

Hermeneutics - Biblical Interpretation

The Need for Interpretation

"Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law."

Professor Agassiz

- Now that we know what the text says we can begin to ask ourselves, "What does it mean?"
- All that God has written to us has a meaning and purpose. He is not playing games with us. All Scripture is profitable...
- Interpretation is the process of recreating God's original meaning when it was written down. The primary purpose of interpretation is to discover what the author meant, to recover the one meaning God intended to communicate through His inspired author.
- Our observations lay the foundation for our interpretation. The more solid and deep our foundation, the more stable will be the superstructure which is our interpretation.

Why do we have to interpret Scripture in the first place? Why doesn't God just make the meaning clear to us?

- Neither godliness nor gifts of Holy Spirit insure a correct interpretation.
 - Time and distance have thrown up barriers between us and the biblical writers, which block our understanding.
 - Language barriers - translations , literary genre.
 - Every translation is an interpretation.
 - Cultural barriers – language is a medium of culture.
 - Obedience is often impossible without interpretation.
 - Eph 5:18 Is beer OK?
 - 1 Cor 13:34 women never to speak in church?
 - Difficult texts
 - God wants us to be diligent. 2 Tim 2:15
- So can we interpret the Bible correctly? Yes but there will always be problems, there will always be some questions that we cannot answer.
- Atheist asked the preacher eating dinner of fish if he believed in the Bible, all of it, is there anything you can't explain - yes many things. What do you do with all those things you cannot explain? I do the same thing I'm doing with this fish I'm eating, I eat the meat and push all the bones to the side and then let anybody who wants to choke over them.

- Does it really bother you that a finite person cannot fully understand an infinite God? Don't get sidetracked with all of the problems and unanswerable questions in your Bible study. Eat the meat.

Genre: What type of literature I am reading? The first question to ask. There are 6 major types of literature in the Bible.

- Bible is not a single book but a library of 66 books.

1. Exposition is a straightforward argument or explanation. It appeals to the mind. Ex. Romans
 - a. the key to understanding a work of exposition is to pay attention to its structure and the terms that are used.
2. Narrative and biography - means story. Most frequent form in the Bible. 40% of OT and 60% of NT. Genesis, gospels, Acts
 - a. What is the plot? - what happens from beginning to end.
 - b. Who are the characters?
 - c. What can we learn about life from this story?
 - d. Interpret in context of whole account.
 - e. Look for comments, clues given by the author.
 - f. Repetition.
3. Epistles – Letters common in 1st century Roman empire.
 - a. Common form
 - b. Understand occasional nature – written to a particular audience at a particular time for a particular reason.
 1. This reason we do not know completely – only guess – mirror reading
 - c. Examine context carefully
 - d. Identify key words
 - e. Understand grammar and syntax of a text.
 - f. Ask many questions about author, recipients, setting.
4. Parables - a brief tale that illustrates a moral principle. 1/3 of Jesus' teaching.
 - a. As a precaution, you must start looking at only **one main point** of the parable. You shouldn't treat a parable allegorically (putting meaning on every elements of the story). Not all the details in the parable are relevant, and those that are relevant will support the one main point of the parable.
 - b. A parable is not a riddle trying to hide the meaning of the story but rather a form of communication that will help the listener hear the message with greater impact. To understand the main point of the parable, you must first try to identify the original audience when the parable was told, know the surrounding context, and find out why the parable was spoken in the first place.
 1. What is the context – the reason for the parable.

2. Don't press the details
 3. Avoid allegorizing the parable.
 4. Ask important questions
 1. Who are main characters?
 2. What comes at the end of the parable?
 3. What occurs in direct discourse?
 4. Who or what gets the most text?
 - c. You should avoid using the same parable found in other gospels to get the main point since Matthew will use a certain parable in the context different from Luke. Learn to read in the context of the author who recorded the parable.
5. Poetry - appeals to the emotions as well as the imagination. Psalms, Lam, Song of Songs, Job, Prophetic books. Language of the heart, emotions, imagery.
- a. Must understand Hebrew poetry, parallelism is two lines that extend a thought, contrast a thought, repeat a thought, or oppose a thought.
 - b. Hyperbole - an exaggerated language used to make a point.
 - c. Ask questions, who wrote it, why, what is the theme, questions, what does it say about people God etc.
 - d. Differences between prose and poetry.
 1. Judges 4 and 5
 2. Exodus 14 and 15
 3. Poets use descriptive, emotional language that is figurative and used to evoke emotion.
6. Proverbs and wisdom literature - short to the point pieces of general truth or principle about life, typically practical in nature and dealing with behavior.
- a. Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, James, some of Jesus' teachings.
 - b. **Proverbs give general principles and are not promises – there are exceptions.**
 - c. Prov 12:22, 26:27
 - d. Error of Job's friends – assumed that proverbs were absolute laws with no exceptions. Job must be a sinner.
7. Prophecy and apocalyptic - looks ahead and often warns of judgment
- a. To understand prophecy one must be careful to recreate the situation in which the prophecy was originally given.
 - b. Apocalyptic - deals with end times, symbolic. Look to OT to understand symbols, rather than looking for a time line ask about implications for us today.
8. Idioms – difficult to interpret because they cannot be taken literally
- a. Every language and culture had them.
 1. I smell trouble
 2. Answer the door
 3. Step on it.
 - b. Found frequently in NT

1. Sleep refers to death Mt 9:24, 27:52, John 11:11
- c. Idioms mean what the author wills them to mean.
 1. Josh 8:17 not a man was left
 2. 1 Corth 7:1 not to touch a woman – literal.
 1. NIV Marry ESV sexual relations
9. Exaggeration – an overstatement that is possible.
 - a. Lk 14:26, Mt 5:29-30
 - b. Hyperbole – exaggeration that is impossible to complete.
 1. Mt 23:23-24 swallow a camel
 2. Mt 7:3-5 log in eye
 - c. Rules for recognizing exaggeration
 1. The statement is literally impossible.
 2. Statement conflicts with what speaker said elsewhere.
 3. Statement conflicts with actions of the speaker elsewhere.
 1. Hating family?
 2. Praying only in secret?
 4. Statement conflicts with other biblical teachings.
 5. Statement interpreted by another biblical writer in a non-literal way.
 6. Statement in a literary form prone to exaggeration – poetry.

Source of Meaning: Who or What Determines the Meaning?

A. The Text?

1. Does the text contain a meaning that is independent of the author? Can the text contain meaning apart from the author? Does the text have a life all its own as it moves through history?

a. Paul Ricoeur states this position well, “The text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by the author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.”

2. Semantic Autonomy of Text. The meaning is the property of the text itself.

3. A text can CONVEY the message or CARRY the message, but cannot itself will meaning. Texts cannot think and meaning is a construction of thought.

a. Text cannot think. Is only a vehicle.

B. The Reader? Post modern view. What does this mean to you?

1. In this view, the reader does not learn, discover, ascertain, or decipher the meaning, but the reader GIVES the meaning to the text. The reader is the determiner of meaning.

2.This has been the dominant view in biblical interpretation. Today this is how many people interpret the Bible

3.BUT – we don't want someone's perspective read into the text – we want to hear what the Biblical authors have to say!

C. The Author? (What Paul meant...")

1.The Biblical approach is to try to understand what the author meant.

2.What the author intended to mean is what we want to understand.

D. Role of the Reader

1.The reader must determine the literary form.

2.The reader must determine the authorial meaning of the words.

3.The reader must seek personal implications and significance.

a.The term that is often used is "application" but we will not use this term since application really has two aspects (= implications and significance).

b.Implications are controlled by the author.

c.Significance is controlled by the reader.

Principles of Interpretation – Walter Henrichsen

1. Assume the Bible is authoritative and inerrant.
 - It is the final court of appeal.
 - Based on belief in inspiration.
 - The context and nature of the command indicates whether or not it is universally applied.
- The Bible is consistent within.
2. The Bible interprets itself; Scripture best explains Scripture.
 - Compare Scripture with Scripture. 1 Cor 14:34, 1 Cor 11:5
 - Danger of omission or addition to Scripture.
 - Immediate context, larger context, same author, Bible as whole.
 - Clear passages should interpret less clear passages. (1 Jn 3:9, 1 Jn 1:8)
 - No doctrine should be established on the basis of one text. (1 Cor 15:29)
3. The interpreter must be saved and dependent on the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12-16).
 - Mt 13:15, 2 Cor 4:4
 - While an unbeliever can study the words and understand the message, they cannot respond in faith to the truthfulness of the message or with belief apart from the Holy Spirit.
4. Interpret experience in light of Scripture; not the other way around.
 - Where do you begin? Experience or Scripture as a foundation for truth. Experience never defines truth. Experience is important part of learning but you do not judge the Bible based on that experience.
 - Mt 5:27-48
5. Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command.
 - We are not to follow the example of every person in the Bible. Abram and Sarah.
 - Examples can be an example for us to follow.
 - The believer is free to do anything that the Bible does not prohibit specifically or in principle.
6. The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, not increase our knowledge.
 - 2 Pet 1:4, 2 Tim 3:16,17
 - Understanding without application is deceptive.
 - Application must be in keeping with a correct interpretation.
7. Each believer has the right and responsibility to investigate and interpret the Word of God for himself.
 - Jesus expects this of us. Jn 5:39, Jn 8:31, 2 Tim 2:15, Acts 17:11
 - Your private interpretation leads you to a conclusion different from historical interpretation – CAUTION! Many Godly, intelligent people have studied the

Scriptures for over 2,000 years with the help of the same Holy Spirit. Learn from them as well.

8. Church history is important but not decisive in interpretation.
 - The church does not determine what the Bible teaches; the Bible determines what the church teaches.
 - “It seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to them should think so little of what He revealed to others.” Spurgeon
 - Doctrines implied by the Bible, clarified in the course of church history.
 - i. Trinity
 - ii. Deity, humanity of Christ
 - Danger of tradition – Mt 23:13-23

9. The Promises of God and you. 2 Pet 1:3-4
 - General (1 Jn 1:9) or specific (Acts 13:47 and Is 42:6-7)
 - Conditional or unconditional

 - o Distinguish between practice and principle.
 - Foot washing today? Jn 13
 - Holy kiss? Rom 16:16
 - Don’t confuse a custom or action for a command. Acts 1:26

GRAMMATICAL RULES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

10. Scripture has only one meaning and should be taken literally.
 - Normally communication has one intended meaning by the author.
 - Interpret literally unless there is an obvious reason not to.
 - i. Genre: Poetry, Proverb, Apocalyptic
 - Words have only one intended meaning.
 - Take Scripture as normal language; “plain sense of the language”

11. Interpret words in harmony with their meaning at the time it was written.
 - Semantic Range – all the possible meanings of a word
 - Only the context can determine which meaning the author meant. Although it is possible for a word to have many meanings, in the context *a word only can carry one meaning* (there are very few exceptions).
 - Determine four things when studying a word.
 - i. How does the writer use the word
 - ii. Its relation to the immediate context
 - iii. Current use at the time of writing.
 - iv. Root meaning. Be careful of word studies, root studies etc. Knowing the root of a word does not guarantee that that is the meaning in this place. Only helpful if word never used anywhere else.

12. Interpret a word in relation to its sentence and context.
- 1 Cor 7:1 Good not to touch a woman?
 - A word cannot mean more than one thing at a time.
13. Interpret a passage in harmony with its context.
- How does the passage relate to the material surrounding it
 - How does it relate to the rest of the book?
 - How does it relate to the Bible as a whole?
 - How does it relate to the culture and background in which it was written?
 - Example 1 Jn 1:7 What does it mean to walk in the light? Without sin?
14. If an inanimate object describes a living being -- then it's figurative.
- I am passages of Jesus.
 - When life and action are attributed to inanimate objects, the statement may be considered figurative.
 - i. Mountains sing, shout
15. If an expression is out of character with thing described -- it's figurative.
- Phil 3:2,3 beware of the dogs.
 - Context will tell you whether a statement is figurative or not.
 - Figurative language used to describe God.
 - i. 2 Chron 16:9 eyes of the Lord
 - ii. God uses human forms of speech and imagery in order to communicate with us.
16. Parables - Don't make a parable "walk on all fours" -- it has only one main point.
- Do not exceed the intended limits of the parable. Don't make it say more than was intended.
 - Historical interpretation of parables – allegory
 - Steps for interpretation
 - i. Determine the main purpose of the parable. Check for clues in introduction or reason for the parable. "Who is my neighbor?"
 - ii. Make sure you explain the different parts of the parable in accordance with the main design.
 - iii. Use only the principal parts of the parable in explaining the lesson.
17. Prophetic statements are to be taken normally, in their usual literal, historical sense -- unless the context compels otherwise. Their fulfillment may be in installments, each fulfillment being a pledge of that which is to follow.
- Malachi 4:5-6 Jesus interprets this figuratively for us. Mt 11:13-14
 - NT writers inspired interpretation of OT passages. Mt 2:15
 - Partial fulfillment Is 61:1-2 Lk 4:17-21

HISTORICAL RULES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

18. Interpret Scripture in light of biblical historical context.
- Bible is historical revelation. Set in a real time and place.
 - Who was the author, recipients, where did they live, when, culture, history? Put yourself as much as possible in the place of the original recipients.
19. Revelation is progressive; later revelation explains earlier. Both Old and New Testaments are essential parts of revelation and form a unity.
- OT sets the foundation for understanding the NT.
 - Jesus assumes listeners know and understand OT. Jn 3:14
 - New Testament is a commentary on the OT.
 - i. Hebrews
 - Essential unity between OT and NT
 - ii. Salvation
 - iii. Seen in frequent quotations from OT in NT.
 - iv. Certain practices of OT fulfilled in NT and therefore cancelled.
 - 1. Animal sacrifices Heb 10:4
 - v. God's character
20. Historical facts or events of history become symbols of spiritual truths only if Scripture designates them.
- Symbol – something that stands for or suggests something else.
 - i. Passing through Red Sea as symbol for baptism. 1 Cor 10:1-4
 - ii. Allegory Sarah and Hagar Gal 4:22-24
 - Symbolic value assigned by inspiration, not the individual reader.

THEOLOGICAL RULES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

- broad rules that deal with the formation of doctrine
21. Scripture must be understood grammatically before it can be understood theologically.
- Understand what it says before you can expect to understand what it means.
22. A doctrine is not biblical unless it sums up all that the Scriptures say on that topic.
- Three kinds of parallel studies.
 - i. Word parallels - love
 - ii. Idea parallels - subject
 - iii. Doctrinal parallels
 - Inductive reasoning – parts to a whole
 - Deductive reasoning – Beginning with the whole and coming to conclusions about the the parts.
 - Both needed. Knowing parts needed to arrive at big picture. Big picture needed to interpret parts correctly.

- Biblical Theology – the big story Christ is the center and focus of the Bible. Luke 24:27
- How you see the big picture will determine how you interpret the parts.
- Covenant vs dispensational theology

Covenant

Continuity between OT and NT
 Grace, Single plan of redemption
 All of Scripture relevant to believer
 Church replaces Israel
 Promises to Israel symbolic
 Millennium – symbolic of present

Dispensational

Discontinuity
 Different dispensations
 Focus more on NT, Epistles
 Israel distinct from church
 Promises to Israel literal
 Literal Millennial reign of Jesus

23. No contradictions in Scripture: When two doctrines seem to contradict each other, accept both as scriptural in the confident belief they will resolve themselves into a higher unity.
- Where the Scriptures do not reconcile conflicting truths, we live with the tension, holding both views in balance.
 - Our allegiance is not first primarily to a system of theology, but the Scripture. Human logic is not the determiner of truth.
 - i. Trinity
 - ii. Dual nature of Christ
 - iii. Origin and existence of evil
 - iv. Divine sovereignty and man's responsibility Acts 2:23
24. An implied teaching must have support in other passages to be considered biblical.
- Mark 12:26-27 Doctrine of resurrection implied in the OT.
 - i. God is God of living. God is God of Abraham. Abraham among living.

Practical Problems – How would you interpret the following passages and what rules would you apply?

1. What does 1 Jn 3:9 mean that no one born of God will continue to sin?
 - a. 1 Jn 1:8 #2
2. What does it mean to walk in the light in 1 Jn 1:7? Does it mean to live without sin?
 - a. #13 Context
3. Can a believer get drunk on beer since only wine is prohibited in Eph 5:18?
4. Should we baptize ourselves for people who are dead? 1 Cor 15:29
5. Does 1 Cor 7:1 prohibit holding hands while dating?
 - a. # 12
6. Does Phil 3:2,3 warn us of the dangers of dogs? Why not?
 - a. #15
7. What did Jesus mean when he said he could raise up children from stones? Mt 3:9
 - a. Rom 9:6-7 #1

8. Your pastor tells you that you should follow the example of Jesus and Paul and remain single. What do you say?
9. Do you think Lk 16:19-31 is a parable or should be taken literally? Why?
10. Who are the “brothers” James refers to in James 1:16, 2:1, and 3:1? How is James using this word?
 - a. #12
11. What does the word fruit mean in the following? How does it differ? How will that change the meaning?

a. Mt 3:8	Mt 21:19
b. Lk 1:42	Jn 15:2
c. Rom 1:13	Gal 5:22
12. Interpret the meaning of Lk 16:9?
 - a. #13

Case studies – Which rules of interpretation or principles found above would you use to help you in your interpretation of the passages below?

1. I decide to toss a coin to decide which University I should attend based on the example of the apostles in Acts 1:26? Is this a Biblical application of this verse?
2. On the basis of Mt 19:21-23 and Luke 14:33, you are told by someone that to be a follower of Christ you must rid yourself of all possessions. Biblically, how would you answer this person and which of the rules of interpretation would you use?
3. A Jehovah’s Witness argues that Jesus denied being divine in Jn 10:33-36. Using the rules of interpretation, interpret this passage and answer the assertion. List the rules used as you do this.
4. What did Jesus mean in John 8 when He told his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood? Is this a reference to what we practice as communion today? Is this a reference to transubstantiation (the belief that in the sacrament of communion, the elements actually become the body and blood of Jesus)?
5. Can true Christians lose their salvation? Hebrews 6
6. What does it mean to hate our parents? Luke 14, Mt 10
7. If God desires to save all men, and Jesus is the Savior of all men, then won’t all people be saved? 1 Tim 2:3-6
8. Parable of the sower Mt 13. Notice how Jesus interprets the parable. What do you think is the main point?

Recommended Bibliography

Playing by the Rules by Robert Stein

A Layman’s Guide to Interpreting the Bible by Walter Henrichsen

Hermeneutics; Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation by Henry Virkler

Living by the Book by Hendricks/Hendricks

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart