



Hermeneutics: The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation¹

2 Timothy 2:15 Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

“That’s just your interpretation!” How many times have unbelievers (and even believers!) used such a statement to disregard the clear teaching of the Word of God? We must admit that interpretation is necessary for us to understand what the Bible says. In fact, virtually every form of communication requires some degree of interpretation. Confusion and contradiction result when we fail to interpret communication properly.

One might suppose that all Bible-believing Christians would interpret the Bible in the same way. Unfortunately, such is not the case. Differences between genuine believers often stem from different interpretations of the same texts. The “obvious” meaning and application of a passage may not be so obvious to some.

Agreed-upon rules of interpretation help believers come to reasonable understandings and applications of the Bible. Once everyone is “playing by the same rules,” differences in interpretation are minimized.

Professing Christians often display a remarkable apathy and indifference toward understanding the Bible. Instead of acquiring the necessary tools for Bible interpretation for themselves, they expect others to tell them what the Bible means and how to apply it. Or, what’s even worse, having never considered the rules of Bible interpretation, some believers tenaciously hold false or faulty interpretations. Those who don’t know or who ignore the basic rules of interpretation inevitably mishandle—*wrongly* divide—the Scripture.

Every believer is responsible to read, understand, and apply God’s Word. This series is designed to help believers do so.

¹ Much of this material comes directly from Dr. Rolland McCune’s Hermeneutics class notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996 revision of his notes. Modified by Brad Anderson, Liberty Baptist Church of Antigo, WI in 2009-2010. Other resources noted as used.

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Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 1: Introduction to Hermeneutics

Every student of the Bible engages in hermeneutics. Some do it well and others do it poorly, but everyone does it. What is hermeneutics? Don't let the word itself intimidate you. The concept is rather simple.

I. THE DEFINITION OF HERMENEUTICS

A. Various definitions

1. "Hermeneutics is the science and art of biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation." (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*)
2. "Biblical interpretation is a rational and spiritual process that attempts to understand an ancient inspired writer in such a way that the message from God may be understood and applied in our day. Hermeneutics is both a gift (art) and a set of logical guidelines (science) for understanding human languages." (Bob Utley)
3. "Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the theoretical principles involved in bringing out to this and every age the relevance of the Bible and its message." (J. I. Packer, "Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority")

B. Further explanations and comments

1. Evangelicals commonly claim that "the Bible is our only rule for faith and practice." Why then do so many Christians disagree about faith and practice? Differences are based on differing interpretations and applications of the Bible. Accepting the authority of the Bible does not necessarily lead to a universal understanding of the Bible. That's why interpretation is so important.
2. Interpretive error is exceedingly common in preaching and publishing (as we'll discover in the lesson on interpretive pitfalls). Many read their own meanings into the text instead of taking them from the text (exegesis). Interpretive error is partially due to sin's effect on the human mind, but in many cases, it is the result of laziness or mere ignorance of the basic principles of Bible interpretation. Both leaders and laypersons are guilty of mishandling the Bible. Yet with minimal training, any believer can become a skilled interpreter of God's Word. Cf. Acts 17:11 and 2 Tim 2:15.

3. Every believer is responsible for hiding God's word in his heart (Ps 119:11), meditating on it, and obeying it (Josh 1:8). Scripture is "inspired" and "profitable" for many things (2 Tim 3:16-17). Such texts show us that God gave His Word for a purpose and that believers must have the capacity to appreciate, understand, and obey it.
4. Christians today have ready access to the Bible in many forms— written, audio, computer, video, etc. With all the available Bible study tools, engaging in personal Bible study is easier today than at any time in the past. Every Bible student should possess the tools and techniques to mine the Bible for the "much fine gold" (Ps 19:10) contained therein.
5. Biblical interpretation is not the sole domain of the professional theologian (i.e., pastors, professors). Every believer should know the basic rules of biblical interpretation and be able to arrive at reasonable interpretations using a few basic tools. Bible study and interpretation is for every believer.

Quote: "I cannot persuade myself that a book intended for the salvation and conversion of the whole world should cover its meaning in any such mystery and doubt that none but critics and philosophers discover it"²

II. THE LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND OF HERMENEUTICS

A. The English Derivation of the Word Hermeneutics

The word "hermeneutics" comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuo* in its various forms and usages. This in turn apparently comes from the Greek god Hermes (aka Mercury) who in Greek mythology was the messenger of the other gods and the interpreter of Zeus. It was said that Hermes discovered language and how to write it and was the god of eloquence and literature. His task was to take what surpassed human understanding and put it into a form that human beings could comprehend.

Hermeneuo in its various forms is used 19 times in the NT in principally two ways: to "explain" and to "translate." Hermeneutics is the task of explaining the meaning of Scriptures.

B. Texts:

Luke 24:27 "he expounded" (*diermeneuo*), meaning "to unfold the meaning of what is said, to explain."

John 1:42 "which is by interpretation..."

1 Corinthians 12:10 "the interpretation of tongues..."

² From Bob Utley, *Biblical Interpretation Seminar Textbook*, freebiblecommentary.org/pdf/seminar.textbook.pdf

C. An OT Illustration: Nehemiah 8:1-8

Ezra and the others read the Hebrew Scriptures and “gave the sense,” i.e., they gave a running exposition and application of it. The readers interpreted or explained the Scriptures for the audience.

D. A NT Illustration: Acts 8:27-35

The Ethiopian official was reading the OT Scriptures (probably the LXX) and having trouble understanding what he read. Philip came along and helped him interpret the passage (from Isa 53).

E. We should recognize that, although every believer is capable of understanding Scripture, preachers and teachers are also valuable in helping people understand.

III. THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Why do we need to understand what God has revealed to us in the Bible?

- ✓ To ascertain God’s message
- ✓ To form a correct theology
- ✓ To have valid content in preaching
- ✓ To have valid application to ethical living
- ✓ To dispel error and misconception

Beyond these reasons, the following pertain.

A. All Bible Reading Requires Interpretation.

1. While the major themes of the Bible are essentially clear, the “plain meaning” of a particular passage is often *not* plain to some readers. The Bible is not equally simple to understand in all its parts. Several passages of the Bible are notoriously difficult to understand. It’s unrealistic to say, “You don’t have to interpret the Bible; just read it and do what it says.” Every reader is an interpreter. It’s not a matter of whether you’ll interpret the Bible; it’s a matter of how you’ll interpret it.

Note the Quote: We never perceive reality without interpreting it. More precisely, we never perceive reality until we have already interpreted it. The only reality that we notice and the only reality that we know is always and already interpreted.³

³ Keven Bauder, “Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither? Part 6 - Digression One: Really?” *In the Nick of Time*, 9/18/2009.

2. Some readers follow the “common sense” school of interpretation—simple common sense guides one’s understanding. Words mean what they seem to mean. This may sound reasonable, but “simple common sense” is rather rare, and one person’s common sense may not seem so “common” to others. Thus, rules of interpretation must extend beyond mere common sense.

Example: How should one interpret the sentence, “There’s a cow in the field.” Is it really a cow? Maybe it’s a bull, a steer, or a heifer. Maybe it’s a buffalo. Is it even bovine? The word “cow” can refer to any number of animals (e.g., elephant, moose, whales)—and even humans! Even seemingly simple statements require interpretation.

3. The act of identifying something accurately, saying something true about it, and having someone else understand what you said, is really quite an amazing feat. Words can have various meanings, depending on context and intent. The fact that we can actually communicate to one another is somewhat surprising.
4. Historically, God’s people have always recognized the need for accurate Bible interpretation to go along with Bible reading. William Tyndale, one of the first to translate the Bible into English, provided prefaces and footnotes throughout his translation. The Geneva Bible included thousands of explanatory notes. The original KJV also provided many marginal notes and alternative readings to help the reader understand the text. Reformers like Luther and Calvin produced commentaries and catechisms to teach what the Bible means.⁴

B. Hermeneutics is Required to Bridge the “Gaps.”

The Bible was written many years ago by people unlike us in many ways. Biblical principles are eternally relevant (i.e., meaningful, applicable), yet reflect a particular historical and literary context. Bridging the “gaps” between the biblical world and our world is somewhat problematic.

Several gaps we must bridge:

1. The Historical Gap: Thousands of years separate us from the writers of the Bible. Knowing the life and times of the writer is essential to bridge this gap.
2. The Cultural Gap: Many biblical practices have little or no expression in our culture. E.g., “cutting” a covenant, levirate marriage, animal sacrifice, foot washing, removal of the sandal, weights and measures, women’s head coverings, the holy kiss, etc.
3. The Geographical Gap: Modern readers may be ignorant of the geographical setting of Bible stories, which adds to misunderstanding.

⁴ Refer to a very helpful article, “Against the Theory of ‘Dynamic Equivalence’” by Michael Marlowe, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/dynamic-equivalence.html>, Oct 2009.

Geography consists of:

- 1) Climate: what affects it and what it affects
- 2) Land formations: plains, mountains, valleys
- 3) Water formations: seas, lakes, rivers, wadi systems
- 4) Trade routes
4. Linguistic Gap: The Bible was written in three ancient languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. There are many problems to be overcome in translating from one language to another.
5. The Literary Gap: Should we take the first few chapters of Genesis as a historical record, as myth, or symbolically? How are we supposed to interpret Hebrew poetry? What is a Gospel? What kind of literature is the book of Revelation? These questions have to do with the types (genres) of literature the Bible contains and the proper ways to interpret them. Lack of literary understanding leads to misinterpretations.

The Bible contains many expressions that we do not commonly use and which obviously call for interpretation. For example, what did Paul mean when he said “touch not a woman” or “many sleep”? Do you know what the following expressions mean? Seed as the dust of the earth, possess the gate, slack hands, covered his feet, spread your cloak, gird up your loins, let none of his words fall, open the ears, enlarge my coasts, my portion, horn of salvation, fruit of the mouth, whitewashed sepulchers, salt of the earth, gather to your fathers, fatted calf, prodigal son, light under a bushel.

Note: Many of the newer Bible translations give the meanings of such expressions instead of translating literally. There are pros and cons to this practice, as we shall see.

Another Note: If you are using the King James Version, you no doubt know the meaning of the following expressions: ague, amerce, beeves, besom, blains, bolled, broided, bruit, cauls, chamois, collop, cotes, draught house, earing, fuller, habergeon, hough, maw, messes, mincing, muffler, ouches, parbar, polled, selvedge, sith, wen, wimples, withs, wot.

C. Hermeneutics is Required for Proper Application of Scripture.

1. We interpret the Bible not only to know what it says, but also to obey it (James 1:22). We must understand and apply the Bible to our modern situation. Correct understanding comes before correct application. Understand first, apply second.
2. Satan knows and even understands what the Bible says (Ps 91:11-12; Mt 4; James 2:19). Many unsaved people are similarly knowledgeable, yet have never applied the Bible to themselves. Understanding without application falls short of the intent of Scripture.

3. Even those who interpret the Bible in similar ways may apply it quite differently. E.g., what does “modest apparel” look like (cf. 1 Tim 2:9)? What is appropriate hair length for men and women (cf. 1 Cor 11:14-15). How does one show that he does not “love the world” (cf. 1 Jn 2:15)? What does it mean to “abstain from all appearances of evil” (1 Thes 5:22)? People apply such principles differently.

IV. THE CHALLENGE OF HERMENEUTICS

- A. Many in our post-modern culture deny the idea that any statement has a particular meaning for anyone other than the reader. That is, they allege that each individual must come to his own understanding of any communication, and that meaning will be different for every individual. There can be, they say, no “right” or “wrong” interpretation of anything; everyone has his own interpretation. Every interpreter is biased and influenced by his background and context. Any statement can be understood in many ways, depending on who is reading or hearing it.
- B. Many today hold that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Everything is a matter of personal perspective or opinion. Thus, no one can say for sure what anything means. What an individual feels about something is all that matters. Since ultimate truth is beyond our reach, it is useless to claim that the Bible says anything that applies to everyone. Claims to objective and universal truth are arrogant, intolerant, uninformed, and dangerous, they say (note the contradiction in that statement).
- C. Christianity, of course, depends on the historical truth that Jesus is “the Christ, the son of the living God” (Mt 16:16), that he died on the cross and rose again (1 Cor 15:3-4), and that those who believe in him will “have life through his name” (Jn 20:31). These statements mean something. If the Gospel can be interpreted in any and every way, then it becomes meaningless. If the Bible can mean anything to anyone, then it has lost its true meaning. Christians must stand for objective truth, insist that interpreters can come to a correct understanding of biblical statements, and proclaim the Gospel confidently. Jesus is “the truth” (Jn 14:6) and God’s Word “is truth” (Jn 17:17).
- D. Even committed Christians must intentionally apply the rules of interpretation to find the author’s original intent. Like everyone else, Christians have biases. We must avoid reading the Bible through our own “lenses” of experience and tradition. We must allow the Bible to say what it says; we take the Bible as is, without trying to change its original meaning to suit ourselves.

Note the Quote: We must force ourselves to remove the glasses of denominational and cultural tradition and view the Bible in light of its own day. Denominational and cultural traditions can be helpful, but they must always be subject to the Bible, not vice versa.⁵

V. THE TASK OF HERMENEUTICS

- A. The main task of hermeneutics is to understand what the original author meant in order to understand what it means to us today. The meaning of Scripture is based on authorial intent.
- B. Because of inspiration (2 Tim 3:16), God is the author of Scripture. Yet God used individuals to receive, record, and publish this deposit. The authors of the Bible, both Divine and human, had a particular intent for their writing, and that is what we must seek to understand and apply.

⁵ Utley



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Lesson 2: God's Communication To Man

Hermeneutics is necessary because God has communicated to man. The Bible contains God's revelation, and man has the responsibility to understand and respond to this communication.

I. REVELATION FROM GOD

A. The Definition of Revelation

1. In a general sense, revelation is a disclosure of what was previously unknown. To be known, God must reveal Himself; He cannot be discovered or known "from below." Revelation is always from the top down.
2. "In the broadest sense revelation is the sum total of the ways in which God makes himself known" (Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 17).
3. In a theological sense, revelation is God's communication of information about Himself and/or the world. God reveals both Himself and information about Himself.
4. The Bible is an objective truth deposit. Biblical hermeneutics applies to the verbal, informational, propositional revelation of God.

B. The Extent of Revelation

In one sense, everything that is not God reveals something about Him. Every aspect of the universe bears testimony or witnesses concerning God. His stamp is on everything that He has created. In theology, revelation from God is in two forms or has two aspects: general and special.

1. General Revelation

- a) This is "God's witness to himself for all men. It is general in two senses. (1) It is a general revelation for all men; i.e., not restricted to a specific man or people. (2) It is a general kind of revelation" (Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 17).
- b) "General revelation, mediated through nature, conscience, and the providential ordering of history, traditionally has been understood as a universal witness to God's existence and character" (Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation*, p. 14).
- c) General revelation essentially tells us that God exists and that He is good, powerful, etc. See Psalm 19:1-6 and Romans 1:18-23.

2. Special Revelation

- a) Special revelation is "God's word in a concrete form to a specific person or group" (Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 17). Millard Erickson says it is "God's manifestation of himself at particular times and places through particular events" (*A Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, p. 144). See Psalm 19:7-14 and 1 Corinthians 2:6-12.
- b) The Bible is special revelation. It is an objective truth deposit of special revelation in propositional, cognitive form. Thus, it is the object of hermeneutics.

II. THE INSPIRATION OF THE TEXT

A. The Definition of Inspiration

1. By inspiration, we understand that supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Holy Spirit, by virtue of which their writings are given divine truthfulness, and constitute an infallible and sufficient rule of faith and practice (Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 41).
2. In a sense, inspiration is an act that encompasses a process and a result. The process of inspiration gave us the Scriptures, which are inspired.
3. Technically speaking, inspiration applies to the writings, not the writers, although the writers are obviously involved and cannot be excluded from the overall picture. "All Scripture is given by inspiration..." (2 Tim 3:16).
Inspiration guarantees that what God said, the human author said; what the human author wrote, God wrote. More importantly for hermeneutics, what the human author meant, God meant (cf. 1 Cor 2:13).

B. The Explanation of the Doctrine of Inspiration

1. Inspiration Is a Miracle of Divine Creation
Scripture is a product of the creative activity of God. God "breathed" them into existence (2 Tim 3:16, cf. 2 Pet 1:21).
2. Inspiration Employed Human Languages
 - a) The Bible Reflects Human and Divine Authorship.
God and man are both necessary and responsible for production of the Scriptures. "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved (borne along) by the Holy Spirit" (1 Pet 1:18). There was a cooperation of the divine and human participants in the process.

- b) The Biblical Languages Are Purely Human.
 - (1) The Hebrew of the OT is not “heavenly Hebrew” and the Greek of the NT is not “Holy Ghost Greek.” The Hebrew was one of the northwest Semitic human languages, and the Greek was *koine* (common) Greek.
 - (2) The biblical languages had literary genres (types, kinds) that must be treated as they were understood in their day.
 - (3) The rules of grammar and syntax must be applied to the text today as they were applied originally.
 - (4) The meaning gleaned today from the biblical languages must be the same as understood by the people to whom the Scriptures were given in their human languages.

III. THE TRANSMISSION AND PRESERVATION OF THE TEXT

A. Evidences of the Preservation of the Text

- 1. The Biblical Idea of the Ultimate Indestructibility of Scripture
 - a) Matthew 5:18 – This verse speaks of the Bible’s ultimate indestructibility. However, the “jots and tittles” imply something about the *text* itself.
 - (1) The “jot” is probably the Hebrew letter *yod* (**y**), and the “tittles” could be the little distinguishing horns or marks used to make certain letters (e.g., **Myhla**)
 - (2) The implication is that the text of Scripture would be preserved.
 - b) John 10:35 – Scripture not being “broken” implies that it will be available and authoritative.
 - c) 1 Peter 1:9-13 – What the prophets wrote is part of the divine record and is authoritative and indestructible (especially v. 12), again implying the preservation of what the prophets wrote.

Note: Psalm 12:6-7 is often cited as a text proving the eternal preservation of Scripture. However, the grammar⁶ of the passage shows that this text is not as strong as some suggest.

- 2. Biblical Indications
 - a) Exodus 17:14
 - b) Numbers 33:2
 - c) Deuteronomy 31:24-26

⁶ The grammatical construction of the text shows that the word “them” in vs. 7 probably does not refer to “the words of the LORD” in vs. 6. The promise of preservation applies to “the godly man” of vs. 1.

- d) Joshua 24:26
- e) 1 Samuel 10:25
- f) 2 Kings 22:8

3. Inherent In the Continuing Authority of Scripture

- a) If the Scriptures are authoritative for all times, they must be generally available. There must be some means for their continuing availability despite whatever problems pertain to copies, translations, versions, etc.

Note, however, 2 Kings 8:22f, where part of the Bible was apparently lost or out of circulation for some time. There is no biblical promise that all Scripture will be available to all people at all times.

- b) Inspiration, authority, and preservation seem to go together theologically. If the text is inspired, it automatically has authority and will be preserved for future generations.

4. Implied In the Warnings Regarding the Scriptures

These are warnings not to add to or subtract from Scripture, either its *words* or *message*.

- a) Warnings regarding the words themselves:
 - (1) Deuteronomy 4:2
 - (2) Deuteronomy 12:32
 - (3) Proverbs 30:5, 6
 - (4) Revelation 22:18-19
- b) Warnings regarding the message of the words:
 - (1) Mark 7:9, 13
 - (2) 2 Corinthians 4:2
 - (3) 2 Thessalonians 3:14

5. Implied In the Commands To Know the Scriptures

Or, conversely, in the rebukes for not knowing the Scriptures.

- a) Deuteronomy 6:4-9
- b) Psalm 1:2
- c) Matthew 22:29
- d) John 3:10

6. The Existence of Translations, Versions, Copies, and Reproductions of the Text

B. The Divine Activity in the Preservation and Transmission of the Text

1. God has used providential (i.e., normal) means to preserve the text of Scripture. God miraculously inspired the text originally, but its preservation has not been a miracle. Preservation and transmission are not miraculous processes. The hand of fallible copyists and translators is evident in the manuscripts that survive. Had God chosen to miraculously preserve the text (or a particular manuscript [MS]), we would expect the Bible to affirm that fact and the MSS [manuscripts] to give evidence of it.
2. God's Word has been preserved in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek MSS. While no two MSS are exactly identical, experts are able to sort through the data and arrive at the correct reading most of the time (the process of textual criticism). No part of Scripture has been lost or so corrupted that we no longer have a reasonable idea of what the original said.
3. The Scriptures teach its own preservation but never mentions the means or methods by which it would be preserved. Nothing in the Bible suggests where or how it would be preserved. So we must look to history to show us how God has preserved His Word.
4. The Word of God is preserved or contained in any translation of Scripture that accurately reproduces the original writings. Even if a translation contains certain flaws or weaknesses, it can still be considered the Word of God (as the KJV translators affirmed).

IV. THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE.

A. The Meaning of the Clarity of Scripture: The Doctrine of Perspicuity

1. The Bible's Central Message is Clear.
 - a) No Christian can fail to learn from the Bible what he needs to know for his spiritual welfare. No sinner can fail to learn what he needs to know to be right with God. The central message of the Bible consists of revealed truth about creation, the fall into sin, the provision of redemption, and the consummation in the Last Days. These truths are essentially clear and evident to any reader.
 - (1) Psalm 119:105, 130
 - (2) 2 Tim 3:15
 - b) We do not deny that the Bible contains difficult, obscure passages. Not all of the Bible is equally clear, and some parts defy interpretation to this day, although we have to conclude that they were understood at the time of writing and first reading. E.g., baptism for the dead (1 Cor 15:29).

2. The Bible Has One Truth System.

There is only one correlated, non-contradictory network of divine truth in the Bible. God intended Scripture to say something, and it's the job of the interpreter to understand and appreciate the intended meaning.

3. The Bible Possesses Its Own Meaning.

Scripture interprets itself from within. One can compare Scripture with Scripture and learn God's message. Scripture does not need supplementation from human reason, tradition, or experience to get the central message.

B. Implications For Hermeneutics

1. The Bible Must Be Interpreted Correctly.

A biblical text has a particular meaning—the one intended by God and by the original author. Every passage has a correct or proper interpretation (although there is no guarantee that any particular interpreter will find it). Since God's intent was to communicate meaning, God's people should be able to find the correct interpretation.

2. The Bible Has No Contradictory Meanings.

Since there is one correlated, non-contradictory network of divine truth, every interpretation must be compatible with and must fit in to the clear teachings of other Scripture.

3. A Person Can Interpret Scripture Directly For Himself.

No official teaching office of the church, no clergyman, scientist, psychologist, philosopher, or anyone else need come between a person and the Bible. This does not mean, however, that every person will come to the correct interpretation. But it does mean that interpretation is not limited to an elite few. Every believer can get something from Scripture. Cf. 1 John 2:27.

This ability for direct access to and interpretation of the Bible does not suggest that teachers are unnecessary. Pastors are expected to learn and teach "sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9). Teachers are valuable in that they help us understand and apply the Bible (cf. Ezra 7:10; Neh 8:8; Acts 8:31).



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Lesson 3: BASIC EQUIPMENT FOR BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

I. BASIC TOOLS

A. General Tools

1. Bible Atlases

- a) *The NIV Atlas of the Bible*, by Carl Rasmussen (Zondervan, 1989).
- b) *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands*, by Barry J. Beitzel (Moody, 1985).
- c) *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Ave-Yonah, eds. (Macmillan, 1977 rev.).

2. Bible Concordances

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Thomas Nelson, 2000).

3. Old Testament and New Testament Backgrounds

a) Old Testament:

- (1) *Kingdom of Priests*, by Eugene Merrill (Baker, 1987).
- (2) *The Biblical World*, Charles Pfeiffer, ed. (Baker, 1966).

b) New Testament:

- (1) *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, by Everett Ferguson (Eerdmans, 1987).
- (2) *Harper's World of the New Testament*, Edwin Yamauchi, ed. (Harper and Row, 1981).
- (3) *The New Testament Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, by Ralph Gower (Moody, 1987).

4. Bible Dictionaries

- a) *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, J. D. Douglas and Merrill Tenney, eds. (Eerdmans, 1987).
- b) *The New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas, ed. (Eerdmans, 1970).
- c) *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, R. K. Harrison, ed. (Moody, 1988).

5. Bible Encyclopedias

- a) *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, G. W. Bromiley, ed. (Eerdmans, 1979-1988).
- b) *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Walter Elwell, ed. (Baker, 1988).
- c) *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, ed. (Zondervan, 1975).

6. Commentaries⁷

Commentaries are valuable because they provide:

- a) Historical context
- b) Answers to content questions
- c) Thorough discussion of difficult texts
- d) Interpretive options
- e) Suggested applications

Note: Many of the above tools are available today in computerized form. Some programs include all or most of the above resources free (e.g., Online Bible, e-Sword). Programs that are more powerful can be quite expensive (e.g., Libronix, Bible Works) but are very helpful for the serious Bible student. Many tools are also freely available on the Internet.

B. A Couple Translations of the Bible

1. If you can't read the original languages fluently, you must use a translation of the Bible in your own language. The purpose of a translation is to convert the original language text into the "receptor" language with as much accuracy and clarity as possible. A reader with average intelligence and education should be able to read and understand the language of the translation.
2. It is probably best to use one main translation or version for preaching and teaching, but use several good translations for study. A comparison of translations will usually show where the problems in interpretation are and perhaps help the reader understand the meaning.
3. Basic things to consider in choosing a good translation:
 - a) The Question of Original Language Texts

⁷ For a list of recommended commentaries and Bible study aids, consult www.dbts.edu/pdf/Booklist.pdf.

Versions of the Bible differ because they follow different original language textual traditions. There is some variation within the available Hebrew and Greek MSS. The vast majority of these variations have little or no affect on the meaning of the text. A very small minority of the variations affect meaning. None of the variations changes the overall impact of Scripture or change what the Bible teaches in general.

- (1) Taken as a whole, no conservative, literal translation of the Bible will lead you astray no matter what its textual background.
- (2) OT: There are only a handful of variations in the various editions of the Hebrew OT (the Masoretic text).
- (3) NT: Majority/Byzantine family vs. Critical/Eclectic family
 - (a) Among all the MS evidence for the NT, two primary “families” emerge. Those within a family vary only insignificantly from other MSS within that family and vary more significantly from the other family of texts. Still, the percentage of difference between the major families of NT MSS is very low; less than five percent of variations have much significance. Most variations have to do with word order, spelling, and the like, and have very little impact on meaning.
 - (b) Majority/Byzantine text advocates claim that the best translations follow the majority of Greek MSS. About 80% of available Greek MSS are in the Byzantine family of texts. Most of these MSS are no older than the Middle Ages (8th-15th centuries). Older translations like the KJV follow this family of texts.
 - (c) Critical/eclectic text advocates claim that the best translations follow the oldest available MSS. The oldest MS are papyrus fragments, many of which were not recovered until the 1800s. Some of these fragments go all the way back to around 120 AD. Other MSS of this family are from the 3rd and 4th centuries, so they are considerably older than the Majority/Byzantine family.
 - (d) The vast majority of NT scholars today recognize the critical text (NA27/UBS4) as the best and most faithful reproduction of the original MSS. Newer translations follow this MS tradition.

- (e) Some scholars maintain their loyalty to the Majority/Byzantine text type. Older translations (like the KJV and NKJV) follow this MS tradition.
- (4) All things considered, it is wise to consult at least one of the newer translations, several of which can be very helpful for the interpreter (e.g., NASB, ESV, NIV).

Excursus on the King James Version Only (KJO) Movement

The KJV has been and remains an important and influential translation of the Bible in English. Many believers use this translation and find it very satisfactory. Unfortunately, some attribute direct inspiration to the KJV itself. That is, they say that the KJV is the result of divine inspiration just as the original manuscripts were. They may even claim that the KJV corrects or supersedes the originals. They claim that the KJV is the one and only legitimate English translation, and that it alone has been miraculously, inerrantly preserved.

The more strident KJO advocates not only claim that the KJV is the only preserved Word of God in English, but also condemn most other English translations as corrupt or even Satanic. To them, if it's not the KJV, it's not the Bible. Any variation from the KJV is totally unacceptable, in their view.

While everyone has a right to his own opinion on the matter, we must recognize that the extreme end of the KJO movement is in serious error. Inspiration and inerrancy apply to the original manuscripts only. Translations and versions are "inspired" to the degree that they accurately reproduce the original MSS. God did not miraculously prevent slight errors from creeping into any particular MS of the Bible. The KJV itself has undergone significant revisions over the years to improve its accuracy and to update its language. Further, we can demonstrate conclusively that the KJV has its own set of weaknesses. Claims of divine inspiration, preservation, and inerrancy cannot be applied perfectly and without reservation to any translation, English or otherwise. *One should not attribute to a copy or translation what is true only of the original.*

The KJV is a fine translation that many Christians treasure. We can acknowledge the value of the KJV without falling into the errors noted above. We can also acknowledge the value of other accurate English translations without forsaking the KJV. We must deny and refute the claims of the extremists in the KJO movement.

b) Theories of Translation

Before going on, we should recognize that every translation also provides some interpretation.

Note the Quote: Anyone who translates also interprets: the translation is not simply a rendering of the underlying text but also an expression of the translator's understanding of it. And every translator is a child of his own time and of his own culture. ... We must therefore distinguish between what comes from the original text and what is added by the translator.⁸

(1) Literal or Formal Correspondence

- (a) Literal versions keep as closely as possible to the original wording. They emphasize what the author wrote/said; emphasis is put on the text. Little effort is made to simplify or eliminate elements of the text that would require explanation or education (i.e., awkward or foreign-sounding expressions).
- (b) The KJV, NKJV, NASB, and ESV are good examples of essentially literal translations (although none of them are word-for-word literal in many cases).
- (c) PROBLEMS:
 - (i) Literal translations can obscure the meaning of language if they follow the original language "woodenly," i.e., without explaining the meaning of the phrase. E.g., "coals of fire" (Isa 6:6) actually means, "burning coals" in English. Or "body of His glory" (Phil 3:21) means "His glorious body." "Before your face" (Mark 1:2) means "ahead of." Others: "possess his vessel" (1 Thes 4:4), "touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1), "Anathema Maranatha" (1 Cor 16:22), or "Lord of Sabaoth" (Rom 9:29).

⁸ Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*. Translated by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 47. Quoted in Marlowe, "Against the Theory of 'Dynamic Equivalence,'" <http://www.bible-researcher.com/dynamic-equivalence.html>

Other examples of Hebrew or Greek idioms⁹ that sound odd in English: opened his mouth and taught, answered and said, gall of bitterness, went in and out, necessity is laid upon me, there is tidings in his mouth, pride of his countenance, fill up the measure of your fathers, make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, ye are straightened in your own bowels

- (ii) There are “degrees” of literalness in the literal or formal correspondence theory. Examples:

- (a) Genesis 5:32 says that Noah was the “son of” 500 years.
- (b) Isaiah 40:1 “Speak ye comfortably” (KJV). The Hebrew has “speak to the heart” and is better translated “speak kindly” (NASB) or “speak tenderly” (NIV).
- (c) Matthew 1:18 Lit. “She was having in the belly by the Holy Spirit” but is correctly translated “she was with child.”
- (d) Matthew 27:44 “Cast the same in His teeth” (KJV) is not in the Greek text. It says simply, “They reviled/reproached Him.”
- (e) The expression “God forbid” (Rom 3:4, 6, 31, etc.) in the KJV is literally “may it never be.”
- (f) 1 Corinthians 16:2 is literally “according to the first of the sabbath,” where “sabbath,” following a common Hebrew usage, means “week.”
- (g) 1 Corinthians 16:13 has “quit ye like men” (KJV), which is one word in Greek, meaning “behave like men,” i.e., with boldness and courage.

⁹ An idiom is a particular expression that makes sense in one language but that may not make much sense when translated literally into another. Examples: in a pickle, a day late and a dollar short, once in a blue moon, ace up your sleeve, make a killing, rat race, walk in the park. How would you translate such expressions into another language?

- (d) Whereas other theories of translation studiously avoid ambiguity in their desire to communicate the meaning of a passage, the literal theorists want to retain ambiguity where the text seems to warrant it. Literal translations give a word-for-word rendering when possible and let the reader discern the meaning for himself.

Note: As you can see, literal translations require some significant interpretation on the part of the reader. Since the translator converts the expression directly into another language, the reader must figure out the meaning of unfamiliar expressions himself. This may be beneficial, but it also requires more interpretive skill of the reader.

Another Note: The only place you'll find a truly word-for-word translation is in an interlinear Bible. All other translations have some degree of non-literality inherent within them.

(2) Dynamic Equivalent or Functional Equivalent

- (a) Dynamic equivalents seek to present the meaning of the text in clear, accurate, idiomatic language. They update language and grammar for modern readers, trying to achieve the equivalent effect of the original in the receptor language. They emphasize content over form; the emphasis is on what the author meant, not on how he said it.
- (b) The *NIV*, *NAB*, and *TEV* are examples of dynamic equivalent translations.
- (c) PROBLEMS:
 - (i) Dynamic equivalents tend to be quite interpretive. The translators give the reader what they think the author meant rather than his literal words. They provide the modern English equivalent of the Hebrew or Greek idioms, which often is not a word-for-word translation.
 - (ii) This theory has less objectivity (or more subjectivity) in translation; it puts the emphasis on the reader; i.e., so he can understand the text.

- (iii) The modern language of some of these translations can be shallow and faddish, using the latest jargon current in the culture. This tends to trivialize the contents.

“The tendency in these versions is to reduce the text to a uniformly bland, [colorless], and even childish manner of speaking throughout the Bible.”¹⁰

- (iv) Rendering the text in clear language for the reader (readability) often comes at the expense of faithfulness to the original wording (accuracy). In some cases, the translation/interpretation is simply wrong (e.g., Heb 11:26 in the NIV). Dynamic translations also tend to ignore some OT allusions and associations and drop some words altogether (e.g., “behold” in Luke 1:48).

E.g., Isa 57:15a; Amos 4:6; Phil 2:1; 1 Pet 1:13 (compare KJV & NIV)

(3) Free Translation (paraphrase)

- (a) The intent of a free translation is to render the Scriptures in the most simple and easily understood way as possible. Free translations convey the ideas but with less concern about the exact words of the original language.
- (b) Examples are *The Living Bible*, *Phillips Translation*, and *The Message*.
- (c) PROBLEMS:
 - (i) Free translations tend to be careless with the original words; they interpret and explain the meaning too much. In their effort to eliminate anything difficult or unusual from their translation, they often fail to convey the original meaning accurately.
 - (ii) Free translations are often the work of one person (e.g., Taylor, Peterson) rather than a committee of scholars, and reflect that person’s biases.

¹⁰ Michael Marlowe, “Against the Theory of ‘Dynamic Equivalence,’”
<http://www.bible-researcher.com/dynamic-equivalence.html>

- (iii) Free translations are more like running commentaries than faithful reproductions of the original words.
“Paraphrases take greater risks with the original, and they confound translation with commentary, leading to expectations on the part of the reader than are not borne out by the original text.”¹¹
- (iv) Reading a free translation can be somewhat helpful, but one should not use a free translation as a primary text. Free translations have no value for Bible study.

Both formal equivalent (literal) versions and functional equivalent (dynamic) versions have strengths and weaknesses, and both are useful tools for students of the Word. A literal version is especially helpful for those who want to preserve, as much as possible, the original form of the language and who want to interpret the text for themselves. The KJV, NKJV, NASB, and ESV fit into this category.

“Though not as fluent as other versions, its literal nature makes the NASB the closest approximation to the Hebrew or Greek” (Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*).

Dynamic translations are helpful in that they “give the sense” of expressions that English readers may not understand (like those discussed above). The translators give the reader what they think the authors meant, and in most cases, they get it right. When the reader comes to an expression that seems obscure or unfamiliar, he can refer to a dynamic version to help him understand the language. Both kinds of translation are valuable. However, avoid free translations and paraphrases.

II. THE SPIRITUAL QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INTERPRETER

A. The New Birth (regeneration)

John 8:43 shows that unsaved people cannot “hear” the words of Christ and thus do not understand them.

1 Cor 2:10-14 shows that saved people have the capacity, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to understand the Bible. Unsaved people are not qualified to interpret the Bible.

B. A Deep Reverence for God. Deuteronomy 29:29; Proverbs 1:7

¹¹ Paul Helm, “Dynamic Equivalence—Is There Such a Thing?” <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2009/09/dynamic-equivalence-is-there-such-thing.html>, Sept. 14, 2009.

The interpreter of Scripture must realize that ultimately God, and thus His Word, are incomprehensible. This produces humility when approaching biblical hermeneutics.

C. A Desire to Know the Word of God

Terry calls this “a disposition to seek and know the truth” (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 156). A teachable spirit, along with a desire to know, are necessary.

D. Obedience and Maturity in Personal Life 1 Corinthians 2:15-3:3; Hebrews 5:11-14

1. A “spiritual” (i.e., mature) Christian has the capacity to “judge all things” and has “the mind of Christ.”
2. A worldly or disobedient Christian is liable to make inaccurate interpretations because he is not in harmony with the Holy Spirit who gave the Scriptures. Moises Silva recommends “a submissive predisposition” as necessary for proper interpretation. “The desire to keep God’s commandments, the determination to do God’s will—this is the great prerequisite for true biblical understanding” (*An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, Walter and Moises Silva, eds., pp. 24-25).
3. Included in this matter are common sense and a right use of reason and logic. The Holy Spirit does not lead one to bizarre interpretations, those which lack internal consistency, or which contradict themselves or other revealed truth. There is nothing wrong with clear thinking and balance in weighing options and finding possible meaning.

III. THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN HERMENEUTICS: ILLUMINATION

A. The Meaning of Illumination: Illumination is an operation of the Holy Spirit on the Christian reader’s mind, enabling him to grasp the significance of the Word of God. See 1 Cor 2:4, 5; Eph 1:17; 1 Thes 2:13; 1 John 2:20, 21, 27.

B. The Need For Illumination

1. The human mind is depraved. It cannot of itself process spiritual things correctly; it has a native hostility against God and all the things of God. Depravity has a negative effect on the human mind, making it prone to error and misjudgment. Thus, proper interpretation is impossible without the Holy Spirit’s illumination.

a) 1 Corinthians 2:14

The natural man does not accept/welcome the truth of God. He cannot “understand” spiritual things. I.e., he cannot experientially know them, or experience them. The natural man cannot know or experience the significance of the truths of God because they are spiritually appraised, discerned, or discriminated, and he does not have the Spirit. On the other hand, the spiritual man does have the Spirit and can appraise spiritual things (v. 15).

- b) Romans 8:7
 - c) Ephesians 4:18
 - 2. The Holy Spirit operates on the mind of the interpreter. He illumines or enlightens the person not the Bible. He does not explain Scripture as such but quickens the human intellect so that it has the capacity to handle Scripture properly. Cf. Psalm 119:18.
- C. Clarification of What Happens in Illumination
- a) No New Revelation is Given.
The illumination of the believer is always in association with the Word of God. It does not give something in addition to the Word. Illumination enables one to grasp the significance of the Word; it does not provide direct revelation or inspiration.
 - b) Diligent Study is Required.
 - (1) The believer, the Holy Spirit, and the Word are in a cooperative relationship.
 - (2) “Just as the biblical writer used his own talents and investigation, so the biblical interpreter must read and study and struggle to understand the biblical text. The more self-consciously active the interpreter is in that process, the more likely is the Spirit’s illumination” (Fred Klooster, *The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutical Process*, p. 460).



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 4: PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL HERMENEUTICS, PART 1

We are finally ready to discuss the practical principles of hermeneutics, i.e., how do we go about the task of understanding the Bible?

The goal of interpretation is to know the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text. The interpreter must discover, to the best of his ability, what the original author most likely meant his audience to understand. Correct understanding of the meaning of the text must begin with the meanings the writer gave to his own words.¹² Before we can understand what a passage means for us, we must understand what it meant originally. Employing the following rules or principles of hermeneutics will help us recognize the author's original meaning.

I. INTERPRET SCRIPTURE LITERALLY OR NORMALLY.

- A. The preferred method of interpretation is called literal, normal, or literary interpretation. We interpret the Scriptures in much the same way we do other forms of literature—we assume the words mean what they say, unless there's a good reason not to. Since God used human language to reveal his thoughts to man, man should employ the common principles used to interpret human language. This approach can successfully handle every type of biblical literature. We need not switch interpretive methods when we move to a different literary form. Apply this general rule: "When the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense."
- B. The literal method of interpretation is often called the "grammatical-historical" method because the goal is to find what the original author intended to say. The grammar and the historical background of a passage are central in determining the original author's intent. The reader of the Bible takes the passages as they were meant grammatically and historically by their original authors and for their original audiences.¹³ Meaning is anchored in the text, not in the reader.

"We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text."¹⁴

¹²William Arp, "Authorial Intent," Baptist Bible College and Seminary, *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 4* (Galaxie Software, 1997; 2003), vnp.4.1.40.

¹³Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation: The Key to Understanding the Bible," Baptist Bible College and Seminary, *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 4* (Galaxie Software, 1997; 2003), vnp.4.1.27-4.1.28.

¹⁴Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Article 15.

- C. Admittedly, sometimes the plain sense doesn't make sense (e.g., Jesus' statement "I am the door."). The grammatical-historical method takes figures of speech (e.g., metaphors, similes) and symbolic language into consideration.
- D. One might ask why we should interpret the Bible literally. After all, there is much symbolism and figurative language in the Bible, which might suggest a less literal approach. But there are several good reasons for approaching the Bible as literally as possible.
 - 1. The purpose of language is to communicate, not to confuse. God created man to receive revelation. If that communication is not understandable in its plain form, then language is not serving its purpose. The plain sense of Scripture usually makes sense, which suggests a literal approach to the text.
 - 2. Dealing with the text of Scripture itself seems to argue for a literal hermeneutic. Literalism is not just a philosophical form forced on the text; it's a proper inference from Scripture. The overall context of the Bible argues for literal interpretation. The authors appear to expect their readers to take them at their word.

For example, God expected the first humans to understand him and do what he said (cf. Gen 1:27-30). Adam and Eve understood God according to the plain meaning of his words.
 - 3. Bible prophecy has been fulfilled literally. Prophecies concerning Jesus' birth, rearing, ministry, death and resurrection were all fulfilled literally. Even the symbolism in prophecy points to something tangible.
 - 4. Without the literal method, all objective meaning is lost. If we can't count on words to mean what they say, interpretation becomes subjective and arbitrary. It's impossible to say what a text means if the parts of a text stand for something other than their surface meanings.
 - 5. The literal method of interpretation can deal with every part of the Bible in a consistent manner. One can apply the grammatical-historical-literary approach to any biblical literature.
 - 6. Literal interpretation is able to deal with literary techniques such as figures of speech and symbolism. One can maintain literal interpretive techniques and still recognize types, symbols, parables, allegories and fables.

II. LET SCRIPTURE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE.

"The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it may be reached and known by other places that speak more clearly" (Westminster Confession, chap. 9).

- A. We look to the Bible itself to see how to interpret it. But how can we interpret the Bible before we figure out how to interpret the Bible? Seems like a circular problem.

Solutions:

- ✓ God apparently “programmed” humans to use language. This is part of the image of God that all people reflect. In hermeneutics, man uses the received laws of language to gain a basic understanding of what the Bible says. This basic understanding can then be further examined and refined with continued study.

E.g., Adam and Eve must have understood God’s communication to them immediately after their creation, even though they had never taken a class in language arts. They had an inherent capacity for language as bearers of God’s image. They understood what God said, and so can we.

- ✓ Some principles are drawn from the Bible itself, such as:

1. The doctrine of inspiration guarantees that there are no contradictions in Scripture. If God is the author, everything should fit together in a non-contradictory system of truth.
2. The repeated commands to obey God’s Word imply that believers have the capacity to understand and do what God has said.
3. How the Bible writers use other Scripture informs us about how we should use it.
4. Fulfillment of prophecy is a good indicator how to interpret prophecy, especially the unfulfilled parts.

- ✓ Interpretation calls for a process of refinement.

1. The reader approaches Scripture using the received laws of literature (i.e., the normal way of understanding what you read).
2. Based on this normal understanding of literature, one draws conclusions and hypotheses, formulates doctrines, etc.
3. One then checks to see if his conclusions fit consistently with the rest of Scripture. One must modify and reformulate his beliefs as needed to maintain conformity with Scripture.
4. Principles of interpretation naturally emerge from this process.

It may seem like circular reasoning to draw the principles of interpretation from the Bible so that we can turn around and use them to interpret the Bible. But that is essentially what we must do. We find the rules of interpretation in the Bible itself.

- B. The Bible contains one interlocking network of non-contradictory truth. The Bible is in complete harmony and is capable of being interpreted from within. It is self-interpreting.

The Holy Spirit is the divine author of Scripture. Any particular part of Scripture must fit with every other part of Scripture. An interpretation of a passage must be in harmony with the rest of Scriptural teaching.

C. How to Apply This Principle

1. A clearly established teaching cannot be overturned by a single statement or an obscure passage. In other words, the clear teaching of the Bible must inform us how to understand unclear passages.

Examples:

- a) 1 John 3:6 “Does not sin.” Cf. 1 John 1:8
- b) Hebrews 6:4-6 “If he falls away.” Cf. John 10:28-29

2. Obscure texts must be interpreted in light of the plain and positive texts.

Examples:

- a) James 2:20-26, cf. John 3:16, Rom 5:1, Eph 2:8, etc.
- b) 1 Corinthians 15:29 Baptism for the dead.

III. CHECK THE CONTEXT.

A. The Importance of Context

1. Simply put, context is king. The literary context of a passage has great influence on its meaning.
“Unless we can grasp the whole before attempting to dissect the parts, interpretation is doomed from the start. Statements simply have no meaning apart from their context” (Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 19).
2. The biblical authors wrote with an argument in view. With a few exceptions (e.g., Proverbs), authors usually express their thoughts in a series or flow of connected ideas. Therefore, the interpreter must know where the thought of the text starts and how the pattern develops.
3. It is easy to fragment the text into isolated words and phrases and then try to extract meaning from these fragments. False doctrines are often built on passages taken out of their contexts.

B. Varieties of Context

1. Book Context and Purpose in Writing

Not only the sections of a biblical book but the author’s purpose in writing and the major theme of the book should be considered as context.

“The parts have no meaning apart from the whole. Only when the message of the whole passage is considered can the parts be studied for details of this central message” (Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 125).

2. Section Context

This deals with the major blocks of material in a book, i.e., the outline of the book and the relation of a passage to the major block. This requires reading the book in order to get the sectional divisions, or at least having a trustworthy outline of the book at hand.

3. Immediate Context

- a) This is the general flow of subject matter at hand. It entails the immediate clauses and phrases of the passage, i.e., the *paragraph*. “The paragraph is the key to the thought-development of biblical books” (Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 23).
- b) The paragraph is probably the most important context to consider when trying to understand a particular word. Every word has a certain range of meaning (“semantic range”), but context nearly always narrows down the options to a very limited number of possible intended meanings.

4. Parallel Passages: verbal and real

- a) Verbal Parallels: If you are trying to find the meaning of a particular word, you can check where else in the Bible the same word is used.
- b) Real Parallels: The Gospel accounts in particular are filled with parallel passages. You should check these parallel passages to see how the other writers recorded the event.

IV. STUDY THE LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR.

A. Consider Word Meaning.

The best tool for word study is a *lexicon* (like a dictionary) because it deals with *words*.

1. General Principles of Word Meanings

- a) Language Communicates a Particular Meaning (Univocal—“one voice”).
 - (1) Words have but one meaning (signification) in a particular context. They can have only one set of propositional, cognitive values in any given place.

Note the Quote: There is only one meaning for every place in Scripture. Otherwise the meaning of Scripture would not only be unclear and uncertain, but there would be no meaning at all—for anything which does not mean one thing surely means nothing (William Ames).

- (2) A denial of the univocal nature of language renders communication impossible. One cannot even try to disprove this rule without using it. Verbal expressions like puns, jokes, and double entendres violate the rule, but we find few of these in the Bible.
- (3) What about a “deeper” or “fuller” meaning, one in addition to or beyond which the author intended (*sensus plenior*)? A few considerations:
 - (a) Inspiration guarantees that what the human author intended and wrote is exactly what the divine author intended and caused to be written.
 - (b) No author or speaker is ever aware of every potential implication of his words. Any additional meaning would still be based on the original intent, not different from the author’s original words and intent.
 - (c) Any supposed meaning not based on the words of the original passage is suspect. Base your interpretation on the plain sense of the words whenever possible.
- b) Words Have A Semantic Range.

Semantic range refers to how a word was used and what it meant at the time of writing. Words can mean different things in different contexts. However, most words have a fairly stable semantic core so that they can’t mean anything anytime.
- c) Words Have Meaning in Association With Other Words.
 - (1) Words do not have automatic meaning; they do not carry meaning outside of their relationship with other words. Words are assigned meanings through use.
 - (2) The basic unit of language is not the word but the *sentence*, which then extends to the paragraph and, in the case of the Bible, the section and eventually the book.
- d) Word Meanings Are Ultimately What the Author Intended.

Words derive meaning from the author who wrote them, not from themselves. Proper biblical hermeneutics determines the author’s intended meaning and conveys that same meaning and message today.

2. Factors in Determining Word Meanings

- a) Etymology: Etymology is an attempt to trace the history of a word back to its original meaning by looking at the component parts of the word. This can be valuable, but it's easy to find dubious meanings. E.g., the word for church (*ekklesia*) is "to call" plus "out," hence, "those called out." Yet the proper meaning of the term is "assembly, congregation."

English examples of words that defy etymology: pineapple, butterfly, grape nuts, dandelion.

- b) Usage: Usage determines meaning. Usage of a word in a particular context is the primary factor in determining the meaning of a word.

B. Consider Word Relationships.

1. Find the Unit of Thought.

Ask the questions, "What's the point?" "What does the author say in the paragraph?" "Why does he say it at this point?"

2. Look For Connectors.

These words indicate transitions from one thought to another. Noting the transitions enables one to follow the author's argument within a paragraph and from one paragraph to another. It helps to follow the inner logic of the passage.

Examples: and, therefore, just as, even so, if...then, such as, since, because

V. FIND THE AUTHOR'S PURPOSE IN WRITING.

A. Check the Author's Statements.

1. Ecclesiastes 12:13
2. Luke 1:1-4
3. John 20:31
4. 1 John 1:1-4; 5:13

B. Check the Author's Exhortations.

1. Hebrews 10:19-23; 10:32-35; 12:1-3
2. "Let us . . . " Heb 4:1, 11; 6:1; 12:1; 13:15



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 4: PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL HERMENEUTICS, PART 2

This lesson continues our examination of the principles of hermeneutics.

VI. SEEK TO UNDERSTAND THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL BACKGROUND.

The preferred method of hermeneutics is often described as “grammatical-historical” interpretation because it takes the historical setting (or culture) of a passage into consideration. Culture may be defined as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). We must understand such details because they have a significant influence on what the author intended to say and how we interpret him.

A. The Importance of Historical and Cultural Information

“Culture includes what people *think* and believe, *say*, *do*, and *make*” (Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 79). Cultural categories to consider: political, religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, material, domestic, geographical, military, and social.

1. It Provides the Necessary Setting For the Biblical Material.

God’s revelation is rooted in historical fact. Revelation came through certain cultural forms in at least two ways: (1) The Bible writers themselves came from a particular culture; and (2) the message from God came to people in terms of their specific cultural settings.

Example: In the OT, prosperity was described in terms of sitting under one’s vine and fig tree (1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4).

2. It May Provide the Occasion for Writing.

Certain books owe their occasion for writing to historical-cultural events or other factors.

Examples: Lamentations (fall of Jerusalem), Joel (locust plague), Ezra (return from Babylon), 1 Corinthians (Paul’s response to problems at Corinth)

3. It Provides Understanding of Biblical Teaching.

Historical and cultural study is necessary for the modern reader to understand many biblical expressions, such as the ancient landmark (Prov 22:28), various items of clothing, farming methods, household items, money, contracts, etc.

Examples: Judges 12:14 – what is the significance of this bit of information? [Probably that having many sons and riding about on a donkey were status symbols in Israel at that time. The forty sons could not have been possible without multiple wives, a sign of great wealth. Thus, Abdon was a wealthy, prominent man.]

Matt 12:38-41 – without a familiarity with the OT and with Jewish culture, you would have little idea about what Jesus meant.

B. How to Determine Cultural Pertinence

How does the modern reader decide whether a biblical detail pertains only to Bible times or if it has lasting significance? Is a principle timeless or culturally bound?

Note: Many things in the Bible are “culturally bound,” that is, pertaining to a particular place and time and not directly applicable beyond that context. Part of the art and skill of Bible interpretation is recognizing when something has continuing significance and when it does not. Example: Sabbath Day observation

We can ask several questions of a passage to help discern whether something has continuing application or is culturally bound.

1. Is it primarily an OT practice for Israel or a NT practice for the church? Deciding on this will settle many issues.

Examples of OT requirements no longer in force: dietary laws (Lev 11; Deut 14), tasseled garments (Num 15:38-40), rules for grain harvesting (Lev 23:5-20). NT believers are “not under the law” (Rom 6:14; Gal 5:18).

Dispensationalists see a distinction between Israel and the church, while others try to bridge the two. How you apply OT principles will depend on your understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church.

2. What is the morality of the situation? If the detail seems to be based on God’s unchanging nature, then it likely has permanent application for all believers of all times.

Examples:

- a) Genesis 9:6—Capital punishment is based on the image of God in man.
- b) 1 Corinthians 11:3—Subordination of women to men in the home and local church is grounded in the Trinity.
- c) 1 Timothy 2:12-14—Women preachers are prohibited on the basis of creation and fall.
- d) 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-20; Rev 21:8—Various “sin lists” describe behaviors that are inherently wrong for all people everywhere at all times.

3. What is Prescriptive and What is Descriptive?

a) What's the difference?

- (1) Prescription: to command or demand; something ought to be done or believed
- (2) Description: what happened; may or may not imply that we should do the same

b) Examples:

- (1) Descriptive: Many of the events in the OT are descriptive and do not offer us an example to follow. E.g., many events in the life of Abraham; events in Judges; going to the temple at the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1); preaching until midnight (Acts 20:7)
- (2) Prescriptive: Believers ought to meet regularly for worship and instruction (Heb 10:25).

4. Is It a Timeless Principle or a Specific Application?

A principle may be absolute and timeless while its application in the biblical setting may be culture bound. It is possible for the Bible to support an absolute principle but not make the application absolute, i.e., the same in every culture of every age.

Examples:

- a) Prayer Practices. The Bible reflects various postures for prayer, such as standing, kneeling, prostration, upraised hands, downcast eyes, etc.
- b) Transvestism (Deut 22:5). This is an absolute principle but may be expressed differently in different cultures. The principle of cross dressing is sexual perversion. Does this prohibit a Scot from wearing his kilts? What about men wearing earrings today?
- c) Footwashing (John 13:12-16). The principle is humble service.
- d) The Holy Kiss (1 Cor 16:20). The principle is fellowship.
- e) Women Wearing Veils (1 Cor 11:5). The principle is recognizing proper authority and gender roles.
- f) Hair and Dress Styles (1 Tim 2:9-10). The principle is modesty and humility.

5. Is It A Timeless Principle or a Historical-Cultural Occasion?

Examples:

- a) Eating Meat Offered to Idols (1 Cor 8-10). The practice is uncommon in many cultures, but the principle is timeless—give no offense to a weak brother and to give no credence to idolatry in any form.
 - b) Separation From A Brother (2 Thess 3:6). Laziness or a refusal to work was the particular issue here, but the broader issue was disobedience to apostolic teaching and authority.
6. What is the Bible's Consistent Witness on the Topic?
- a) The Bible uniformly witnesses against murder, adultery, drunkenness, theft, hatred, homosexuality and many others sinful behaviors.
 - b) It always promotes love, mercy, fidelity, patience, kindness, good works, honesty, etc.
 - c) See if the Bible consistently condemns or approves of the behavior in question.
7. What is the Modern Application?
- When we seek to apply a biblical principle, several options are available.
- a) Retain Both the Principle and Its Cultural Expression.
We may decide that it's necessary to do the exact same thing the biblical characters did in the same way they did it.
Examples where we retain both the principle and the expression of it: family roles, church attendance on the Lord's Day, church polity
 - b) Retain the Principle But Update the Cultural Expression.
Specify the principle involved and think about appropriate ways to apply it to the modern situation.
Examples: substitute handshake for the holy kiss, substitute a church building for in-home meetings, use media (TV, radio, newspaper, Internet) to proclaim the Gospel
 - c) Assume Both the Principle and Its Biblical Cultural Expression are Culturally Bound.
In some cases, neither the practice nor the principle have continuing authority. We do not have to apply the principle or the practice.
Examples:
 - (1) The practice of levirate marriage (Gen 38:11ff)
 - (2) Not charging interest to a fellow Jew (Exod 22:25)
 - (3) Purification of women after childbirth (Lev 12:1-8)

- (4) Head coverings on women as an expression of submission to authority (1 Cor 11:13-15). This one is hotly disputed by some.

VII. SEEK ONE PRIMARY MEANING.

- A. In general, each passage has a single meaning, and only one meaning, which the human author understood and intended to convey to his readers. The most important question to ask is “What main point is the author trying to make?”¹⁵ We find this through a grammatical-historical analysis of the text. We are not trying to find a “deeper” or “spiritual” meaning, but the plain, clear meaning on the “surface” of the text.
- B. The implications or applications of a passage may be far reaching. The human author may not have understood the full significance of his inspired words (see 1 Pet 1:10-12). We also find that NT authors, under inspiration, sometimes employ OT texts in ways we would not normally expect, beyond their apparent grammatical-historical meanings. For example, Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 (“out of Egypt I have called my son”), which speaks of the nation of Israel, and applies these words directly to Jesus. Other passages which use the OT in creative ways: Luke 20:17-18/Isa 8:14-15, Heb 2:13/Isa 8:17-18, Mt 4:12-16/Isa 9:1-2, 1 Cor 15:54/Isa 25:8, etc.¹⁶
- C. For our purposes, we must apply the rule, “A text cannot mean what it never meant.” The original meaning must be evident in how we interpret a passage.

VIII. THINK DISPENSATIONALLY.

- A. God’s relationship with man changed over time in response to the progressive unfolding of revelation. From Genesis to Revelation, we see evidence of different arrangements (dispensations) between God and man. Thus, some parts of the Bible simply don’t directly apply to modern believers. The Mosaic Law, for example, applies specifically to the Israelites before the time of Christ, not to church-age believers (Rom 6:14; Gal 2:19; Col 2:14). Most of the Book of Revelation will not come into play until after the return of Christ.
- B. However, this does not imply that we can’t learn from the parts that don’t directly apply to us. The entire Bible is “profitable” (2 Tim 3:16) and all of it is beneficial for us. So try to determine if the text you are reading directly applies to you, or if you should seek more general principles to apply.
- 1 Cor 10:11 *Now all these things happened to those people as examples, and they were written for our instruction, to whom the ends of the ages have come.*
- C. Note: Progressive revelation brings about additional light, but it does not completely reverse or contradict previous revelation. New revelation may add to or supersede, but it does not contradict. A word or idea in the OT does not take on an opposite meaning in the NT. For example, the word “Israel” means the same thing in both testaments. Progressive revelation is like the building process: the

¹⁵ Fee and Stuart, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶ For more on this issue, see the articles by Robert Thomas in *Master’s Seminary Journal*, vols. 12 and 13.

superstructure is added to the foundation; it doesn't replace it.

IX. PRINCIPALIZE.

- A. Much of the Bible is historical narrative, that is, written in story form. A common error in interpretation is thinking that just because something happened in a Bible narrative, it should always happen that way. Instead, we should seek underlying principles from the biblical stories. Find those timeless, abiding truths that the narrative illustrates.
- B. For example, the Book of Ruth teaches us several important lessons, such as the importance of loyalty, the grace of God, and how God provides for His people. But one should not think that just because Ruth found her husband by lying down at the feet of a sleeping farmer, all girls seeking husbands should do likewise. Likewise, the story of David and Goliath does not teach us how to deal with our own personal "giants." What are some underlying principles in that story? [Trust God, be willing to take risks, righteous indignation, etc.]

X. PROPOSE A TENTATIVE INTERPRETATION.

Once you've gone through the necessary steps, state what you think the text means. Make sure your interpretation rests solidly on the evidence from the passage. You must be able to support your interpretation from the context of the passage and from historical and grammatical evidence.

It should be obvious by now that accurate biblical interpretation requires a good amount of study and thought. Such rigorous work is often difficult, but not beyond the ability of most mature Christians.

XI. CHECK YOUR INTERPRETATION.

Once you think you understand what a passage is saying, how can you be sure that your interpretation is valid? Perhaps you are mistaken. Consider the following:

- A. Christians have been interpreting the Bible for many centuries. It is highly unlikely that you are the only one in the history of the church who has found the proper interpretation of a passage. Check to see if your understanding is consistent with what other respected, orthodox interpreters say. If no one else shares your conclusions, you're almost certainly wrong.

How can you check your interpretations? [good commentaries, your pastor]
- B. The most probable interpretation is coherent—it must make sense. An important rule of interpretation is, "If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense." If God is the author of Scripture, every interpretation will be reasonable and sensible. Interpretations that are contradictory or nonsensical are false.
- C. The most probable interpretation follows the recognized norms of the language in which it was written. A true interpretation will not violate the standard rules of grammar or violate the conventions for its type of literature.
- D. Questions to ask:

1. Does it express or conform to orthodox Christian theology? Do other respected, orthodox Christians hold this view?
2. Does it correspond to typical patterns of God's truth or activity as clearly revealed in rest of the Bible?
3. Does it work in Christian experience, producing godliness and other valid qualities and advancing God's program?

XII. MAKE NECESSARY AND APPROPRIATE APPLICATIONS.

- A. Interpretation should lead into application (James 1:22). Once you understand a principle, you should start thinking about how to apply it to your life. Ask yourself, "So what? What must I do with this principle?"
- B. We must rely on the ministry of the Holy Spirit to help us both understand and rightly apply Scripture.
- C. Application is more individual/personal than is interpretation. How you apply a principle may be different than how others apply it. Application is often determined by one's personal
 1. need
 2. situation
 3. level of maturity
 4. desire to know and follow God
 5. cultural and denominational traditions
 6. current historical situation¹⁷
- D. Some Helpful Guidelines
 1. Be sure to apply the primary intent of the biblical author, not just minor details of the passage.
 2. Not all truth is meant for immediate or personal application. The Bible often records that which it does not advocate. Some passages simply do not contain many applicable principles. Don't try to force an application where one does not reasonably exist.
 3. Application should never seem contrary to other clear Bible passages.
 4. Application should never seem contrary to Christlike conduct. Extremes in application are as dangerous as they are in interpretation.
 5. Questions to ask of a passage to find applications:
 - a) Are there examples to follow?
 - b) Are there commands to obey?

¹⁷ Utley

- c) Are there errors to avoid?
- d) Are there sins to forsake?
- e) Are there promises to claim?
- f) Are there rules by which to live?



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 5: Interpretive Pitfalls

As noted earlier, error in interpretation is very common. Failure to interpret the Bible adequately is one of the reasons Christianity is so fragmented today. Interpretive errors fall into various categories, which we'll explore below. If we are aware of the kinds of errors that are common, we can intentionally avoid them. This lesson will examine several common interpretive errors.

- I. **Allegorization:** An allegory is a comparison—"this stands for that." The allegorical method of interpretation asserts that underlying the plain sense of the text is a hidden or deeper meaning. Each element of a text is given a meaning other than, or in addition to, the plain sense of the text. The interpreter's job is to go beyond the plain sense of the text to get at the "real" meaning.
 - A. Examples: The four rivers of Genesis 2 represent the body, soul, spirit, and mind; the seven locks of Samson's hair represent the seven deadly sins; in the story of Jesus turning water into wine, the clay water pots represent man, and the wine represents the joy of the Holy Spirit.
 - B. This style of interpretation was very common in the Middle Ages before the Reformation. Martin Luther, for example, before his conversion, followed the mediaeval method of interpretation which distinguished many different meanings in the same word. For example, Jerusalem could mean the good, virtue, or reward; Babylon might mean the evil, vice, or punishment. One word may have four bad and four good senses, according as it is understood literally or figuratively. It was during the Reformation that a more literal/normal method of interpretation regained acceptance.
 - C. Although a desire to apply a passage to the modern situation is commendable, we dare not get more out of a text than is legitimate. A commitment to the grammatical-historical approach will usually prevent such errors.
- II. **Spiritualizing:** One is spiritualizing when he uses elements of a story to teach a spiritual truth that is not rooted in the text. This practice is very similar to allegorizing.

For example, when teaching the story of the Gibeonites who tricked Joshua into a peace treaty (Josh 9), one might suggest that Satan also tries to trick believers into making wrong decisions. Or one might suggest that the command to annihilate the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) means that we must eradicate personal sin in our lives. Similarly, in David's fight with Goliath (1 Sam 17), one might suggest that we all have our own personal "Goliaths" to fight, such as gossip, envy or pride. Jesus' command that Simon "thrust out a little from the land" (Luke 5:3) has nothing to do with separation from the world. Avoid reading foreign ideas into the text.

III. Failure to account for personal bias

Every interpreter carries his own set of experiences, education, denominational traditions, and a host of other influences with him as he interprets the Bible. If we are aware of such biases, we can compensate for them by allowing the Bible to speak for itself. We must intentionally avoid reading our own ideas into the text.

IV. Lifting a passage out of its context

A. Perhaps one of the most common interpretive errors occurs when the reader lifts a passage out of its context. By removing a passage from the author's day and the author's intended purpose, one can make the Bible say anything.¹⁸ Remember the most basic interpretive rule: context is king.

B. Examples: 2 Peter 2:20-23 seems to imply that a believer can lose his salvation. However, who is in view in the passage? (see vs. 1).

V. Failure to appreciate the significance of literary genre on the meaning of a passage

A. Each literary form in the Bible—narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, Gospel, epistle, apocalypse—has a set of rules that governs how the reader should approach it. One should not confuse the different types of literature contained in the Bible. Recognize the kind of literature you are studying and interpret it accordingly.

B. Examples: Solomon's admonition to "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Pr 22:6) should be considered as a statement of wisdom that generally proves true, not an iron-clad guarantee that rightly-trained children will never stray.

VI. Failure to treat figures of speech appropriately

A. The Bible is filled with figures of speech, cultural idioms, and symbolic language. Some of these expressions are easily interpreted ("I am the door," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the vine."). Others are quite difficult.

B. Examples: "Ephraim is a cake not turned" (Hos 7:8). "The horseleach hath two daughters, crying, Give, give" (Prov 30:15). A person must "hate" the members of his own family to be a disciple of Christ (Luke 14:26). One must eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood to have eternal life (John 6:54-56).

VII. Oversimplification or neglecting the full biblical teaching

A. It's easy to pull one or two statements from the Bible and make conclusions based on them. However, if we want to know what the Bible teaches on a particular topic, we must consider everything the Bible says about it, not just a few verses. Similarly, we must consider how all the details of a passage influence our interpretation of it. Seemingly minor details often have major consequences.

¹⁸ Utley.

- B. Examples: Some suggest that because God is love, he would never punish the sinner. However, God is also holy, righteous, and just. It is an error to emphasize one of God's attributes while ignoring the others.

Jesus' statement that "all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Mt 21:22) should not be taken in isolation from the other things Jesus and the other NT authors said about prayer. James' statements about the necessity of good works (James 2:20-26) should be correlated with what the Bible states about salvation by grace without the works of the law.

VIII. Failure to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive elements of a passage

- A. Descriptive elements within a narrative simply declare what happened without suggesting that anyone follow that example. Narrative literature is mostly descriptive.
- B. Prescriptive elements demand that we obey a command, follow an example, or believe a doctrine. The epistles of the NT are largely prescriptive in nature.
- C. The fact that something happened or that someone did something does not imply that anyone else should do the same. The Bible often records events without advocating that anyone follow suit. Some parts of the Bible record events that were unique, not to be repeated. Some parts of the Bible simply lack direct, practical application to us today.

Examples: Many of the things Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did were sinful and bad examples. The Book of Judges is filled with stories of shocking and shameful conduct. King David provides both good and bad examples for us. Some things recorded in Acts at the beginning of the church are not repeatable.

IX. Failure to understand the meaning of words

- A. Words do not have meaning in and of themselves. Words become meaningful as they are used in connection with other words. Valid interpretation depends on understanding the meaning of words as they appear in context.
- B. A dictionary or lexicon will give you a range of meanings for most words. But the author of the passage most likely meant only one thing. Context must inform us as to what the most probable meaning of a word is. Usage of a word in context always controls meaning.
- C. The Bible student must be very careful when doing word studies. It's easy to read too much into the meaning of a word. Preachers seem especially prone to get more out of a definition than what is appropriate.
- D. Examples: John probably did not intend to convey any significant distinction in meaning by his use of the different words for "love" (*philos, agape*) in John 21:15f. The word "servant/minister" (Acts 13:5), although literally translated as "under-rower," probably has little to do with rowing on the lower level of a Roman ship.

- X. Failure to account for the differences between the OT and the NT.
- A. The NT is the guide for Christian living. The New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant. The OT is profitable in many ways and provides good information for us by way of example and admonition, but is not the guidebook for Christian living (1 Cor 10:11; 1 Tim 3:15-17).
 - B. We interpret the OT in light of the NT. We know how to apply the lessons from the OT based on what the NT tells us. However, we should avoid reading NT truth back into the OT. Most church truth was not revealed to OT saints—it was “a mystery” to them. We don’t force ideas revealed in the NT back into the OT.
 - C. Many ideas introduced in the OT find their fulfillment in the NT (e.g., the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, animal sacrifices, the person and work of the Messiah). NT teaching corresponds to the meaning of concepts expressed in the OT. The foundation laid in the OT is completed and filled in by the NT. NT interpretation unfolds the intended meaning of the OT promises.¹⁹
 - D. Examples: God’s promise to Abraham regarding a “seed” (Gen 15:5) was fulfilled by Christ (Gal 3:16, 19). The fulfillment corresponds to the original promise. While the fulfillment of the promise by Christ goes beyond what Abraham probably understood, it still corresponds to the OT sense.

¹⁹ Elliot E. Johnson, *GTJ* 11 (Fall 1990).



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 6: Interpreting Figurative Language

Some have accused those who hold to a literal approach to Scripture of interpreting the Bible “flatly” or “woodenly,” that is, without recognizing how figures of speech influence meaning. This accusation is mistaken. The literal-normal method recognizes and interprets figures of speech appropriately and accurately.

I. Introduction

- A. The Bible contains various types of literature: prose, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, narrative, epistle, gospel, and parable, among others. We find figurative language within every kind (genre) of literature.
- B. What is figurative language? We recognize figurative language “when a word is employed in another than its primary meaning, or applied to some object different from that to which it is appropriated in common usage” (Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*). In other words, a writer uses figurative language when he represents one thing in terms of something else.
- C. How do we determine when an author is using figurative language?
 1. If the item can be taken normally or if its plain sense or face value sense makes good sense, take it literally.

E.g., the first few chapters of Genesis seem to be a historical report of what actually happened, not a poem or a legend. The book of Job contains much poetry, yet there is no overriding reason to think of it as fictional.
 2. Figurative language is probably present when a literal understanding appears to be unusual, contradictory, impossible, or absurd.
 - a) Isaiah 55:12 The trees “clap their hands”
 - b) Isaiah 66:2 “trembleth at my word.”
 - c) Jeremiah 1:8 Jeremiah was an “iron pillar” and a “bronze wall”
 - d) Micah 1:2 “Listen, O earth”
 - e) Matthew 7:3 “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?”

- f) Matthew 17:20 “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove.”
 - g) Matthew 26:26 “This [bread] is my body . . . take eat”
 - h) Acts 7:54 “Gnashing [grating] the teeth” at Stephen
 - i) Galatians 2:9 “Pillars” in the church
3. Note context. Does the context allow for or demand a figurative meaning? Sometimes an explanation of the figure is near at hand in the context.
- a) John 6:53f In Jesus’ discussion of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, he says the following, suggesting that his words should not be taken literally:
John 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.
 - b) 1 Thes 4:13-16 “Asleep” is explained as being “dead.”
4. Note genre. Some genres, such as prophecy and poetry, tend to include large amounts of figurative language. Jesus used figurative language frequently. The epistles have some, but not as much.

D. Figurative Language Yields Literal or Normal Meaning.

- 1. Passages are not to be interpreted *both* figuratively (non-literally) and literally. The correct approach follows the intention of the author. Figures of speech are intended by the authors to convey *clear meaning*. They do not open the door to multiple senses or multiple meanings.
- 2. There is a difference between interpreting the Bible figuratively (invalid) and interpreting figures of speech normally (valid). The presence of figurative language does not require us to drop the literal-normal method of interpretation.

II. Types of figurative language

A. Simile and Metaphor: Figures Emphasizing Comparison

- 1. Simile: A simile is an expressed or formal comparison using phrases such as “like” or “as.”

Psalm 1:3-4 “He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, . . . The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.”

Jeremiah 23:29 “Is not my word like a hammer”

Psalm 42:1 “As the deer pants for the streams of water”

1 Peter 1:24 “All flesh are like grass”
- 2. Metaphor: A metaphor is an unexpressed or implied comparison describing one thing in terms of something else.

Psalm 23:1 “The Lord is my shepherd”

Isaiah 40:6 “All flesh is grass”

Luke 12:32 The disciples are a “little flock”

John 10:7, 9 “I am the door”

Hermeneutical principles for simile and metaphor: Look for the single, authorially-intended meaning in the comparison, chiefly by noting context. The meaning may involve more than one factor or comparison, but must be textually based, i.e., found in the words.

Psalm 1:3; Jer 17:8—“Like a tree” probably refers to good health and abundant fruit, as is explained in the rest of the verse. One should not press every detail about a tree onto the Christian life. I.e., the bark and the sap are irrelevant.

Matt 5:13—“Ye are the salt of the earth.” Jesus probably was referring to the preservative or flavoring nature of salt, not the many other things that could be said about salt.

B. Parable and Allegory: Extended Comparisons

1. Parable: A parable is an extended simile where the story and its application are usually kept separate.

Matthew 13:24, 31, 44, 45, 47 “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .”

We’ll take a whole lesson to discuss hermeneutical principles for interpreting parables.

2. Allegory: An allegory is an extended metaphor where the story and its application usually intermingle.

Psalm 80:8-15 The vine brought out of Egypt

Isa 5:1-6 Vine and vineyard

John 15:1-10 Vine and branches

Ephesians 6:11-17 Christian armor

Hermeneutical Principles for Allegories

1. Note the Historical Setting and Literary Context of the Allegory.

Judges 9:7-15 The only way to understand what this story is to be familiar with the historical background described within the chapter.

2. Find the Points of Comparison.

John 15:1-10 The vine, vinedresser, and the branches

Ephesians 6 The pieces of armor

3. Remember that the presence of allegorical language in a passage does not mean that literal statements in Scripture should be taken allegorically.

B. Figures Involving Association or Substitution

1. Metonymy: the substitution of one word or thing for another, usually because of a close mental association.

Genesis 42:38 Jacob's "gray hair" would go down to Sheol in sorrow. This speaks of his old age, being an old man.

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 The imagery here refers to various parts of the body.

Romans 3:27-30 The "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" mean Jews and Gentiles.

2. Synecdoche: the substitution of a part for the whole or the whole for the part, usually because of the natures of the things associated.

Micah 4:3; Isa 2:4 Beating swords into plowshares means total disarmament.

Romans 1:16 "Greek" stands for Gentiles.

Sometimes "repentance" stands for repentance and faith, and sometimes "faith" also stands for both. Luke 24:47; Acts 15:31; Acts 17:30

3. Merism: the substitution of two contrasting parts for the whole.

Psalms 139:2 "Sit down" and "rise up" stand for all his activity.

Acts 1:21 "Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus *went in and out* among us"

4. Hendiadys: the substitution of two coordinate terms for a single idea wherein one defines the other.

Genesis 3:16 "Pain and childbirth" (lit) means painful childbirth.

Acts 1:25 "Ministry and apostleship" means apostolic ministry.

Philippians 2:17 "Sacrifice and service" means sacrificial service.

Hermeneutical principle: Look for the meaning intended by the association or substitution.

C. Special Figures Regarding God

1. Anthropomorphism: attributing human bodily parts to God

2 Chronicles 16:9 God's *eyes* move to and fro.

Psalms 8:3 The heavens are the work of God's *fingers*.

Psalms 31:2 "Incline your *ear* to me"

2. Anthropopathism: attributing human emotions to God

Zephaniah 8:2 Jealousy

Psalms 2:4 Laughter

Ephesians 4:30 Grief

3. Zoomorphism: attributing animal parts and characteristics to God
Psalm 91:4 Feathers and wings

Hermeneutical Principle: Look for the meaning intended by the association.

D. Figures Involving a Personal Dimension

1. Personification: This is the representation of a thing, quality, or idea as a person.
Psalm 114:3 “The sea looked and fled”
Numbers 16:34 “The earth opened her mouth and swallowed Korah”
2. Apostrophe: This is addressing a non-personal item as a person.
Psalm 114:5-6 “What ails you O sea?”
Jeremiah 47:6 “O sword of the Lord”

The Hermeneutical Principle: Find the meaning intended by the association.

E. Other Figures of Speech

1. Hyperbole: intended overstatement or exaggeration
Num 14:2 “All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, ‘Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!’”
Matt 5:29 “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out.”
Matt 19:24 “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”
Luke 14:26 “If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother...”
John 12:19 “Behold, the world is gone after him.”
Acts 17:6 “These that have turned the world upside down ...”
Gal 5:12 “I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.”
2. Euphemism: describing a delicate subject in other than literal terms
Gen 4:17 “Adam knew his wife, and she conceived”
Gen 18:11 “it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.”
Lev 20:18 “uncover her nakedness”
1 Sam 24:3 “cover his feet”
1 Cor 7:1 “touch a woman” (or “come near” or “come to her” or “take her”)
3. Irony: reversal of meaning (including sarcasm); the words mean the opposite of what they say.

Job 12:2 “No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you.”

4. Rhetorical Questions: a question not intended to be answered by the hearers.

Ex 4:11 “And the LORD said unto him, Who hath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD?”

Ex 14:11 “And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? Wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt?”

John 8:43 “Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye cannot hear my word.”

The Hermeneutical Principle: Find the meaning intended by paying attention to the context.

A rule that applies to all figurative language is that even though figures of speech cannot be taken literally, they usually point to or reflect something that is literally true. Figures of speech communicate truly and accurately using non-literal language. Thus, the use of figurative language does not introduce absurdity or contradiction into the Scriptures. We must recognize and interpret biblical figures of speech normally, much like we would when we encounter them in other forms of literature. The presence of figurative language in the Bible does not invalidate the literal method of interpretation.



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 7: Interpreting Type and Symbol

The presence of types and symbols in the Bible add another layer of complexity to the interpreter's task. A good understanding of what types and symbols are, along with some rules for interpretation, will help us grasp the significance of these biblical elements.²⁰

I. Types

A. Definition

1. The word "type" comes from the Greek "tupos," used 15 times in the NT. A type is a model, pattern, example, or mark. A type implies a correspondence or resemblance between two things. One thing resembles or matches something else. Something from the OT pre-figures or suggests something in the NT. The preceding thing is called a type, and the thing suggested or prefigured is called the antitype.

Most conservative Bible students recognize that the OT includes types that are later specified in some way in the NT. The two testaments are related by types and antitypes, shadows and fulfillments. The NT looks back to a number of persons, things and events in the OT and treats them as foreshadowing persons, things, and events. Some people see types throughout the OT; some see just a few that are explicitly designated as types.²¹

2. A type carries an image of its corresponding fulfillment and is always future in fulfillment. It is prefigurative and inherently prophetic.
3. The main ingredients of biblical type:
 - a) There must be a genuine resemblance between the type and fulfillment. The resemblance is not merely in looks or outward features but in substance and function.
 - b) There must be biblical evidence that a typical relationship exists. Certain resemblances may be used as illustrations and analogies but they do not thereby constitute true biblical types. The resemblance must be intended by God as a type.

²⁰ Some of the material in this and following lesson comes from the *From Moses to You* Sunday school curriculum by Barry Pendley, available at www.freesundayschoollessons.org.

²¹ Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 171-172.

Zuck suggests six ingredients of a type:²²

- (1) The type and antitype must have a natural correspondence or resemblance.
- (2) The type must have a historical reality (the antitype depends on the literal meaning).
- (3) The type must prefigure or foreshadow the antitype; i.e., it looks ahead.
- (4) The type is “fulfilled” or “completed” by the antitype; the antitype is greater than and is superior to the type.
- (5) The type must be divinely designed.
- (6) The type and antitype must be designated as such in the NT.

A similarity between two individuals does not necessarily mean that one is a type of the other. For example, a common mistake is to see Joseph as a type of Christ. Even though there are similarities between Joseph and Christ, the Bible never directly states that Joseph is a type of Christ. However, the Bible does assert that Adam is a type of Christ (Rom 5:12-21).

4. Classifications of types:

- a) Persons. E.g., Melchizedec is a type of Christ (Heb 7); Jonah’s experience in the fish typified Jesus’ experience in the grave (Matt 12:40).
- b) Events. E.g., Aspects of Israel’s wilderness sojourn typify elements of the Christian life (1 Cor 10:1-11).
- c) Institutions. E.g., the Sabbath typifies the Christian’s spiritual rest (Col 2:7; Heb 4:3-11); the Passover celebration is fulfilled in Christ (1 Cor 5:7); the Passover lamb typifies Christ’s sacrifice (1 Pet 1:19).
- d) Actions. E.g., the brazen serpent is a type of Jesus’ crucifixion and salvation by faith (John 3:14-15); the tearing of the curtain in the tabernacle when Jesus died typifies the believer’s direct access to God (Heb 10:20).
- e) Offices. E.g., the office of high priest is a type of Jesus’ intercession for believers (Heb 4:14; 9:12); the office of prophet typifies Jesus’ being a spokesman for God (Deut 18:18).

B. Hermeneutical Principles for Types

²² Zuck, 178.

1. Be careful with typology. Conservative scholars recognize fewer than 20 types in the whole Bible.²³
 - a) Don't suggest one thing is a type of something else unless the NT verifies that to be the case.
 - b) Don't invest too much meaning in types even when you find a legitimate one. The fact that one thing is a type of another does not suggest that the two are identical in every respect. The significance of a type and its antitype rests on the major parallels between the two, not the minor details.
2. Determine the literal sense of the type. Types are built on a literal understanding of the text. There's no need to allegorize or spiritualize the text.
3. Find the Divine intent.
 - a) This principle deals mainly around *how* the divine intent is displayed by God and thus discerned by the interpreter. What constitutes "biblical evidence" that a typical relationship exists?
 - b) Factors in determining divine intent:
 - (1) Direct Statement
 - (a) Romans 5:14 – Adam is a "type" [*tupos*] of Christ.
 - (b) 1 Corinthians 10:6 – "These things happened as examples (*tupos*) for us."
 - (c) 1 Peter 3:21 – "And corresponding to that (*antitupos*), baptism now saves you."
 - (2) The Use of Metaphor or Simile
 - (a) 1 Corinthians 5:7 – The Passover lamb
 - (b) Hebrews 4:3, 9, 11 – "Sabbath" and "rest" for Christians
 - (c) John 3:14 – Moses and the brazen serpent
 - (d) Matthew 12:40 – Jonah in the fish's belly
 - (3) Direct Allusion
 - (a) Hebrews 5:4-5 – Aaronic priesthood and Christ
 - (b) Hebrews 6:20ff – Melchizedekian priesthood and Christ
 - (c) Hebrews 13:11-12 – OT sacrificial animals burned "outside the camp" and Christ's suffering "outside the gate."

²³ Zuck finds only 17 (p. 179-180).

NOTE: If evidence of divine intent is lacking, then the interpreter may be merely engaging in a form of allegorization.

4. Allow the Antitype (Fulfillment) to Govern the Situation.
 - a) The typical relationship is largely determined on the NT end where the evidence of the relationship is found. This is where the similarities and applications can be discerned.
 - b) Did the OT author know he was recording a type? It is highly unlikely that he did. Typology, while wholly predicated on the divine intent, resides in the area of implications of the human author's words. It is not a form of *sensus plenior* (multiple meanings). No one knows the implications of his speech on any subject much less on theological truth. But God does know all implications and He can draw out certain ones for His purposes.
5. Find the Clear Point(s) of Correspondence Between Type and Antitype.
 - a) Romans 5:14 – Adam is a type of Christ in *representation* or headship.
 - b) John 3:14-16 – The serpent in the wilderness was an *object of faith* that represented the nullification of death and disaster.
 - c) 1 Corinthians 10:6 – Israel's craving of evil things is similar to what was going on in the church.
 - (1) 10:7 – Idolatry
 - (2) 10:8 – Immorality
 - (3) 10:9 – Testing God
 - (4) 10:10 – Grumbling
6. Be Aware of Dispensational and Other Theological Factors.

If the church is a "mystery," i.e., revelation not given in the OT but disclosed to Paul (Eph 3:2-9), then it would seem that there are no true types of the church in the OT.

II. Symbol and Symbolic Act

A. Definitions

1. "A symbol is a sign which suggests something rather than stating it" (Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*).
2. "A symbol is some object (real or imagined) or action which is assigned a meaning for the purpose of depicting rather than stating the qualities of something else" (Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*).

3. A symbol is an object or some kind of action which conveys a teaching. It is illustrative. A symbol may represent something past, present, or future. A symbol does not necessarily resemble the thing represented (i.e., it need not be similar, but may be so). The meaning is not in an inherent correspondence but must be assigned to the symbol.
4. Like types, the central idea of a symbol is a correspondence or resemblance. However, unlike a type, a symbol has no time reference. A type has a specific fulfillment—the antitype. Symbols do not; they are more general. Symbols are easily misunderstood.
5. As with typology, people often carry symbolism too far, seeing symbols where none legitimately exists.
6. Common biblical symbols:
 - a) Baptism symbolizes the believer's identification with Christ (Rom 6:3-14).
 - b) The Lord's Supper symbolizes Jesus' suffering and death on the cross (1 Cor 11:23-26).
 - c) Darkness symbolizes sin, evil, or disaster (Rom 1:12; Eph 5:11).
 - d) Light symbolizes that which is good, true and righteous (John 1:4; 1 John 1:5).
 - e) The color red may symbolize sin and white purity (Isa 1:18).
 - f) Yeast (leaven) symbolizes both sin (1 Cor 5:6) and growth (Matt 13:33).
 - g) A lamb is symbolic of Christ and His sacrifice (John 1:29; 1 Pet 1:19).
 - h) Flocks of sheep symbolize groups of humans (Mt 10:6)
 - i) A wolf symbolizes false teachers (Matt 7:15).
 - j) A lion may symbolize Satan (1 Pet 5:8) or Christ (Rev 5:5).
 - k) A sword is symbolic of divine chastisement (Deut 32:25; Ps 7:12) and of a slanderous tongue (Ps 57:4). The word of God is likened also to a sword (Heb 4:12).
 - l) Others: trees, dogs, foxes, vines/vineyards, olives, milk and honey, shepherds, serpents, fruit

B. Hermeneutical Principles for Symbols and Symbolic Acts

1. Note the Historical and Literary Contexts.
 - a) If the purpose of the symbol can be discerned from its setting, then the point will usually be clear.

- b) Note the literary genre (type of literature). Prophecy and poetry often contain symbolism, but narrative usually does not contain as much symbolic language. If the passage is part of a vision, it probably contains symbolic ideas.
- c) Look for how the text deals with the symbol. Sometimes a passage makes it very clear what the correspondence is between the symbol and its referent and it may even state the meaning. For example, the ten horns on the fourth beast in Daniel 7 symbolize “ten kings who will come” (v. 24).
- d) Other examples:
 - (1) Jeremiah 1:13 The boiling pot from the north. Jeremiah was a prophet during the decline before the Captivity and the northern power was Babylon who would eventually “scald” Israel.
 - (2) Ezekiel 4:1-3 A symbolic siege of a city. The context is the Exile and the symbol depicts the siege and fall of Jerusalem.
 - (3) Ezekiel 37:1-14 The valley of the dry bones. The context deals with Israel’s captivity and dispersion. The symbol speaks of Israel’s regeneration and regathering in the end times. It does not teach a second blessing or an experience of sanctification subsequent to salvation, or even a “regathering in unbelief” for Israel.
 - (4) Matthew 26:26-28 The bread and the cup were instituted on the night of Christ’s betrayal and threshold of His death. The Lord’s Supper is clearly symbolic.
 - (5) Revelation 1:16 pictures Jesus with a sword coming out of his mouth. This is certainly symbolic imagery. The Word of God is like a sword (Heb 4:12) and judgment is often associated with a sword (Rev 19:15). Perhaps the judgment associated with God’s Word is the idea of the symbolic imagery.

2. Find the Point(s) of Teaching Between the Sign and What is Represented.

In other words, look for the object (the symbol), the referent (what the symbol refers to), and the meaning.

For example, a lamb (the symbol) pictures Christ (the referent) because Christ endured a sacrifice similar to what lambs did (the meaning). John called Jesus “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29). Sheep (symbol) picture people (referent) because they often go astray (Isa 53:6).

3. Compare With Similar or the Same Symbols in Scripture.

- a) Leaven often suggests something negative when used as a symbol.

- (1) Mt 16:6 *Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.*
 - (2) Mr 8:15 *And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod.*
 - (3) 1 Cor 5:6 *Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?*
 - (4) However, note Mt 13:33 *The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.*
- b) The number seven sometimes suggests completion or perfection when used symbolically.
- (1) Genesis 2:1; cf. Exodus 20:11
 - (2) Joshua 6:4
 - (3) Revelation 2-3 The seven churches.

To Symbolize or Not to Symbolize, That is the Question

A great debate rages over whether some of the language of prophecy is symbolic or not. Some see much prophetic literature as symbolic, describing spiritual realities in poetic terms that are not to be taken literally. For example, some suggest that the prophecies regarding a thousand-year period of peace and righteousness ruled by Christ (the Millennium) is really just a symbolic or figurative way of describing the church.²⁴ But those who take a more literal view assert that if language can be understood literally, it should be. Hence, they see a literal millennial reign of Christ in which the promises of prophecy will actually occur just as they were written. One should stick with a literal viewpoint unless significant factors make it impossible to do so.

Other Symbolic Ideas

Some people see numbers as highly symbolic. They suggest that three is the number of the Trinity, that six is the number of man, that seven is the number of perfection, etc. There are entire books written on biblical numerology. But the best way to deal with numbers is to understand them normally or literally unless the Bible itself provides a symbolic interpretation, which is very rare. In general, there is no special significance assigned to numbers. They mean what they seem to mean without any other special significance.

²⁴ This view is called “amillennialism” and is common among Reformed and Presbyterian believers.

Similarly, it is dangerous to assign meaning to a certain color. For example, looking for meaning in the colors of the Tabernacle is a common practice. There are some colors that do have meaning, as noted above. But unless the text specifically associates a color with a meaning, it's unwise to do so.

Even animals may be assigned symbolic meanings. The donkey seems to be associated with humility (Matt 21:5), the horse with royalty (Rev 6:2) and the lion with danger, destruction and boldness (Num 23:24; Ps 22:21). And of course, the snake may symbolize Satan or deception (Gen 3:1; Rom 3:13). But again, one must avoid the temptation to import symbolic meanings into texts that are clearly literal.

Exercise: Read Revelation 1:16. Point out the symbolic language in the text and suggest the significance of the symbols.

And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.

1. What kind of literature is this? *Prophecy/apocalyptic; a vision (Rev 1.10), which suggests that the language here is symbolic.*
2. Is there anything preventing a literal understanding of the text? *Stars in one's hand is uncommon; a sword for a tongue almost demands symbolic interp, a face like the sun likewise suggests a symbolic understanding.*
3. Suggest the referent and/or the meaning for the symbols:
Seven stars: *7 pastors/messengers of 7 churches (1.20)*
Right hand: *power, authority*
Sword: *authority, power, judgment (cf. Rev 19:15)*
Face like the sun: *glory, majesty, power, brightness, holiness, purity*
4. Does the context reveal the meaning of the symbols? *Rev 1.20 the stars are the angels/messengers/pastors of the churches.*
5. How do we know who the "he" in the passage is? *Context – 1.13, 17-18 clearly it's Jesus.*
6. How would you explain the meaning of the imagery? What does the symbolism imply? *Christ has authority over the church; he's ready to bring judgment upon the world; he is great in power and glory*



Hermeneutics:

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Lesson 8: Interpreting Wisdom Literature

Solomon wrote the following to his son: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Prov 1:7). Wisdom and discipline are the subjects of the Bible’s wisdom literature. Besides the Book of Proverbs, Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon also contain similar wisdom literature. While wisdom literature is not confined to Proverbs, this lesson will deal primarily with proverbial literature. Proverb belongs to the genre of wisdom literature, which deals in applying divine truth in practical experiences of one’s life.

I. Characteristics of Proverbs

A. What is a biblical proverb? Several definitions:

1. Proverbs are “short, pithy sayings, in which a wise counsel, a moral lesson, or suggestive experience, is expressed in memorable form” (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*).
2. “Proverbs consist of short, sagacious sayings from everyday life” (Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*).
3. A proverb is “a brief statement of universally accepted truth formulated in such a way as to be memorable” (Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*).
4. A proverb is a short, pithy saying that expresses a wise, general truth in a memorable way. This expression is often in the area of basic values and proper attitudes as well as right action. Hebrew wisdom was very practical. It was based on experience, not special revelation. It focused on an individual being successful in life (all of life: sacred and secular). It is divine “horse-sense.”²⁵

For example, the saying “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” is a proverb declaring the importance of diet for good health. A biblical proverb differs from other proverbs in that its author has written under inspiration, and the author is viewing life from God’s perspective.

- B. Proverbs are usually short, memorable, and sometimes even humorous. They often overstate or oversimplify things in order to make a point. Proverbs are simple yet profound statements of godly wisdom.
- C. Proverbs are based upon the teachings of the OT Law. Wisdom as it appears in Proverbs and other wisdom literature refers to skill in godly living under the Law. NT believers must be careful in understanding and applying the Proverbs because of their close association with the OT Law.

²⁵ Utley

II. Types of Proverbs

There are two different types of proverbs:

- A. The wisdom sentence: an observation based on experience; a generally stated truth that does not necessarily persuade or exhort.

The wise inherit honor, but fools he holds up to shame. (Pr 3:35)

A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones. (Pr 12:4)

- B. The admonition: a command, followed by reasons or motivations for why one should obey it usually introduced by the word “for.”

My son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths, for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood. (Pr 1:15-16)

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. (Pr 3:1-2)

III. The Subjects of Proverbs

Many of the Proverbs point out the contrast between three types of people.

- A. The Wise Person: A wise man is one who is rightly related to God—he is saved. He also seeks after godly wisdom and obeys the Law of God.

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (Pr 2.1-5)

- B. The Simple Person: This person is gullible, ignorant, or easily distracted. He follows others to destruction. While it's not a sin to be simple, those who are simple display a lack of godly character.

I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who lacked judgment. (Pr 7:7)

- C. The Fool: Simply stated, the fool has all the characteristics of an unsaved person. There are several types of fools:

1. The Arrogant Fool: This is the most common way to understand the fool in Proverbs. In one word, he is a menace. He is pictured as one who is stupid, arrogant, and gossipy.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Pr 1:7)

Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips. (Pr 14:7)

2. The Scoffing Fool: This fool is a troublemaker with a bad attitude who despises correction.

How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? (Pr 1:22)

3. The Lazy Fool: This sluggard is a fool who refuses to work.

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. (Pr 26:14-15)

IV. Parallelism in Proverbs

Hebrew poetry and proverbs often use a poetic device called parallelism. Proverbs are usually made up of two lines. Correct interpretation is based on determining what relationship exists between the two lines. The first line relates to the second line in any of the following ways:

- A. Same Idea: The second line simply restates the first in other words.

*Penalties are prepared for mockers,
and beatings for the backs of fools. (Pr 19:29)*

- B. Developing Idea: The second line adds to the thought of the first.

*A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion;
he who angers him forfeits his life. (Pr 20:2)*

- C. Opposite Idea: The second line contrasts with the first.

*The light of the righteous shines brightly,
but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out. (Pr 13:9)*

- D. Explained Idea: The second line explains the reason for the first.

*Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him yourself. (Pr 26:4)*

V. Rules for Interpreting Proverbial Literature

- A. Understand the nature of proverbial literature. Proverbs are not iron-clad, legal guarantees. They are general guidelines for joyful, godly living. For example, those who “train up a child in the way he should go” (Pr 22:6) can be reasonably sure that “when he is old, he will not depart from it.” However, such an outcome is not guaranteed. A proverb states what normally is true in most cases. Proverbs state principles rather than promises.

- B. Proverbs do not cover every possible exception. They are general rules that usually apply, but not in some cases. For example, a gentle answer usually turns away wrath (15:1), but sometimes it does not.

- C. Proverbs often contain figurative or symbolic language. Make sure you understand the significance of symbolic imagery (see the previous material on interpreting figures of speech and symbolism). For example, in Proverbs 1:20, wisdom is personified.

- D. Be careful when handling those portions of wisdom literature that strictly apply to those living under the OT Law. For example, God promised the Israelites long life and prosperity for obeying the Law (3:2-10). The general principle is true, but we shouldn't see such promises as unconditionally binding for those in the church.
- E. You may need to translate the principle of the proverb into the modern situation. For example, Proverbs 22:11 states, "He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend." There are few kings left in the world, and few of us have the opportunity to know them personally. Thus, we must look at the statement more generally.
- F. Individual proverbial statements stand by themselves. While "context is king" for other types of literature, context may not be too significant for a proverb. For example, read a few of the proverbs in Proverbs 29. Although they are all contained in the same chapter, most of these proverbs stand alone as independent units of thought.
- G. Proverbs generally make one main point or highlight one particular principle. Seek to understand the point of the proverbs' comparison or contrast. Avoid the temptation to read more into the text than is really there. Example: the virtuous woman "is like the merchant's ships" (31:4). In what way?
- H. Interpret proverbs in light of other biblical doctrine. If your understanding of a proverb conflicts with or contradicts clear teaching from another part of the Bible, your understanding is wrong. And always check your interpretation with the experts (a good commentary or your pastor). You may also want to consult a couple of different Bible versions to see how the translators handled the text (e.g., Pr 26:2).

Wisdom literature normally deals with life's major questions and mysteries. Other books of the Bible, like Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, are longer, more developed treatments of life's mysteries. Many of the same principles discussed above apply to the interpretation of these books.



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Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 9: Interpreting Psalms

Psalms are versatile parts of Scripture. We look to them during times of joy and anticipation (e.g., weddings and holidays) as well as when faced with grief and suffering (e.g., funerals and hospital visits). The Psalms are some of the best-known and beloved pieces of literature known to man. Everyone appreciates the comforting words of the Twenty-third Psalm. The Book of Psalms has played an important role in both the history of Israel and the church.

Psalms are similar to proverbs in that they are found in many different books of the Bible. The books of Job, Proverbs, Psalms, Song of Solomon, and even the book of Judges (Deborah's Song) all contain psalms. Also, psalms are similar to proverbs in that they are usually composed of short, parallel verses. Since the Psalms are so well known and appreciated, we ought to make sure we understand how to interpret them.

I. Basic Information about the Psalms

- A. A psalm is a special type of literature. Our English word "psalm" comes from the Greek and Latin versions of the OT. The Hebrew word for a song sung to the accompaniment of instruments is *mizmor*. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) used the word *psalmos* to translate this word. The Hebrew Bible entitles the collection of psalms "Praises." Each psalm is a song. So we might think of the Psalms as the Hebrew hymnal. The entire book of Psalms is often called the Psalter.
- B. The first psalm written was undoubtedly the one composed by Moses (#90), somewhere around 1400 B.C. The final psalm was perhaps the one composed by Heman (#88), somewhere around 450 B.C. Thus, the Psalms span a period of nearly 1,000 years. Dating the individual psalms is a tricky task. We are dependent upon whatever clues we can gather from the superscriptions and the psalms themselves.
- C. Some of the titles of the Psalms include the tune to which the psalm is supposed to be sung or other musical information regarding the psalm. For example, Psalm 4 is prefaced with the words "To the chief Musician on Neginoth, A Psalm of David." Neginoth likely referred to an instrument or to a tune the psalm was sung to.
- D. Many of the psalms are preceded by a brief superscription, indicating such things as the author of the psalm, the historical situation which occasioned the psalm, various musical notations, etc. There has been considerable debate among scholars as to the accuracy of these superscriptions. Though not part of the original text (it is generally agreed that they were later added by the compiler(s)

of the Psalter), conservative scholars view them as reliable, though not inspired. In fact, the Hebrew Bible considers them to be part of the text, making them the first verse of each psalm.

- E. The Psalter is divided, like the Pentateuch, into five books, each closing with a doxology or benediction:
1. The first book comprises the first 41 psalms, all of which are ascribed to David except 1, 2, 10, and 33 which, though anonymous, may also be ascribed to him.
 2. Book second consists of the next 31 psalms (42-72) 18 of which are ascribed to David and 1 to Solomon (the 72nd). The rest are anonymous.
 3. The third book contains 17 psalms (73-89) of which the 86th is ascribed to David, the 88th to Heman the Ezrahite, and the 89th to Ethan the Ezrahite.
 4. The fourth book also contains 17 psalms (90-106) of which the 90th is ascribed to Moses, and numbers 101 and 103 to David.
 5. The fifth book contains the remaining 44 psalms. Of these, 15 are ascribed to David, and number 127 to Solomon.
- F. Each psalm makes up a single chapter in the Book of Psalms. Therefore, a relationship exists between all of the verses in a psalm. This is unlike the book of Proverbs, in which there is no clear relationship between the individual proverbs.
- G. The word *selah* occurs seventy-one times throughout the Psalms, and three times in Habakkuk, but nowhere else in the OT. It may denote an instrumental interlude, some appropriate response by the congregation, or perhaps it means something like “forever.”²⁶
- Many there be which say of my soul, There is no help for him in God. Selah. I cried unto the LORD with my voice, and he heard me out of his holy hill. Selah.* (Psalms 3:2, 4)
- H. When referring to a psalm, one should say “Psalm 100,” for example, rather than “Psalms chapter 100.” One wouldn’t say “Hymns chapter 100,” but “Hymn number 100” or just “Hymn 100.” It’s the same with the Psalms.
- I. We find over one hundred direct quotations from the Psalms in the NT. So interpreting this type of literature is an important skill to develop.

II. Types of Psalms

A. Hymns

Nearly a third of the psalms are songs of praise and adoration directed to God. Hymns are concerned with praising God for Who He is and for what He does (or has done).

Example: Psalms 8 & 150

B. Laments

²⁶ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the OT Poetic Books* (Moody, 1988), p.123.

In over a third of the psalms, the author expresses concern over a trial that he or his people are undergoing. The focus of a lament is always on submission to God. The premise of a lament could be stated as following: “Bad things are happening, but God is in control of every situation. I can trust in Him.”

Example: Psalm 3 – David fled from Absalom.

C. Royal Psalms (sung to honor the king)

These psalms express tribute to God’s control in the political realm. Some of the royal psalms also deal with the Messiah’s coming kingdom.

Example: Psalm 2 – David as God’s king is protected by the Lord

D. Proverbial or didactic (teaching)

These psalms are statements of godly wisdom and encourage those who fear God to behave in godly ways.

Example: Psalm 1 – The righteous man will prosper.

E. Imprecatory psalms

These psalms call down curses on God’s enemies.

Example: Psalms 35, 69, 109

Due to their harsh nature, many have difficulty accepting the imprecatory psalms. To properly understand such psalms, one must remember that they were written in the context of the theocracy—the nation of Israel under God’s rule. In the theocracy, God normally blessed obedience and chastised disobedience. In an imprecatory psalm, the psalmist is not so much venting personal rage against his enemies as he is asking God to uphold the terms of the theocratic covenant, punishing the disobedience of the transgressor, for His name’s sake. In the church age, imprecatory prayers are rarely appropriate (see Matthew 5:44).

F. Some of the psalms are called “Messianic” because they contain prophecies or information about the coming Messiah. For example, Psalms 2, 18, 22, 45 and 110 contain Messianic ideas.

G. Psalms of ascent (sometimes called “pilgrim” psalms)—for example, Psalms 120-134. These were sung on the way to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts—Passover in the Spring, Pentecost in the Summer, and Tabernacles in the Fall—mentioned in Exodus 23:14-19 and Leviticus 23:4-44.

H. Other classifications include penitential psalms (32 & 51) and praise psalms (8 & 100)

III. Parallelism in Psalms

Like the Proverbs, Psalms normally display a form of parallelism.

A. Same Idea: The second line restates the first.

The heavens declare the glory of God;

the skies proclaim the work of his hands. (Ps 19:1)

- B.** Opposite Idea: The second line contrasts with the first.

*For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)*

- C.** Growing Idea: The second and following lines build upon the first.

*Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name;
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. (Ps 29:1–2)*

- D.** Explained Idea: The second line explains the first

*I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. (Job 19:25)*

IV. How to Interpret Psalms

In order to interpret a psalm properly, keep the following rules in mind:

- A.** The Psalms relate directly to the history of Israel; therefore, a psalm cannot be fully understood apart from that history. If you don't know the OT very well, you won't understand the Psalms, either. Sometimes the historical situation that produced a psalm is unknown, so it's hard to figure out what the author is talking about. Most good cross-reference Bibles will point out places in the OT which help determine the background of the psalm you are studying. The preface to the psalm often gives its historical background. See Psalms 2 & 51.
- B.** Try to determine who is speaking. Sometimes the voice of a psalm is an individual (Ps 27); sometimes it's a community (Ps 44). David wrote many of the Psalms, but he is not the only author.
- C.** Try to determine the type and tone of the psalm. Psalms may be hymns, laments, royal or proverbial in nature.
- D.** Note the type of parallelism the psalm uses. Make sure your interpretation follows the comparisons and contrasts reflected in the parallelism.
- E.** See if the psalm is quoted in the NT. If so, see how the NT authors interpreted the psalm.
- F.** Remember that a psalm may be directly linked to the historical situation mentioned in the psalm. Be careful about making a psalm apply directly to you or your situation. Look for broad, general principles rather than specific promises.
- G.** Since psalms are songs, they usually have a theme or subject. All the parts of the psalm will say something about that theme. Compose one brief sentence that summarizes the argument or theme of the whole psalm. For example, the theme of Psalm 1 is the righteous man will prosper.

- H. Pay close attention to the language of the psalm. Poetry is often highly figurative and full of symbolic imagery, so be careful how you understand the words of a psalm. Define all unknown words and expressions. It's often helpful to read the psalm in two or three versions of the Bible. Older versions do not identify the stanzas of the psalm; modern translations usually do.
- I. Like Proverbs, Psalms relate general principles, not exception-less promises. Certain expressions in Psalms may have exceptions or may be conditional. E.g., Ps 103:3, 145:14, 16, 19.
- J. Suggest a potential interpretation. As always, compare Scripture with Scripture. No doctrine based in the Psalms will contradict any other part of the Bible. Also check what respected scholars have said about the psalm.
- K. Think of several ways to apply the principle to your life. How will you change in response to the teaching of the psalm?

Exercise: Work through the above rules in Psalm 1.

1. How does this psalm relate to the history of Israel? *No direct connection. However, the concepts of "blessed" and "ungodly," "sinners," and "scornful" are all based on the OT definitions of these terms.*
2. Who is the author? *anonymous*
3. What type of psalm is it – hymn, lament, royal or proverbial? *Proverbial/didactic*
4. What kind of parallelism does the psalm use? *Various*
5. Is the psalm quoted in the NT? *Not directly*
6. Is the psalm culturally bound? Is there anything preventing a broad application of the ideas? *no*
7. What is the theme or subject of the psalm? Put it in a sentence. *The righteous man will be blessed; the sinner will not be.*
8. Is there any figurative or symbolic language to define? *yes* If so, what? *"As a tree" – comparison between a person and a tree; "fruit," "leaf shall not wither," ungodly like "chaff." I.e., the "blessed man" prospers (like a healthy, fruitful tree) while the "ungodly ... shall perish."*
9. Are the promises here universal or conditional? *Conditional—for the "blessed man" who fits the description given. The benefits are for those who keep the OT Law.*
10. Summarize the general teaching or principle of the psalm. What are some other general principles? *God blesses the righteous, but the wicked suffer; separation from wickedness; God's presence in the life of believers*
11. How is this psalm going to change your life? *Trust God to bless me; stay away from wicked influences; try to turn sinners from their path*

The ability to interpret the Psalms is an important skill to develop. Because this type of literature has its own set of characteristics, the interpreter must be careful in his conclusions. Make sure

that as you study the Psalms you apply the rules from this lesson.



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 10: Interpreting Narrative Literature

The Bible contains more narrative than any other type of literature. Over 40% of the OT alone is narrative; whole books are given over to it; some books on prophecy use a narrative approach. The Gospels and Acts are also narrative literature. Since the Bible contains so much of this material, it is important to know how to interpret this kind of literature properly. It's quite easy and common for people to misuse and misinterpret biblical narrative. In this lesson, we'll learn how to approach and understand narrative literature.

I. What Biblical Narratives are *Not*.

A. Not Exhaustive Histories

1. Biblical narratives contain the information the author (and God) intended to include and nothing more. Narratives are selective and illustrative.
2. Narrative accounts do not contain a full historical recording of all the data, only those details that serve to make the author's point. What they record is true, but not exhaustive. Cf. John 20:30 & 21:25.

B. Not Usually Directly Doctrinal or Instructive

1. Narrative most often illustrates or demonstrates truth or doctrine taught directly elsewhere. Biblical stories are not doctrinal expositions. They are somewhat comparable to parables as a teaching vehicle.
2. Narratives generally teach by implication and/or extrapolation. For example, the reader is left to infer from the David and Bathsheba narrative some of the causes and effects of adultery and deceit. The story illustrates and brings out some of the implications of the Sixth Commandment (murder), Seventh (adultery), Ninth (false witness), and Tenth (covetousness), among other things.
3. In some cases, direct approval or censure is recorded of an action, such as Joshua's failure to consult the Lord (Josh 9:14), Israel's "whoring after" Gideon's ephod (Jud 8:27), or how David's adultery displeased the Lord (2 Sam 11:27).

II. What Narrative Is

- ##### A.
- Simply put, a narrative is a story, a narration of events. Narrative literature is an account of what happened.

- B. Biblical narratives have a divine side to them. There is something ultimately revelatory in view in the biblical narratives. They are really about God and what He did; He is the hero of the stories in the last analysis. They are designed to teach lessons to the readers.
- C. Biblical narrative has theological purpose, i.e., the outworking of God's decree or plan. Generally, in the OT and Gospels, this plan concerns Israel, and in the NT (Acts and Epistles especially), it concerns the church. Biblical narrative is ultimately about God and what He did, so underlying all Bible stories are theological principles.

1 Corinthians 10:11 *Now all these things (OT events) happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*

- D. All narratives have some common elements:
 - 1. Setting: the background of the story—characters, geography, time, etc.
 - 2. Action: what happened (the plot of the story)
 - 3. Conclusion: the outcome of the action. The conclusion often tips you off as to why the author wrote the story. For example, Ruth, a young Moabite woman, chose to worship God while the Israelites were living in disobedience. God, in turn, blessed Ruth by placing her in the royal line of David, and ultimately of Christ. It's not until the end of the story that we truly understand the purpose of the book.
 - 4. Most narratives follow a pattern: background or introduction, problem or conflict, complications, climax, solution of problem, and conclusion.

III. The Goal of Interpreting Narrative

- A. The reader should have a three-fold goal:
 - 1. Understanding what the text says (the content).
 - 2. Understand what the text meant to the original readers. What point was the author (under inspiration) was trying to make?
 - 3. Understand what the text means to modern Christians today. One must first understand what the text said originally before he can attempt to pull out (exegete) any principles from it.
- B. Understanding the content is the easy part—just read the text. The content is what happened, the plot of the story. The underlying principles are more difficult to discern. It often takes repeated readings and considerable thought and prayer to grasp the timeless principles that modern believers can extract.
- C. Once the principles are brought to the surface, one can then suggest how the modern believer may apply them. Identifying such principles is the goal of interpreting narrative.

IV. Common Mistakes in Interpreting Narrative

Most errors in interpreting narrative stem from the desire to find a personal application of the story. After all, of what benefit is a story if it contains no personal application? So people often seek spiritual principles in the story and in the process mishandle the text. We've already examined several interpretive pitfalls in Lesson Five, so we'll quickly review the most common mistakes associated with narrative literature.

- A. Allegorization: assigning spiritual meanings to the details of the text when the text does not indicate any such meanings.

Examples: Philo (a Jewish teacher around the time of Jesus) taught that Sarah and Hagar represent virtue and education, Jacob and Esau represent wisdom and foolishness, and the seven-branched candle stick in the tabernacle represents the seven planets in the solar system.²⁷ Assigning any kind of spiritual meaning to the five smooth stones David picked up, or to the seven locks of Samson's hair, or to the various colors used in the Tabernacle, or to the red rope in Rahab's window is allegorization. Unfortunately, allegorical interpretation is quite common.

- B. Spiritualization: finding spiritual similarities between a text and a spiritual principle when such does not exist in the text.

For example, suggesting that the story of David and Goliath teaches that God will help us overcome "giants" (i.e., problems or difficult situations) in our lives is spiritualization. So is proposing that just as the walls of Jericho fell down, so we must destroy certain "walls" in our own lives (or build "walls" if we're following Nehemiah's example).

Such methods are questionable at best and dangerous at worst. The reader's goal is to find the timeless principles underlying the passage, not to arbitrarily assign "spiritual" meanings to the details of the text.

V. Rules to Keep in Mind When Interpreting Narrative

- A. Try to discern the author's original intent in writing. The author's purpose may be stated or implied within the text. Make sure you know the purpose of the book in which the story is found. Try to determine how the story fits into the author's train of thought. You can find such information in a study Bible, commentary, or Bible handbook.
- B. Remember that context is king. Read the material preceding and following your passage and try to discern what the context adds to your understanding.
- C. Note the setting, action, and conclusion of the story. Become very familiar with the contents of the narrative. Make sure you understand all the words of the passage.
- D. Focus on the major aspects of the story, not the minor details. The principle(s) you extract must be based on the significant features of the story. For example, in the story of Ruth, the fact that she gleaned a particular kind of grain (barley and wheat) has no great significance.

²⁷ Zuck, p. 32.

- E. Distinguish between what may be normative and what is not. Most of the material in narratives, especially those in the OT, is *non*-normative; that is, modern believers need not duplicate the events related in the story. The fact that something occurred in a narrative does not guarantee that it should always happen that way. For example, it's normal for a widow to seek a husband, but the method Ruth used to snag Boaz is not normal or given as an example to follow.
- F. Some things related in narratives are culture-bound, i.e., applicable in that time and place but not applicable today. For example, in Ruth's day, when someone pulled off his sandal at the city gate, it had a specific meaning (Ruth 4:7).
- G. Principlize: attempt to discover in a narrative the spiritual, moral or theological teachings that underlie the story. What is the moral of the story? What do we learn about God or about ourselves? Make sure the principles you are considering are truly found in the text. Check that you are not allegorizing or spiritualizing.

“Principlizing is an attempt to discover in a narrative the spiritual, moral or theological principles that have relevance for the contemporary believer...Principlizing focuses on those principles implicit in a story that are applicable across times and cultures.” (Virkler, *Hermeneutics*).
- H. Compare Scripture with Scripture. The principle(s) you extract must be taught elsewhere in the Bible and not contradict other portions of Scripture. A single narrative passage is never a solid basis of a doctrine. As always, check your results with the experts (good commentaries, your pastor, etc.).
- I. Consider appropriate applications of the principle(s) to your own life. Make sure your application of the text fits the underlying general principle(s) found in the text. A primary aim in Bible study is to obey the principles you find.

Exercise: Apply the above rules to the woman at the well narrative (John 4:4-42).

1. What is John's purpose in the book? (See Jn 20:31). How does this passage fulfill his purpose? *Shows that Jesus is the Christ.*
2. What is the context of the story of the woman at the well? What material precedes the passage? *The growing number of his disciples excited the curiosity of the Pharisees, who constituted the ruling religious class. The growth of any messianic movement could easily be interpreted as having political overtones, and Jesus did not want to become involved in any outward conflict with the state, whether Jewish or Roman. In order to avoid a direct clash, he left Judea and journeyed northward to Galilee.*²⁸
3. Why was Jesus in Samaria? *He was on his way from Judea to Galilee.* What do we know about the Samaritans? *The Jews had little or no communication with them. The Jews despised the Samaritans and half-breed apostates.*

²⁸ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*

4. What are the major aspects (the plot) of the story? *Jesus arrives at the well, engages a woman in conversation, and leads her to the belief that He is the Messiah. She goes and tells others who come to the same belief.*
5. What aspects of the story are culture-bound? *A woman being at a well in the middle of the day; the hostility between Jews and Samaritans*
6. Are there any words or ideas that need to be defined? *The "sixth hour" – probably noon. Living water (vs 10) is spiritual life due to the presence of the Holy Spirit; "meat to eat" was Jesus' purpose, his desire to complete the task God had given him. Verse 20 "this mountain" – the Samaritans had set up their own temple on Mt. Gerezim, but the Jews had destroyed it many years before this encounter. "Messiah." The fields being "white already to harvest." Sowing and reaping.*
7. Suggest some of the timeless principles underlying the story. *Primary: Jesus is the Messiah. Also, salvation is available outside Judaism; God loves sinners; use common situations to witness; tell others about Christ; we must worship God in spirit and in truth*
8. Are these principles taught elsewhere in Scripture? Do other orthodox believers hold these same principles? *yes*
9. How might you apply the principles to your own life? *Witness to others, worship in spirit and in truth*
10. Suggest a couple of *inappropriate* interpretations and applications of this text. *The proper place for personal evangelism is a well; it's necessary to go to Samaria to witness; always ask for something to drink before witnessing; stay two days wherever you witness.*



Hermeneutics:

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Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 11: Interpreting Prophecy

Many people are curious about what the Bible predicts about the future. Tomorrow somehow holds more intrigue and fascination than yesterday or today. Astrologers and psychics are doing a booming business because people want to know what's going to happen next. Even unbelievers are curious about what the Bible says about the future.

The only One who knows the future is God Himself. He planned all events—past, present and future—and therefore can tell us what will happen. Fortunately, He has told us what that future will look like. God is the source of prophecy.

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet 1.20-21)

I. What is Prophecy?

The word “prophecy” comes from two Greek words meaning, “to speak for or before.” Actually, much of what the prophets said was “**forth**telling” the Word of God rather than “**fore**telling” it. Predictive prophecy is the speaking and writing of events before they occur. Prophecy is found throughout the Bible and pertains to many subjects. Some predictions were fulfilled shortly after the prophecy, and some are yet to be fulfilled. Much of the Bible is prophetic literature, so it is important that we understand how to approach it.

II. Rules for Interpreting Prophecy

- A. As always, consider the context. Make sure you understand what precedes and what follows the passage in question. The literary context will usually indicate if the fulfillment will be in the eschaton or in the relatively near future in history from the perspective of the author. Certain expressions are helpful in this regard, such as the “Day of the Lord,” “in that day,” “the latter days,” and “the time of the end.”
- B. Employ normal, literal hermeneutics as much as possible. That is, follow the same principles of interpretation as used throughout the rest of the Bible—grammatical, historical, literary interpretation. Don’t seek “deeper” mystical or symbolic meanings. As always, if the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.
- C. Note how the historical situation influences the prophecy. For example, in Joel, a locust plague gives the setting for the prophet to talk about the coming Day of the Lord.

- D. Consider the significance of figurative or symbolic language. Some prophecy records what the author saw in visions. Visions tend to be highly symbolic and full of meaningful imagery. However, even such language is communicating a literal truth. Note how figurative language is used in Gen 3:15 and Rev 1:13-16.
- E. Realize that some prophecies are fulfilled partially at one time and fully at another time. For example, the OT prophets likely did not understand how the Messiah could be both the suffering servant (Isa 53) and the conquering king (Zech 9.9). They didn't see the time between the two comings of Christ. The technical word for seeing two or more parts as one is "foreshortening." Try to determine if the prophecy has been partially fulfilled, totally fulfilled, or not yet fulfilled. Read Isa 61:1-2 and Luke 4:16-21.
- F. Look for "built in" interpretations. Sometimes the prophecy gives its own interpretation. For example, in Daniel 2, Daniel explains the meaning of the vision to the king (and to the reader). An angel explains the interpretation of the vision in Daniel 10. The text frequently gives the explanation of the prophecy.
- G. Compare parallel passages. Many OT prophetic passages (especially in Daniel) correlate to the prophecies in Revelation.
- H. Suggest an interpretation. Check it with the rest of Scripture and with respected scholarship.
- I. Consider what difference the prophecy should make in your life. Some prophecies have no direct application to believers, but others should affect the way you live. For example, the prospect of future events should affect your daily life (read Titus 2:11-14 and 2 Peter 3:10-14).

III. Why Literal Interpretation?

One might ask why prophecy should be interpreted literally. After all, there is much symbolism and figurative language in prophecy, which might suggest a less literal approach. But there are several good reasons for approaching prophecy as literally as possible.

- A. The purpose of language is to communicate, not to confuse. God created man to receive revelation. If that communication is not understandable in its plain form, then language is not serving its purpose.
- B. Bible prophecy has been fulfilled literally, for the most part. For example, prophecies concerning Jesus' birth, rearing, ministry, death and resurrection were all fulfilled literally. Jeremiah's prophecy concerning Israel's seventy-year captivity in Babylon was also fulfilled literally. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he said that he would return in the same way—literally and physically (Acts 1.9-11). So we should expect other prophecies to be literally fulfilled as well.
- C. Without the literal method, all objectivity is lost. Even symbolic and/or figurative language must have some basis in reality. If prophetic language is purely symbolic, then it's virtually impossible to say for sure what it means.

- D. Without literal interpretation, many prophecies seem to have little or no meaning. For example, the last eight chapters of Ezekiel describe in minute detail a temple that will be built in Jerusalem. If no such temple is going to be built (during the Millennium), then the prophecy has little or no significance.

IV. Interpretive Schemes

- A. Theology and hermeneutics go together. Theology influences interpretation and vice versa. There are two major interpretive schemes you should be familiar with.²⁹
1. Covenant Theology: Covenant theologians see no essential distinction between the nation of Israel and the Church. The Church has replaced the nation of Israel in God's plan. The promises God made to Israel are now being fulfilled spiritually in the Church, often called "spiritual" or "true" Israel. There will be no millennial kingdom because the kingdom is the church. Covenant theology interprets much prophecy symbolically. The promises regarding Israel's future peace, prosperity, and power are all fulfilled by the church.
 2. Dispensational Theology: Dispensationalism takes a much more literal view of prophecy. Dispensational theologians maintain a clear distinction between Israel and the Church. Israel differs from the church in origin, composition, and destiny. The church age is currently God's plan, but Israel will eventually receive all the promises given in the OT. Jesus will reign over the nation of Israel (and the world) from the throne of David in Jerusalem in the future; He is not reigning on David's throne right now.
- B. These two theologies have produced different ways of viewing the future:
1. Premillennialism: Premillennialists believe in a literal one thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ on the earth, the Millennium. Christ will return for His saints at the Rapture, after which He will return to earth and establish His millennial reign. During the Millennium, the nation of Israel will experience the blessings God promised to Abraham and David. The church is not fulfilling all the promises given to Israel, although it does benefit from them (e.g., the "new covenant" of Jer 31:31).
 2. Amillennialism: The prefix "a" means "none"; thus, amillennialists believe that there will be no literal thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth. The kingdom is currently in existence (i.e., the church) and Christ is ruling the church from heaven. Jesus never will actually reign over an earthly nation of Israel from the throne of David in Jerusalem. The promises to Israel are being fulfilled now in a spiritual or symbolic way by the church, which is the promised kingdom.
 3. Postmillennialism: The prefix "post" means "after"; thus, postmillennialists believe that Christ will return after the Millennium. The

²⁹ For a good discussion of the two views, see Renald Showers, *There Really is a Difference* (FOI, 1990).

church will triumphantly subdue every element of society around the world. So many people will be saved that the earth will become a virtual Christian kingdom. After an extended period of peace, prosperity and spiritual progress, Jesus will return to usher in the eternal state.

4. Panmillennialism: Panmillennialists aren't sure about how it's going to work out, but they figure it will all "pan out" in the end. ☺
5. *Who's Who?* Fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals tend to be premillennialists. Most Reformed believers are amillennialists or postmillennialists. Present day "dominion theology" is postmillennial. Supporters claim that Christians should take over the leadership of every aspect of society in order to bring it back under the authority of Christ. Roman Catholics believe their church (and no other) is the kingdom of God.

V. Interpreting the Book of Revelation

Mention the topic of Bible prophecy and a discussion about the Book of Revelation will not be far behind. We should admit that Revelation is a very difficult book to interpret. Historically, believers have approached the book in the following ways:³⁰

- A. Historicist: the book is a prewritten record of the course of history from the time of the apostles to the end of the world. Fulfillment is considered to be in progress at present and has been unfolding for nearly two thousand years. The seven churches mentioned at the beginning of the book refer to seven periods in history, so the various prophecies have been and are occurring right now.
- B. Preterist: the fulfillment of Revelation's prophecies has already occurred in the ancient past, not long after the author's own time. The book describes, in symbolic terms, the events of 70 AD when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. This view depends on the book being written before 70 AD. Only the very end of the book has yet to be fulfilled.
- C. Futurist: the majority of the prophecies of the book has not yet been fulfilled and awaits a future literal fulfillment. Everything from Revelation chapter 4 on refers to events in the future. Cf. Rev 1:19 for the three-part division of the book.
- D. Spiritual (or *Idealist* or *Symbolic*): one should not attempt to find individual fulfillments of the visions. The book is like a great drama depicting spiritual realities. Fulfillment is entirely spiritual/symbolic and recurrent. Events in the book describe things that will happen throughout history, such as conflict between Christ and Satan, between the saints and the anti-Christian powers of the world, and the victory of Christ and believers over their enemies. One should not attempt to find literal fulfillments of the prophecies in history or in the future.

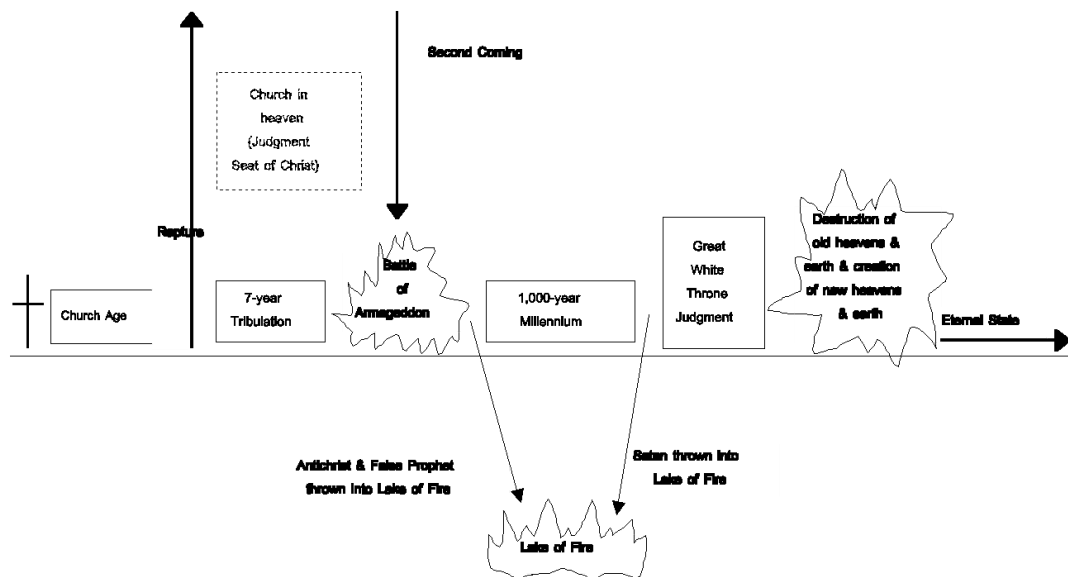
Over the history of the church, the above four positions have been popular. The futurist view (and premillennialism) appears to be the oldest, but the other views have been popular as well. Luther and many reformers took a Historicist approach to Revelation.

³⁰ Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (Nelson, 1997), pp. 2-3.

This appears to be the classic Protestant position. The Futurist approach again gained popularity through the Bible conference movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, most conservative evangelicals support either the Futurist or Preterist approach. Dispensationalists are futurists.

Note: How one views the future, and how one interprets Revelation, is not a basis by which to judge the orthodoxy of that person. Historically, good men have held varying interpretations of prophecy. We would do well to remember this.

The Futurist/Dispensational View of Prophecy



Below is a visual representation of how most Dispensationalists envision the fulfillment of prophecy.³¹

Conclusion: The study of prophecy is a very interesting and profitable pursuit, as long as you follow the correct rules of interpretation. The study of prophecy should comfort us with the knowledge that God's plan always works out, and challenge us to greater commitment in His service.

³¹ Taken from *BFL Teen Edition*, Lesson 32.

Discussion:

1. Why is there so much disagreement when it comes to interpreting prophecy? *Because everybody is employing a different set of hermeneutical rules. Also, prophecy as a genre is notoriously difficult to interpret.*
2. How do we know when to interpret prophecy literally and when to interpret figuratively? *If the plain sense makes sense, that's probably the right sense. When the text says something that is impossible or highly unlikely, then the language is probably symbolic and should be understood as such. C.f. Rev 1.16.*
3. Explain prophetic foreshortening. *The prophets often saw the prophecy fulfilled in one step, when in fact the prophecy may have a segmented fulfillment—part at one time and part at another.*
4. Explain how theology affects interpretation. *People generally try to fit the text into the theological framework they support. If the text does not fit into the system, you've either got to change your interpretation or change your system.*



Hermeneutics:

The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 12: Interpreting Parables

Jesus spoke many parables in the Gospels—about 35 of them. Parables are often defined as an “earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” However, this definition, while memorable, is not very accurate. Since parables are so common, it is wise for us to consider how to properly interpret them. How do we approach the parables?

I. What is a Parable?

- A. The word “parable” comes from the Greek word “*parabole*,” the combination of the preposition “*para*,” meaning “beside” and “*ballein*,” meaning “to throw.” A parable is a form of figurative language “thrown alongside” a principle to illustrate it. Rather than using a single word or phrase to make the comparison, a parable suggests the comparison by means of a short, fictitious story, a true-to-life narrative told to illustrate or illuminate truth.
- B. The goal of a parable is to prod hearers and readers to consider the similarities between the story and their own situation.³² Parables make principles come to life. John Bunyan’s famous book *Pilgrim’s Progress* is an extended parable that illustrates the Christian life.
- C. The word “parable” can refer to short, memorable statements called similitudes. Instead of a story, this kind of parable is much like a proverb (a wise saying or maxim), but usually employs common elements of life and customary habits. Read Luke 14:7-8, 10-11, and 21:29-31 for examples of similitudes.

II. Why Did Jesus Speak in Parables?

[Jesus] told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” (Mk 4.11-12)

Jesus gave two reasons for His speaking in parables: they revealed truth to those who genuinely were seeking truth, and they hid truth from those who were not. Those who had rejected Jesus revealed the hardness of their hearts. They had rejected the truth and were thus unable to comprehend the purpose or meaning of the parables. Parables kept truth from them because they were not genuinely interested in truth. Parables sparked the interest and thinking of those who were seeking the truth. Even so, often the disciples did not understand the point of the parables, so Jesus explained His meaning to them.

³² Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 194.

Jesus is well known for His parables, but they are found in the OT as well (e.g., 2 Sam 12:1-13). Before or after telling a parable, Jesus would often say, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” Sometimes Jesus said, “Hear a parable . . .”

III. Misinterpreting Parables

Parables are some of the most abused literature in Scripture. Misinterpretation of parables usually takes two forms: getting too much out of the parable or missing the main point of the parable.

A. Assigning Invalid Meanings—getting too much from a parable

Interpreters often look for a hidden or deeper meaning in the parables. Note how Augustine, an early Church Father, interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Detail of the Parable	“Real” (hidden) meaning
Man going to Jericho from Jerusalem	Adam is the man, Jerusalem represents heaven, Jericho represents man’s mortality
Thieves jumped him	thieves were the devil and his angels
Was stripped	of his immortality
Was beaten	persuaded him to sin
Was left half-dead	he lives physically, but is dead spiritually
A priest and a Levite pass	priest = OT Law, Levite = the prophets
The good Samaritan	Jesus Christ
Had his wounds bound	restrained his sin
Treated with oil and wine	comfort of hope and a fervent spirit
Man placed on a donkey	belief in the incarnation of Christ
The next day	the Lord’s resurrection
Stayed at an inn	the church
Given two-pence	promise of this life and the life to come
Hosted by innkeeper	the Apostle Paul

You probably did not realize that the Parable of the Samaritan had all of these “deeper” meanings. The fact is, it does not. This interpretation assigns meanings

to the details of the text that go far beyond the author's intended meaning and exemplifies the dangers of misinterpreting a parable. Augustine was guilty of allegorization, importing meaning into the parable and finding more in it than what was legitimately there.

B. Missing the Main Point

The other interpretive mistake readers make is to miss the main point of the parable. Often the details of the parable are so interesting and the apparent comparisons so clever that one misses the main point Jesus was making. Augustine (from above) gives us a good example of that. He perceived many interesting meanings from the details but ignored the main point of the parable—the characteristics of a good neighbor.

C. Basing Doctrine on Parables

Parables illustrate doctrine; they do not set or determine doctrine. E.g., Matt 13:5-7 (the Parable of the Sower) does not teach that genuine believers can lose their salvation. Matt 13:30 (the Parable of the Tares) does not teach that heretics should be allowed to remain in the church. If the primary support for a doctrine comes from parables, that doctrine is of questionable value.

IV. How to Interpret Parables

A. Read through the parable several times.

Become very familiar with the story (the plot). Jot down questions and notes for further study. If the parable is repeated in another place, read it there as well. The Gospels often tell the same story from different perspectives. Consult a Harmony of the Gospels to compare texts side by side. Read the passage in a couple of versions if the language is unclear.

B. Try to determine why the parable was told.

The text often indicates, either directly or indirectly, why Jesus told a parable. A problem, question, or special situation often prompted Him to tell a parable. This purpose is important to know. You can't understand a parable until you grasp why it was told. Finding the purpose of the parable usually tells you the main point and interpretation of the parable. Fortunately, Jesus often introduces his parables with an explanation of why He is telling it. Context usually tells you the purpose of the parable.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Mt 7:24)

Another parable he put forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: (Mt 13:31)

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. (Lk 18:1)

C. Note the point(s) of comparison.

A parable illustrates a truth by way of comparison or analogy. Thus, you must understand the true-to-life situation (i.e., the historical context and culture) before you can understand the comparison Jesus is making. Fortunately, Jesus often clearly reveals the comparisons He's making within the parable. That is, he explains how the story is related to the topic He's speaking about. Note what Jesus says is like something else; that's the point of the comparison. For

example, in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:18–23), Jesus explains the meaning of each of the four types of soil where the seed fell. But if you don't understand how soil and seeds work, the parable will have little meaning to you. The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt 25:1-13) makes little sense if you don't understand some things about Jewish wedding rituals and lamp oil.

In some parables, the implications are so clear that Jesus doesn't explain the connections. For an example, see the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21–35).

- D. Pay special attention to the language and symbols in the parable.

Because parables are comparing one thing to another, they normally contain symbolic language and imagery that the reader must decipher. The main figures in a parable stand for something else. For example, in the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 21:33-44), the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenant farmers are the religious leaders, the landowner's servants were the OT prophets, and the landowner's son is Jesus. What or whom do the main figures in the Parable of the Prodigal Son represent (cf. Luke 15:11-32)? *Father—God; PS—repentant believer, the Gentiles, a sinner turning to X; the Other Son—Israel; rejoicing—rejoicing in heaven over the salvation of a lost person/repentance of a believer.*

- E. Try to determine the main point of the parable.

Parables generally have one main point.³³ The details of the parable beyond that one central point are usually not significant. Don't make the parable "stand on all fours," that is, don't try to make every part of the story stand for something. Try to grasp the main point. For example, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7), the story illustrates the truth that there is rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents. The other details of the story, such as the fact that there were one hundred sheep or that he brought the lost sheep home on his shoulders, are insignificant. Don't make comparisons where none exists. Try to condense the general teaching of the story in one sentence. Often, the final statement in the parable states the point of the parable.

Matthew 13:1-9, The Parable of the Sower: People respond in various ways to the preaching of the Word. (In this case, the details are meaningful.)

Matthew 13:24-30, The Parable of the Tares: Counterfeit faith is common.

Luke 12:16-21, The Parable of the Rich Fool: Materialism is foolish.

- F. Note the actual or intended response of the hearers.

The response of the audience to the parable hints at the parable's meaning. Jesus often concludes His parables with instructions to the audience. For example, after the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus called His audience to action with the words "Go and do likewise." Thus, the conclusion of a parable may reveal the central meaning.

³³ Some longer parables (e.g., the Prodigal Son) make several significant points.

G. Suggest an interpretation.

Once you follow the above steps, the meaning of the parable should become obvious. As always, your interpretation should square with the rest of Scripture. Never base a doctrine on a parable alone. You may want to check a couple of commentaries to see if your results compare favorably with what respected scholars say.

H. Suggest appropriate applications.

Remember that the goal of Bible study is to apply the principles you find. Think about how you will change your life in response to the parable's teaching.

Exercise: interpret the familiar Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24–27).

Follow the steps from above.

1. What is the plot of the parable? *Wise man built his house on a rock and it withstood the storms; foolish man built his house on sand and it fell.*
2. Why did Jesus tell the parable? *Illustrating the difference between those who hear and obey and those who hear and reject.*
3. What are the points of comparison?

Those who hear and obey: *like a wise man who built on rock*

Those who hear and reject: *foolish man who built on sand*

Why is it wise to build on rock? *Security, confidence, strength*

Why is it foolish to build on sand? *Insecurity, weakness*

Note the connections: Obeys the word—wise man—builds on rock—house stands; rejects the word—fool—builds on sand—house falls

4. What imagery or symbolism must the reader explain? *Rock, sand, storms, the house standing or falling*
5. What's the main point of the parable? *Those who obey the word of Christ enjoy stability.*
6. Does the response of the hearers aid in interpreting the parable? *No.*
7. Suggest an interpretation of the parable. *It's wise to hear and obey Jesus; it's foolish to hear and not obey Him; those who hear and obey Jesus have a firm foundation and can be confident; those who don't can't.*

Of what significance is the fact that the same trials hit both houses? *It implies that the same trials hit both believers and non-believers. This is not the main point of the parable, but it seems a valid inference.*

Suggest a few misinterpretations. *That the main point of the parable is to build your house on a rock rather than on sand; that trials always come in threes (rain, floods, wind); rain = x, floods = y, wind = z.*

8. Suggest applications based on the principles of the parable. *Hear and obey the words of Christ. Commit yourself to daily Bible reading. Seek to obey the principles you read or hear. Recognize that Christianity is a sure foundation for living.*

Conclusion: Since parables are so common in the NT, it's important that we know how to interpret them. Follow the rules from this lesson, and you'll understand the parables better.

Discussion:

1. Why are parables so easy to mishandle? *Because they are figurative to begin with and easily misunderstood.*
2. Explain why Jesus spoke in parables. *To conceal truth from those not interested in truth and to illustrate truth to those who were.*
3. Why should you never base a doctrine on a parable alone? *Because parables are easy to misinterpret; it's easy to make a parable say what you want it to say; doctrines should be based on more than one passage.*



Hermeneutics:

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Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 13: Interpreting the Epistles

The Apostle Paul traveled extensively throughout Israel, Greece, and modern-day Turkey, preaching the Gospel and planting new churches. He trained men to be pastors and deacons in these churches. Timothy and Titus were sent to two difficult areas to train other leaders. While Paul traveled, he encouraged and instructed both Timothy and Titus in their tasks by writing letters to them. He also wrote letters to churches he and/or others had started. These letters were copied and collected by the early church and eventually included in the canon of inspired Scripture. In this lesson, we'll study how to interpret this type of literature. It's essential that we learn to do so because the majority of the information about the Christian life is found in the epistles.

I. Characteristics of an Epistle

- A. The word “epistle” is somewhat uncommon in modern speech, so many people don’t know what an epistle is. Some jokingly suggest that an epistle is the wife of an apostle. The word comes from the Greek “*epistolos*” which simply means “a letter.” The epistles are letters Paul, Peter, John and others sent to various people or churches shortly after the time of Christ. These letters were written under divine inspiration and are thus true and authoritative for us today. Much of the NT is composed of epistles.
- B. Epistles were very important to the establishment and growth of new churches. These epistles are helpful for us today as well. They contain many practical teachings that speak directly to us in the church age.

II. The Patterns of an Epistle

Epistles share many things in common with the kind of letters we are familiar with. We have some type of greeting (e.g., “Dear _____”); then we explain the purpose of our letter (e.g., “I am writing you because . . .”). We say what we want to say, and then we close with some kind of good-bye (e.g., “Yours truly, ...”). Epistles in the Bible were intentionally written with a similar pattern.³⁴

A. Opening *greeting*

This is similar to our opening statements. However, this greeting details who is writing and to whom he is writing. After this introduction, the phrase “Grace, mercy and peace to you . . .” is found in all of Paul’s letters. Most of the other Epistles contain a similar kind of introductory greeting.

³⁴ Ryken, p. 155.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:1-2)

B. Thanksgiving

The writer usually gave thanks for something the church has done or for what God has done.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil 1:3-5)

C. Body

This is the main content of the letter. The letter may consist of:

- ♦ Doctrinal teaching (Eph 1-3)
- ♦ A warning against false teachers/teaching (Col 2:8)
- ♦ A rebuke for following false teaching (Gal 1:6-7)
- ♦ A word of encouragement for ministry well done (1 Th 1:6-8)
- ♦ Instructions regarding worship (1 Tim 3:15)
- ♦ A plea to the church to solve problems (1 Cor)

D. Final comments and/or greetings

In the closing, the writer briefly extends further greetings to faithful people in the church (e.g., 2 Tim 4:19). Sometimes, the writer gives greetings from his helpers in ministry (e.g., Phm 23-24).

Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Phil 4:21-23)

III. Principles for Interpreting Epistolary Literature

A. Do some background reading.

It's vital to know the historical context of each epistle. Find out who wrote the epistle and what motivated it (the occasion). Since each epistle was written with a specific purpose in mind, it is important to discover what that purpose is. Most study Bibles will give you a brief introduction to the book. A working knowledge of the Book of Acts is also helpful, because the epistles were written in the course of history covered by Acts. A Bible handbook (like Haley's) or a book on NT survey contains much helpful background information.

B. Read the book through several times.

Read and re-read the epistle. Consulting two or three versions is helpful. Take your time and try to absorb what you are reading. Most epistles are short enough to read through in one sitting.

While you are reading, try to focus on one paragraph at a time. Paragraphs are either identified with the paragraph symbol (¶), as in the KJV, or by the layout of the text, as in most new versions. Paragraphs contain one main idea, so find out what that idea is. Ask two questions while reading:³⁵

- ♦ What does the author say in each paragraph?
- ♦ How does this paragraph help support or advance the author's main theme?

While you are reading, have a pen and notebook ready and make a question/idea list. This is a good place to make notes about each paragraph. (Note: Paragraphs sometimes overlap chapter divisions, e.g., Eph 4:29–5:2.)

C. Identify the different parts of the letter.

- ♦ Opening: Who is writing to whom?
- ♦ Thanksgiving or Praise: to whom and why?
- ♦ Body of the letter: what's the problem or point of the letter?
- ♦ Closing comments: What final instructions or comments does the author make and why?

D. Identify the overall theme of the book.

Try to condense the general argument of the book into one or two sentences. It's important to know the theme because each part of the book says something about the theme. Sometimes the theme is obvious, sometimes not. If you have trouble determining this on your own, you can usually find this information in a study Bible or commentary.

Example: What is the theme of Galatians? *The Epistle of Galatians eloquently defends Paul's apostolic authority and contains in summary form what the apostle taught. In particular it contains a clear statement of justification by faith and builds on that foundation a defense of Christian liberty against any form of legalism ... Galatians was written to call early Christians back from the Mosaic Law to grace, from legalism to faith. It is an emphatic statement of salvation by faith apart from works.*³⁶

E. Make an outline of the book.

It's often helpful to trace the author's argument through the book. Note how the author moves from point to point. Compare your outline to one published in a study Bible or commentary.

³⁵ Fee and Stuart, p. 51.

³⁶ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:588.

IV. Interpreting specific passages

If you've followed the above steps, you should have a good general grasp on the contents of the epistle in question. Take the following steps to interpret any part of an epistle:

- A. Start with the paragraph your passage is in. While you can try to interpret a single sentence or even a phrase, remember that "context is king." Find out the theme and purpose of the paragraph your passage is in, and then determine how that paragraph fits into the overall scheme of the book.
- B. Define all significant words. Since words and sentences convey the meaning of the text, it's essential that you understand the vocabulary and structure of the passage at hand. It may be helpful to consult a dictionary or another version.

With the availability of books and computerized Bible study aids today, even those not familiar with the original languages can do significant research on the meaning of Bible words.
- C. Consider whether the passage is culturally bound. Some of the epistles deal with issues that applied directly only to the original audience, not to us. For example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians regarding how to deal with meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8). We don't deal with that issue at all. Since there is no direct application of that passage, we have to consider whether there may be broader, general principles that might be applicable.
- D. Consider other passages that may pertain to the interpretation of your passage. All truth is interlocking. Other passages may help clear up the meaning in the text you are looking at. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. A primary rule of interpretation is to let clear, direct teaching inform unclear passages.

Example: Is there a contradiction between Paul's statements on justification by faith and James' statement that "faith without works is dead"?
- E. Suggest a potential interpretation. Write down what you think the author meant. Then check that meaning with other passages.
- F. Check a couple of good commentaries and/or other resources (pastors, teachers, etc.). Note that it's usually best to do your own research and study before you read what others have to say about it. Again, if your conclusions are seriously out of line with what respected scholars think, you need to adjust your results.

Exercise: Read Philippians 2:1-11 (one paragraph). Let's try to interpret verse 6.

1. What is the purpose and theme of the Book of Philippians? *General doctrine and Christian living. Not one specific theme—more general warnings and exhortations regarding various subjects—unity and humility, joy, false teachers, persecution. NIV Study Bible has good paragraph.*
2. What part of the letter is this? *Body – Doctrinal teaching*
3. What's the theme of this paragraph? Note vs. 2 and vs. 5. *Unity and humility*
4. What words do we need to define in verse 6?
form – note that vs. 7 uses the same word (*morphe*)

robbery – a thing to be seized upon or to be held fast, retained

5. Is there anything culturally bound within the text? *No*
6. Are there other passages that teach about the deity of Christ? *Yes, many. This passage supports the doctrine.*
7. What did Paul mean here? *Jesus did not consider the glories of heaven something to be retained, but left heaven and came to earth. Although Christ is essentially God (equal to God), he did not regard such equality as something to be held on to.*
8. Is the author teaching that Jesus became less than God when he came to earth? *No– This is not suggesting that Jesus left his deity behind, but he temporarily laid aside some aspects of it.*

Conclusion: It's important to know how to interpret epistles because this type of literature makes up a large portion of the NT. Plus most of what we know about life in the church age is based on the epistles. Follow the above guidelines for interpreting the epistles.

Discussion:

1. Why is it so important to know how to handle epistolary material? *Because the NT has a lot of it, and it's the primary resource for telling the believer how to live in the church age.*
2. How are epistles different from narrative? *Narrative tells a story; epistles generally don't. Narratives are usually non-normative and non-didactic; epistles are usually both normative and didactic. Narratives describe, epistles prescribe.*
3. Explain the idea of a passage being culturally bound. *The info applies directly only to the original recipients of the letter. There may be broad, general principles that we can extract, but you have to be careful about it.*
4. What if you come up with an interpretation that no one ever thought of before? *You're almost certainly wrong.*



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Part 2: A Method of Biblical Interpretation

Lesson 14: Putting It All Together: A Logical Method of Interpretation

We are nearing the end of our journey exploring the art and science of biblical interpretation. In this lesson, we'll try to pull together the primary tasks the Bible interpreter must complete in order to come to an accurate understanding of the Bible.³⁷

I. Prepare Yourself Spiritually.

- A. Fruitful Bible study is **a combination of dependence on the Holy Spirit and the sharpening of your God-given abilities of reason and analysis.** The Spirit was given to help us understand God's Word (John 14:26; 16:13-14; 1 Cor 2:10-16). Bible study is a spiritual exercise. Those not prepared spiritually will find little profit in Bible study.
- B. Prayer should be "priority one" in interpretation and application. Prayer is not an automatic link to true interpretation, neither in its quality or quantity, but it is the first indispensable step. Prayer is not overcoming some reluctance on God's part to open His book to us, but it is a recognition of our dependence on Him.
- C. Personal cleansing from sin is also a prerequisite. Known, unconfessed sin hinders our relationship with God (Isa 59:1-2). He does not require sinlessness in order to understand the Bible, but the Bible is spiritual truth and sin is a barrier to spiritual things. We need to confess and forsake known sin (1 John 1:9). We need to open ourselves to the Lord for inspection (Ps 139:1, 23-24). Many of His promises are conditional on our faith response; so too, our ability to understand the Bible.
- D. We need to develop a desire to know God and His Word (Ps 9:7-14; 42; 119). When we become serious with God, He is able to draw near to us and open His will for our lives (Zech 1:3-4; James 4:8).
- E. We need to immediately apply (put into practice) the truth gleaned from our Bible study into our lives (James 1:22). Many of us already know much more biblical truth than we are living. Application is not optional; wise people hear and obey (Mt 7:24f). Walk in the light you have and more light will be given.

³⁷ Much of this material comes from Bob Utley's hermeneutics seminar textbook.

II. Remember the fundamental rules of interpretation (from Lesson 4)

- A. Interpret literally or normally, using the grammatical-historical method. “If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.” Unless there is a good reason to think the author is speaking non-literally, interpret the passage literally.
- B. Context is king. Always consider how the surrounding words and paragraphs influence a passage.
- C. Consider the historical and cultural background and what influence it has on the passage. Some passages are “culturally bound” and do not have a parallel significance to modern believers.
- D. Try to understand what the original author intended to say to the original audience. “A text can never mean what it never meant.” Try to determine what the author’s purpose in writing was.
- E. Decide if the passage commanding or describing. Much of the OT describes events without prescribing that we duplicate them.
- F. Seek one primary meaning, the “plain sense,” rather than “deeper, hidden” meanings. The writer had only one meaning in mind.
- G. Look for underlying, timeless principles.
- H. Remember the difference between Israel and the church. Many things pertaining directly to the nation of Israel do not have continuing application for the church.
- I. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Seek to correlate truth. Find out what the rest of the Bible has to say about your passage or topic.

III. Process the Text Logically

- A. Read the Bible! One cannot know what a passage means if he does not know what it says. Careful reading and outlining are the keys to understanding.
Mt 22:29 Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err [go astray, wander], not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God.
Ac 17:11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.
 - 1. It may be helpful to consult more than one translation.
 - a) Primary study should be done out of an essentially literal translation: KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV.

- b) **Further study may require consulting a dynamic equivalent translation: NIV, NRSV. These Bibles “give the sense” of a passage instead of giving a word-for-word rendering. Sometimes this is helpful, but one must recognize that the text is quite interpretive. One can use these versions almost like a commentary.**
 - c) **Avoid paraphrases and “free” translations: Living Bible, New Living Translation, The Message, Contemporary English Version, Good News Bible, Jerusalem Bible, Today’s English Version**
 - 2. **Read the entire book or literary unit in one sitting. When you read, allow yourself a prolonged period of study time in a quiet place. Read carefully and slowly to familiarize yourself with the contents. You must see the whole before the significance of the parts becomes obvious.**
 - B. **Write down your textual observations (i.e., take notes). Keep track of key words or ideas that need to be defined. Define the key words with a Bible dictionary or lexicon.**
 - C. **Notice the major divisions (literary units) of the author’s thoughts. These are identified by changes in subject, time, topic, tone, place, style, etc. The basic unit of thought is the paragraph.**
 - D. **Make an outline of the passage.**
 - E. **Consider the historical context. Look for verses in the biblical text to answer these questions.**
 - 1. **Who wrote the passage?**
 - 2. **To whom was the passage addressed?**
 - 3. **Why was the passage written to them?**
 - 4. **When was the passage written?**
 - 5. **What historical circumstances were involved?**
 - F. **Consider the literary context, i.e., the material surrounding the passage at hand. This would include the previous and following paragraphs, the chapter containing the passage and the whole book. Make sure you understand the meaning of the words and expressions in the passage.**
 - G. **Consider how the genre of your passage influences its meaning. We’ve examined how to interpret figurative language, types and symbols, wisdom literature, psalms, narratives, prophecy, parables and epistles. Approach each genre appropriately.**

- H. Consider parallel passages or similar passages found elsewhere in the Bible. Since the entire Bible is inspired (2 Tim 3:16) and since our basic presupposition is that it does not contradict itself, we must allow the Bible to fully explain itself on a given subject.
- I. Make a tentative interpretation. Write down what you think the text means. Make sure your interpretation fits the evidence from the passage.
- J. Check your results.
 - 1. Consult your pastor: Bible students often neglect or ignore their own pastors as sources of information and help in Bible interpretation. Pastors may not be “experts” on some theological issues, but they likely can give you a reasonable answer or at least point you in the right direction.
 - 2. Consult recognized experts: scholars, teachers, writers, speakers, etc.
 - 3. Consult one of the better study Bibles: MacArthur, Ryrie, Reformation Study Bible, NIV Study Bible notes
 - 4. Consult conservative commentaries: Commentaries are usually written by scholars who have studied a passage or book intently and in far more detail and depth than the average person is able. Their explanations are often very insightful.
 - 5. Consult historical resources: Pastors, theologians, and scholars have been publishing their thoughts on the Bible for many centuries. Find out what Christian writers have said about your passage throughout history.
 - 6. Consult systematic theology books: Theology books are usually extensively indexed by both text and topic. Check the index for your text. Read the material corresponding to your topic or text. Find out how your ideas fit into the whole of Christian theology.
- K. Avoid common interpretive pitfalls.
 - 1. Allegorization: finding deeper or hidden meanings in the elements of a passage
 - 2. Spiritualization: finding spiritual meanings that were not intended by the author
 - 3. Confusion: failing to recognize distinctions (e.g., between Israel and the church); failing to consider other portions of Scripture
 - 4. Proof-texting: stringing together a series of favorite texts to prove a point, while at the same time ignoring those passages that conflict



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Lesson 15: The History of Interpretation

A basic understanding of the history of interpretation is valuable for every student of the Bible. It may come as a surprise that historically many interpreters have not followed the grammatical-historical (literal) method. In fact, allegorism in one form or another has been predominant in the history of the church. This is unfortunate but true.

A study of history should expose us to and warn us against the errors of faulty hermeneutical methods. Hopefully, modern exegetes will not make those same mistakes.

The history of interpretation runs in general eras or periods. In this sketch, some of the important or dominant characteristics of each period will be outlined.

I. JEWISH/RABBINIC INTERPRETATION (OT)

- A. Generally, rabbinic interpretation was allegorical. The rabbis held that since Scripture came from God, (1) multiple meanings are to be found in the text, and (2) every detail of the text (even the individual letters) has importance for interpretation regardless of how insignificant or incidental.
- B. Four main types of Jewish interpretation were in use at the time of Christ.
 - 1. Literal: This was called *peshat*, a grammatical-historical method which served as a basis for other methods.
 - 2. Midrash: Midrash means “sacred study,” and sought deeper meanings by breaking the texts into pieces and focusing on insignificant details. It was given to fanciful allegorical interpretations.
 - 3. Pesher: This comes from the Qumran sect. It had principles of midrash but with a heavy eschatological (end times) emphasis.
 - 4. Allegorism: Allegorism of literature had been used widely by the Greeks and was adopted by Hellenized Jews (i.e., those who had accepted the Greek culture) for their purposes.
 - a) The Jews (particularly at Alexandria, Egypt) had a religious heritage from Moses and a philosophical tradition which came from the Greeks. They employed allegorism to reconcile the two traditions. They interpreted Moses allegorically and brought him into conformity with Plato and other philosophers.

- b) The chief representative of rabbinic allegorism was Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-AD 54), the most influential biblical scholar of the Diaspora (the scattered Jewish people). He sought to reconcile Greek philosophy and the Pentateuch and show his Jewish contemporaries that Greek philosophy was really from the OT. Philo said the literal meaning is for the immature but the allegorical is for the mature.

II. APOSTOLIC INTERPRETATION

- A. The fundamental hermeneutical principle for the apostles was that Jesus literally fulfilled OT prophecies. Cf. Is 61:1-2 with Lk 4:18-21.
- B. The apostles found predictions about the work of Christ or the Church in the OT. They frequently quoted the OT to support their statements about Jesus (Acts 2:25-36, 13:29, 33, 15:15, etc.)
- C. The NT writers were somewhat creative in their use of OT texts (cf. Mt 2:15; Gal 4:24). However, they often followed the plain meaning of the OT passages they quoted (e.g., Isa 7:14/Mt 1:22-23).
- D. The apostles took the sayings of Jesus normally, according to the plain sense, without seeking hidden or unusual meanings (1 Cor 11:23f).

III. PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION (AD 100-590)

- A. Patristic (i.e., having to do with the church Fathers) interpretation is reflected in various schools. The school at Antioch, founded by Lucian in the early fourth century, was noted for its sound, grammatical-historical interpretation and its wholehearted opposition to allegorism. Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca 358-428) was especially noteworthy. In contrast, the schools at Alexandria, Caesarea, and Edessa were given to the allegorical method.
- B. Unfortunately, allegorism dominated the church Fathers. The allegorical method was valuable (they thought) in that one could use it to defend Christianity against intellectual criticism and harmonize Christianity with various philosophies.
- C. Early Patristic Allegorism
 - 1. The Epistle of Barnabas (ca AD 130): The author (unknown) allegorized passages favorable to Judaism. He allegorized the clean and unclean animals (a fertile field for all allegorists), the Song of Solomon, and many other passages.
 - 2. Justin Martyr (AD 164): Justin allegorized Judah's immorality with Tamar, David's adultery, and Jacob's wives, along with the bells on the high priest's robe, among others.

3. Clement of Rome and Irenaeus: By means of excessive typology of the OT, both tried to establish NT truths and practices. Clement gave every text a literal and a spiritual meaning. E.g., he saw bishops and deacons in Isaiah 60:17 as referring to officers and overseers of the church. Irenaeus saw the Garden of Eden as a type of the church, etc.
4. The Alexandrian School:
 - a) Clement of Alexandria (born c. AD 150): He saw five senses to Scripture:
 - (1) Historical: What actually took place
 - (2) Doctrinal: Moral, religious, and theological teaching; biblical statements taken directly into one's thought
 - (3) Prophetic: Genuine prophecies and types
 - (4) Philosophical: Allegorizing the Bible to accommodate Greek philosophy, showing the influence of Philo and the Stoics
 - (5) Mystical: Much like the former; Lot's wife symbolized impiety which produces blindness of heart
 - b) Origen (AD 185-254): Origen was a deep allegorist. He believed Scripture had a triple interpretation, what he called body, soul, and spirit. The body of Scripture was the literal, external words; the soul was man's relationship to his fellow man; and the spirit was man's relationship to God, and God's relation to Himself, the world, and man. Origen's allegorical approach would dominate interpretation in the Church for the next 1000 years!
 - c) Post-Origen Influence
 - (1) Jerome (d. AD 420): Originally, he was an allegorist but later was influenced by the school at Antioch. However, he never completely abandoned allegorism.
 - (2) Augustine (d. AD 430): His four-fold sense of Scripture had the following ingredients:
 - (a) The literal ("letter" as he called it)—what happened.
 - (b) The allegorical—what one must believe
 - (c) The moral—what one must do
 - (d) The anagogical—what one must hopeTo his credit, Augustine also proposed the following important rules of hermeneutics:

- (1) Focus on the literal or historical meaning unless the literal made no sense.
- (2) Clear passages should be used to understand less clear ones.
- (3) Compare Scripture with Scripture.
- (4) Context is the final judge of meaning.

Unfortunately, Augustine usually ignored most of his sounder principles and engaged in allegorism.

IV. MEDIEVAL INTERPRETATION (590-1500)

- A. Biblical scholarship showed almost no originality during the Middle Ages. Scholars were content to compile the statements of the church fathers. Tradition arose and played a key role in theology. The doctrine of the dominant church (Roman Catholic) was thus patristic (based on the Fathers) and not exegetical (based on the Bible text). Again, the allegorical method was quite prominent.
- B. Reasons for the widespread use of medieval allegorism:
 1. Allegorism was used to justify the papacy.
 2. Knowledge of the biblical languages continued to be practically non-existent, and exegesis was severely stunted.
 3. The apostate condition of the Roman Catholic Church cultivated mysticism and extreme pietism in some of the monasteries (e.g., Cluny, St. Victor).
- C. The Dark Ages (7th-12th Centuries)
 1. Gregory the Great (ca. 604) and Venerable Bede (735): Both were allegorists. Gregory taught that Job's three friends are the heretics, and when they came to Job, they were returning to the Holy Church. Job's 7000 sheep represented innocent thoughts, the 3000 camels were high and vain notions, the 500 oxen were virtues, and the 500 she-asses were wanton inclinations. Bede allegorized the Prodigal returning to the Father's house to mean worldly philosophy coming home to the Church.
 2. Bernard of Clairvaux (1135): Mysticism arose during this time and produced some mystical allegorists of note. Bernard used allegorism to support the papacy. For example, the two swords of Luke 22:38 were taken to be "spiritual" and "material" respectively. The first was to be used by the church and the second by the soldiers when ordered to do so by the church. Innocent III's claims to the papacy were in part founded on this interpretation. Bernard interpreted the sun and moon of Genesis to be the papacy and the secular rulers respectively.

3. Cabbalists (12th ct): Letterism and allegorization was taken to absurdity. Since God gave to Moses words, letters, vowel points, and accents, they had supernatural significance. Each letter in a word represented different words, so they substituted words with the same numerical value.³⁸

³⁸ From Shane Belding, *Biblical Discernment in the Pew*, D. Min. project at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Minneapolis, MN.

- D. The Scholastic Period (13-15th Centuries).
 - 1. The leading light here was Thomas Aquinas (1274). He held to the four-fold sense of Scripture, dwelling mostly on the non-literal aspect. With Aquinas and the scholastics came a divorce between theology and exegesis and a marriage between theology and philosophy.
 - 2. A contemporary of Aquinas, Bonaventura, held to a seven-fold sense of Scripture corresponding to the seven seals of the apocalypse. They were historical, allegorical, mystical, symbolical, synechdocal, and hyperbolic.
- V. THE REFORMATION ERA (1500-1650)
 - A. The Reformation brought an end to free-wheeling allegorism and a return to the study of the biblical languages and sound hermeneutics. The Reformers and pre-Reformation leaders were grammatical-historical interpreters. With the translation of the Bible into numerous languages and dialects came a new interest in biblical interpretation.
 - B. Among the early Reformers, Luther and Melancthon followed the literal sense of Scripture although at times they lapsed into allegory. Calvin was free from allegorism and mysticism. His great principle was “Scripture interprets Scripture.”
 - C. *Sola Scriptura* (Scriptures Only) became the rallying cry of the Reformers. This led to a “back-to-the-Bible” movement in which all church practices had to be supported by Scripture. Since the Bible was the authoritative source document, accurate exegesis and analysis was very important to the Reformers.
- VI. THE POST-REFORMATION AND MODERN ERAS (1650-1940s)
 - A. Protestant Scholasticism/Confessionalism: In response to post-Reformation Catholic decrees and dogmas, the Protestants developed a creedal approach to theology. Appeal was made to creeds and confessions (statements of faith) for authority, and exegesis in many quarters turned cold and sterile. Good hermeneutics became sidetracked as “dogmatics” (doctrine) became dominant over exegesis. Proof-texting in its worst sense often prevailed.
 - B. Pietism: Believers wanted something warm-hearted and practical for their everyday lives, a personal experience with God, not mere doctrine. Thus pietism arose, which emphasized edification instead of exegesis. Unfortunately, personal reflections on Scripture were often not rooted in accurate biblical analysis. Pietists often disregarded the grammatical-historical method in favor of an “inner light” type of interpretation. This left them susceptible to false theology.

- C. Rationalism/Biblical Criticism: Rationalism promoted reason as the only determining method of finding truth. Human reason stands in judgment of every biblical statement. Biblical revelation was discounted as rigid, authoritarian, and culture-bound. Rationalism was the main product of the Enlightenment for biblical studies. (The Enlightenment was a 17th and 18th century overthrow of dogma, tradition, and revelation, and an elevation of human intellectual autonomy.)
- D. Liberalism: Liberalism was merely an extension or natural outcome of the hermeneutics of rationalism. In this system, the inspiration of Scripture is denied, the idea of evolution is applied to Israel's religion with the OT books having their authorship and dates of composition altered radically, the idea of the supernatural is denied, and the Bible is interpreted only as history (and not very accurate history at that).
- E. Neo-orthodoxy: This is in one sense a non-rational, emotional, subjective approach to Scripture, and in another sense only a variation of the rationalism of the liberal approach. Neo-orthodoxy's basic premise is still the autonomy of the human intellect despite the idea that an "encounter" with God is supposedly above human intellectual process.
 - 1. God reveals Himself in His presence and not in words. Knowledge does not come from biblical statements but from a personal, indescribable experiences with God.
 - 2. God is the Wholly Other, totally outside human perception. Only myths can bridge the gap between man and God. The biblical events are not meant to be viewed as historical but as myths to convey spiritual truth.
 - 3. Truth is paradoxical, filled with apparent contradictions; the Bible need not be rationally coherent. The Bible itself is treated by the neo-orthodox in the same basic manner as the liberals.

VII. MODERN DAY (1940-PRESENT)

- A. Some suggest that the text's affect on the reader is more important than the text itself. The relevance of the text to the reader is most significant, not what the text says. The reader determines meaning for himself; the author's meaning is secondary. Meaning is found in the reader's response. Every reader will get something different from the text, so there can be no uniform understanding.
- B. Many deny that a reader can access the author's original intent. The author and the reader live in separate worlds. The reader cannot escape his own set of biases and thus cannot truly understand what the author intended. All the reader can know is how he feels about the text. Objectivity is impossible. Absolute truth is impossible.
- C. A variety of groups seeks to interpret the Bible according to their own interests, political positions, and points of view: feminist, liberation, sociological, etc.

- D. Fortunately, many evangelical Christians retain their commitment to the grammatical-historical method of hermeneutics. Many still believe that “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16-17). We must strive to maintain this commitment.