

How to Study the Bible

Historical-Grammatical Study

WHAT KIND OF ISSUES DOES HERMENEUTICS DEAL WITH?

There are two basic divisions within the entire subject of hermeneutics:

1. General Hermeneutics

General hermeneutics refers in the general rules that govern all Bible interpretation.

- * Find the author's intended meaning
- * Read the literature in a literal fashion
- * What does the language indicate?
- * What does the geography indicate?
- * What is the historical setting?

2. Special Hermeneutics

Special hermeneutics refers to the rules that govern certain types of literature within Scripture.

- * Rules for understanding parables
- * Rules for interpreting prophecy
- * Rules for discerning poetry
- * How to interpret metaphors
- * The uses of narrative

In this class, we will only be concerned with gaining a good understanding of General Hermeneutics. In a later course we give more attention to Special Hermeneutics.

GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

This leads us to defining the approach we believe understands the Bible as it was intended:

Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. It applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same grammatical process and exercise of common sense and reason, which we apply to other books. The grammatico-historical exegete, furnished with suitable qualifications, intellectual, educational, and moral, will accept the claims of the bible without prejudice or adverse prepossession, and, with no ambition to prove them true or false, will investigate the language and import of each book with fearless independence. He will master the language of the writer, the particular dialect which he used, and his peculiar style and manner of expression. He will inquire into the circumstances under which he wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view. He has a right to assume that no sensible author will be knowingly inconsistent with himself, or seek to bewilder and mislead his readers. *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Milton Terry, p 70.

By this we do not mean:

- Letterism – that denies the use of symbols (where they are clearly symbolic); metaphors, similes, normal figurative language.

It is **Grammatical**

It uses the normal means of human communication through human language and grammar.

It is **Historical**

The books were written to specific people at specific times for specific reasons. The interpreter must do the homework necessary to understand the words and events as they would have been understood to the original audience.

The goal of Bible Interpretation is to determine the original meaning of the text.

The following are ideas that help one to formulate the original meaning of the text:

1. The Bible, as a body of literature, is to be interpreted like all other books.
2. Know the primary meaning of words – signification of words – manner of its usage, and the peculiar shades of meaning it may have acquired.
3. Know the grammatical structure of the language employed, for thus only can one come into possession of the precise thoughts of an author, and judge of their adaptation to impress the first readers.
4. The main object of an author in writing is also to be diligently sought, for in the light of his chief purpose of the details of his composition are often more clearly apprehended.
5. The form of the book's structure is also to be studied, and the logical relation of its several parts discerned.
6. Comparison of one Scripture with another
7. Understand the times of an ancient writer, learn the circumstances under which he wrote and look out upon the world from his point of view.

Biblical Hermeneutics, Milton Terry, pp 71ff

1. What did the words convey in the grammar of the original readers?
2. What was being conveyed by those words to the initial readers?
3. How did the cultural setting influence and affect what was written?
4. What is the meaning of the words in their context?
5. In what literary form is the material written and how does that affect what is said?
6. How do the principles of logic and normal communication affect the meaning?

Basic Bible Interpretation, Roy B. Zuck, p 66.

HUMAN COMMUNICATION (Accommodation)

What language does God speak? When we get to heaven, what language will we speak? Will we speak or will we “just know?”

When you study the Bible, keep in mind – God gave you a book that He wants you and every other human being on the earth to be able to understand.

So, God did not write the Bible in a language or in a form that humans would not be able to use and comprehend. No, God “accommodated” Himself and His word by using normal means of human communication and human language.

There are things about God and about Heaven and about the spiritual world of which we cannot see that we, in our human frailty, would no doubt have trouble understanding.

John 4:24 "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

If God is “spirit” then does God have emotions like we have emotions? Does God have a mind to think like we do? How does God get from one place to the other?

In other words, there is nothing tangible in this world for me to see or think of in which to compare God. I can't see, and never have seen a spirit, so how can I know what God is like and how He operates?

God has used human means to communicate to us. That's good news, because that means that humans can understand exactly what God wants us to understand from what He says about Himself and His ways in the Bible.

A Few Facts:

God Used Human Languages to Communicate His Revelation

God used _____ THREE human languages to record Scripture.

Ancient _____ HEBREW

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: Genesis 1:1

NAU Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Ancient _____ ARAMAIC

The name is given to a form of Semitic speech, most nearly related to Hebrew and Phoenician, but exhibiting marked peculiarities, and subsisting in different dialects. Its original home may have been in Mesopotamia (Aram), but it spread North and West, and, as below shown, became the principal tongue throughout extensive regions. After the return from the Captivity, it displaced Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jews in Palestine. In its eastern form it is known as Syriac found in only a few places in the Old Testament (Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; 2 Kings 18:26; Isaiah 36:11; Jeremiah 10:11) and a few words in the New Testament.

Koine (Common) _____ GREEK

John 1:1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

NAU John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

While these languages may not be known by many in the world today (none of the languages the Bible was written in are actually spoken today), they can still be learned and studied.

God communicated through human language so humans could understand what He intended them to understand.

God could have communicated to us in many different ways, but He accommodated Himself to communicate to us through normal human means of communication.

God Used Human Illustrations to Explain What He Is Like

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Human _____ QUALITIES to describe
_____ DIVINE realities.

NAU Exodus 33:20 But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"

NAU Psalm 8:3 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;

NAU 2 Chronicles 16:9 "For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. You have acted foolishly in this. Indeed, from now on you will surely have wars. "

ANTHROPOPATHISMS

Human _____ EMOTIONS to describe divine realities.

*NAU Zechariah 8:1 Then the word of the LORD of hosts came, saying,
2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I am exceedingly jealous for Zion,
yes, with great wrath I am jealous for her.'*

ZOOMORPHISM

_____ ANIMAL characteristics to describe divine realities.

NAU Psalm 91:4 He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.

God gives us these descriptions so we can have a concrete way to think about something that would be very difficult to grasp otherwise.

But Be Very Careful – Don't Take Anthropomorphisms too far:

NAU Psalm 50:21 "These things you have done and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.

God is NOT like us – He accommodated to our ability to understand – so we could think about Him the way He wanted us to think about Him.

God Used Human Illustrations to Communicate Spiritual Truths

In other words, God did use some figurative language in the Bible to communicate many truths.

Figurative language is not an illustration with a _____ HIDDEN meaning. It is an illustration with an _____ OBVIOUS meaning.

NAU Psalm 23:1 <A Psalm of David.> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

NAU 1 Peter 2:2 like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, 3 if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

NAU John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

NAU John 10:7 So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 "All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

Figures of speech use illustrations to teach something with an idea already clear in people's minds.

How can you know if something is to be taken figuratively or literally?

Biblical language, like newspaper language or any other ordinary human communication, should be taken as literal unless there is one of three compelling reasons for considering it non-literal.

1. If the statement is obviously irrational, unreasonable, or absurd if taken literally.
2. The context may indicate that the language is figurative.
3. If there is a contradiction with clearer and more enduring emphases of Scripture, it is legitimate to ask whether or not the passage is to be taken as literal – i.e., Luke 14:26 – hate Father and mother.

Understanding and Applying the Bible, Robertson McQuilkin, pp 170ff

1. Always take a passage in its literal sense unless there is good reason for doing otherwise. Rev 7:4-8 – no reason to take this as anything but literal – John 1:29 – Jesus is the lamb, obviously figurative
2. The figurative sense is intended if the literal would involve an impossibility. Jer 1:18; Rev 1:16; Ps 57:1; Micah 1:2
3. The figurative is intended if the literal meaning is an absurdity (Isa 55:12).
4. Note whether the figurative expression is followed by an explanatory literal statement (1 Thess 4:13-15; Ephe 2:1)
5. Sometimes a figure is marked by a qualifying adjective, as in “Heavenly Father” (Matt 6:14), “the true Bread” (John 6:32), “living Stone” (1 Peter 2:4).

Basics of Bible Interpretation, Roy B. Zuck, pp 144-145.

BE CAREFUL WITH ACCOMMODATION!!!

This idea of God using human illustrations to communicate divine truth does NOT mean that God used incorrect, barbaric ideas of ancient people that can now be set aside because our more modern understanding of reality is further advanced than the ancient cultures.

Some people want to dismiss ideas in the Bible such as:
Blood Sacrifices or miracles

Because they might have fit what people used to believe in ancient, less sophisticated societies, but are obviously unnecessary with what we know to be true in our more modern and scientifically advanced society.

NO – accommodation merely means that God used human means to communicate divine and timeless truths.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

God did not communicate everything all at once. The Bible was written over a period of 1500 years.

Therefore, there are concepts that God initiated in the Old Testament that are not fully understood until He completed His revelation years later in the New Testament.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Ephesians 3:4-5; Romans 16:25-26

The Church was not fully revealed in the Old Testament, but later in the New Testament

Why is this important? Israel should never be interpreted in the Old Testament to be _____ THE CHURCH

The Trinity

There are hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament: (Genesis 1:26), but a full understanding of the Trinity is not found until the completion of the New Testament.

The Priesthood and the Sacrificial System

Why Old Testament animal sacrifices?

The full intent of this system is not realized until the death of Jesus. (Hebrews 9:11-14).

BE CAREFUL WITH PROGRESSIVE REVELATION !!!

Progressive revelation DOES NOT mean evolution:

Some say that there are no complex or sophisticated thought to be found in the Old Testament. Some say that the Bible shows theology growing and changing over time and through experience. So, the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament. Or faith in the Old Testament is different than faith in the New Testament. Or ideas of monogamy or homosexuality in the Old

Testament change and should now be understood in light of our present culture.

We only mean by Progressive Revelation – that God’s revelation must be understood through its whole – not merely its parts.

Don’t force New Testament ideas into Old Testament ideas.

Don’t change Old Testament ideas to become New Testament ideas. Let the Bible speak for itself.

SINGLE MEANING

DEFINED:

This principle means that a biblical text has one basic proper meaning or interpretation, not two or three.

There is one correct interpretation, but after it is ascertained we may make several legitimate applications of its relevance to our own lives or the lives and situations of other people.

Here we mean what every writer means: one intended meaning.

A reader cannot feel the liberty to read another person’s writing and say that the original writer meant one thing, but the reader can legitimately find other meanings that the original author never intended or suggested.

This entire principle rests upon the fact that writers are using language to get a particular point across and it is the reader’s responsibility to find the author’s point and apply that point alone.

No reader has the right to impose multiple meanings upon any person’s writing, especially the Bible, unless the writer SPECIFICALLY SAYS THERE IS MORE THAN ONE INTENDED MEANING.

Every word means something specific and direct:

For example:

He Has a Trunk, but I don't, nor do you, nor should you.

What do I mean?

Do I have in mind multiple legitimate meanings?

If this sentence were given in the course of conversation at a circus while watching the elephant show, it would probably be illegitimate to say that what I meant, or what any reader should derive as a meaning of this sentence, is that no one should have a trunk on their car, everyone should drive hatch backs.

Readers NEVER _____ DETERMINE MEANING
- they only _____ DISCOVER the originally intended meaning.

In terms of biblical material:

If a biblical writer says that a passage has more than one intended meaning, then it is legitimate.

But just because an apostolic writer (like Matthew quoting or commenting on the meaning of an Old Testament verse like Matthew 2:18 quoting Jeremiah 31:15) assigns a second meaning, does not mean that anyone who reads has the same right to do so.

Readers are missing a very important element that the biblical writers had:

DIRECT INSPIRATION FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT

We do not determine meaning – we simply seek to discover the meaning intended by the biblical writers.

Consider Ramm's comments:

Protestant Pietism. Many devout Christians believe that God speaks to them each day out of Scriptures and so gives them direction and guidance for the decisions of that day. Hence the Scripture is read in anticipation of specific directions emerging out of their reading of the Scripture that pertain directly to their lives and their decisions. Scripture is not only the fountain head of all theological truth and God's Word through the ages, but its phrases or sentences or verses are intended to be specific ways in which God can speak to each Christian each day he reads his Scripture in the light of the decisions and situations that Christian is confronted with that particular day.

For example, a very pious Protestant might be in a place of indecision whether he should take a certain trip or not. In his devotions he reads how the Church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas away on a missionary trip. So this Christian feels that God is speaking to him in that passage and it is now God's will that he should take the proposed trip.

This is a very direct assertion of plurality in the meaning of Scripture (1) The first sense is what the record means of Paul and Barnabas setting out on a missionary trip. (2) The second meaning is that God is telling this pious Christian of the twentieth century to take a trip.

Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Bernard Ramm, pp 111-112.

It is wrong for a reader to read:

NAU Hosea 8:1 Put the trumpet to your lips! Like an eagle the enemy comes against the house of the LORD, Because they have transgressed My covenant And rebelled against My law.

And then determine that God wants him to go and become a band director.

However, to read:

NAU Ephesians 4:2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,

And understand: if I am to be Christ-like and obedient to God in my character, I should be more compassionate and longsuffering toward .

..

Such would be a legitimate application of the intended meaning and intended application Paul is suggesting.

You are not to read the Bible for a meaning unique to you – any such reading of the Bible is setting yourself up for grave error and is a misuse of God's Word.

Read the Bible to find the meaning for anyone.

Once you have discovered the single meaning intended by the author, you should seek a practical way to apply that single meaning in your personal life.

BUT – _____ *APPLICATION* IS NOT A PART OF THE HERMENEUTICS PROCESS

APPLICATION CAN ONLY COME _____ *AFTER* THE ENTIRE PROCESS OF HERMENEUTICS AND EXEGESIS IS COMPLETED.

A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that words and sentences can have but one signification in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture. . . Hence that meaning of a sentence which most readily suggests itself to a reader or hearer is, in general, to be received as the true meaning, and that alone.

Understanding and Applying the Bible, J. R. McQuilken, p 108.