God through his subjective experience apart from the Bible.

“Mysticism” relies on elaborate experiences to determine truth and to know God.

This view led to what is called “Pietism”

“Pietism” grew out of the rigid creeds imposed upon people through the abuses of the reformation. Christianity became cold and no ideas outside those outlined in the creeds could be accepted. Christianity became too formal and too tied to the Church’s dogmatic approach to what people believed. Pietism wanted to recover using the Bible in obtaining spiritual food and personal edification, not merely doctrinal dogmas.

While this may sound very good – and many of its premises are right and necessary, Pietism led to people lifting up their own insights into Scripture’s meaning outside a meaning that is discovered through finding out what it first meant to the one’s it was written to.

Pietism lifted personal experience above actual truth.

LIBERAL

Rationalism. This movement stressed that the human intellect can decide what is true and false. The Bible, then, is true if it corresponds to man's reason, and what does not correspond can be ignored or rejected.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher who taught rationalism with a political bent. Hobbes was interested in the Bible as a book with regulations and principles for the English Commonwealth.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a Dutch Jewish philosopher, taught that human reason is free from theology. Theology (revelation) and Philosophy (reason) have their separate spheres.

Therefore, he denied the miracles in the Bible.

And yet he set forth several rules for interpreting the Bible, including the need for knowing Hebrew and Greek and the background of each Bible book.

Reason is the all-embracing criterion for judging any interpretation of a Bible passage: 'The norm of biblical exegesis can only be the light of reason, to all.' The Bible is to be studied only for its historical interests.

Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) rejected the authority of the Bible and stressed the place of feeling and self-consciousness in religion. This was in reaction to rationalism and formalism. As stated in his Monologues, published in 1800, he stressed that Christianity should be viewed as a religion of emotions, not as a series of dogmas or a system of morals.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) – The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, known as ‘the father of modern existentialism,’ relegated reason to the lowest level of human operation, rejected Christendom with its formal rationalism and cold creedalism, and taught that *faith is a subjective experience in one’s moments of despair*.

Principles of Modern Liberalism

1. Religious liberals believe that ‘modern mentality’ is to govern our approach to Scripture.
2. Religious liberals redefine inspiration. Experience is inspiration.
3. The supernatural is redefined.
4. The concept of evolution is applied to the religion of Israel and thereby to its documents.
5. The notion of accommodation has been applied to the Bible. (Jean Piaget – It refers to adaptation in which a child or adult develops new schema or modifies existing ones to accommodate new information different from what was already known.)
6. The Bible was interpreted historically – with a vengeance.
7. Philosophy has had an influence on religious liberalism.

Neo-Orthodoxy

Karl Barth (1886-1968). He did not agree with liberals that the Bible is merely a human document. Instead, in the Bible God speaks in divine-human encounters. In those encounters, revelation occurs and the Bible becomes the Word of God.

The Bible is a record of and witness to revelation, not revelation itself. Other neo-orthodox leaders include Emil Brunner (1889-1966) and Reinhold Neibuhr (1892- 1971).

Neo-orthodox theologians deny the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. The Creation of the universe, the creation of man, the Fall of man, the resurrection of Christ, and His second coming are interpreted mythologically.

The Fall is a myth that teaches that man corrupts his moral nature.

The Incarnation and the Cross teach us that the solution to the problem of human guilt must come from God. These events happened on a different level of history, a mythological level in contrast to actual history.

Rudolf Bultmann (1844-1976) taught that the New Testament should be understood existentially by 'demythologization,' that is, by eliminating mythological 'foreign' elements, such as miracles, including the resurrection of Christ, which he said are unacceptable today.

These 'myths' expressed reality for people in Bible times, but for today these elements in the Bible are not literal. They are pre-scientific poetic devices for expressing transcendent 'spiritual' truths.

Jesus for example, did not literally rise from the dead. His 'resurrection' speaks instead of the new freedom His disciples experienced.

Ernest Fuchs – taught we should not seek to determine the meaning of the biblical text. We should simply let it speak to us, letting it change our understanding of ourselves.

Hermeneutics then is the process of self-understanding. In this 'word-event,' as Ebeling called it, or flash of insight, the text speaks to our

situation. The meaning of the Bible, Gadamer argues, can never be fully discovered. Because it was written so many centuries ago, people today cannot enter into that world. Therefore, our world and the world of the Bible are held in tension.

The above material was taken in part from Roy B. Zuck's Basic Bible Interpretation and Bernard Ramm's Protestant Biblical Interpretation.