

Bible Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

Hermeneutics is the *science* and *art* of interpretation; *science* because we are guided by rules in a system; *art* because the application of rules is a skill, and not by mechanical imitation.
--Bernard Ramm

Each Scripture passage has one (and only one) intended meaning, which the author intended to communicate to his audience. There can be, however, many applications of that one interpretation.

The goal of Biblical hermeneutics is to study the Scriptures—without altering or distorting the Communicator's (God) intended meaning—so that it can and will be accurately explained, understood, and applied to a contemporary audience.

Biblical hermeneutics and hermeneutics education (training) are critically necessary...

- 1) to bridge the gap of understanding between the Bible and us...since we are separated by time, by culture, and by distance.
- 2) to keep the interpretation of Scripture within objective (and truth-bound) realities.
- 3) to help Jesus-followers gain independent interpretive abilities.

The preferred method of uncovering the intended, authorial meaning of the Scriptures (and other literature) is the **Literal-Grammatical-Historical-Contextual** interpretational method:

- **Literal (Normal):** To interpret in a normal and natural (or plain) manner, while recognizing any existence of figurative language.
NOTE: While the word "literal" is a technical term, "normal," "natural," or "intuitive" may be better labels for this method. "Literal" identifies an interpretational methodology, which is distinguishable from other (inferior) methods, such as "allegorical" (which searches for hidden meanings), or "spiritual" (which looks only for moral significance).
- **Grammatical:** To apply principles related to grammar—syntax, linguistics, morphology (ex. tense, voice, definition, etc.).
- **Historical (Cultural):** To research the historical and cultural record in order to bring information to bear on the interpretation.
- **Contextual:** To utilize the passage's context in widening concentric circles—paragraph, book, author's writings, testament, and entire Bible.

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GENERAL HERMENEUTICS involves the "general" principles used in interpretation of literature generally (ex: novels, newspaper articles, correspondence, etc.).

SPECIAL HERMENEUTICS involves the "special" principles used in the interpretation of special genres of literature (ex: editorials, lawyer's briefs, classified ads, political speeches, blogs, tweets, poetry, figurative language, etc.).

Special Figures of Speech in the Bible: A figure of speech is a form of expression used to convey meaning (or to heighten effect) by comparing or identifying one thing with a different thing. (The second thing usually having more familiarity to the receiver.)

1. Simile—a formal comparison between two different objects, using "like" or "as."
(Jer. 23:29; Matt. 17:2)
2. Metaphor—an implied comparison by direct assertion. (Gen. 49:9; Lk. 13:32; Jn. 3:19)
3. Metonymy (mental relationship) or synecdoche (physical relationship)—a resemblance relationship, in which one thing is used for another, since the two are frequently associated.
 - a) A cause is stated in place of an effect.
(Lk. 17:29; 1 Thess. 5:19)
 - b) A part is stated in place of the whole, or vice versa. (Judg. 12:9; Js. 4:7)
4. Personification—an inanimate object portrayed as animate. (Ps. 114:3-4; Rom. 8:19)
5. Hyperbole—an exaggeration or magnification of an object beyond reality. (Jn. 21:25; Acts 17:6)
6. Symbol—when something stands for (or suggests) some meaning in addition to its ordinary one. (Gen. 7:4; Exod. 24:18; Matt. 4:2)

Special Literary Genres in the Bible:

NOTE: General genres of history, instruction, and dialogue are usually naturally understood.

1. Poetry: Structural parallelism is the distinctive feature of OT poetry. Hebrew poetry is characterized by a balance of thought (parallelism), whereas Indo-European poetry is characterized by a balance of sound (meter, rhyme).
2. Prophecy: Prophetic literature (foretellings) must be interpreted in light of the strong possibility that figurative language is present. Because of the historical blurriness of many prophecies, dogmatism should be resisted.
3. Parable: A parable is an extended simile which is realistic, but not historical. It is intended to illustrate one basic thought. (Luke 15; Matt. 13)
4. Allegory: An allegory is an extended metaphor which is non-historical, and often imaginary. (John 10, 15; Eccl. 12:3-7; 1 Cor. 5:8)

TEN WARNING SIGNS OF IMPROPER (and dangerous) HERMENEUTICS

- #1 PROOF-TEXTING: Finding a Scripture passage to support one's predetermined thought or belief, instead of formulating beliefs from proper study of the Bible. (*"Here's a verse that proves my position."*)
- #2 EXPERIENCING: Trying to prove a concept from personal experience rather than from proper Bible interpretation. (*"I know it's true...it happened to me."*)
- #3 NORMALIZING: Accepting everything that happened in the Bible as the norm for Christians. (*"NOW is just like THEN...after all, God doesn't change."*)
- #4 CULTURALIZING: Making the Bible authoritative only for its time and culture. (*"Since we humans have progressed so far since Bible times, we can be certain God's ancient rules are obsolete."*)
- #5 LITERALIZING: Disallowing figurative language in the interpretation of Scripture. (*"I'm just taking the Bible for what it says."*)
- #6 PERSONALIZING: Taking messages directly spoken or written to someone else as directly to or for me. (*"God said it...it's right here...it's in MY Bible."*)
- #7 SUBJECTIVIZING: Approaching a text with personal preconceptions, prejudices, and/or biases, rather than with objectivity. (*"This is what it means to me."*)
- #8 MYSTICIZING: Looking for a hidden meaning above the clear and obvious authorial intent. (*"This is deep...and mature, spiritual people get it."*)
- #9 MAVERICKING: Being divergent from almost every other Bible interpreter. (*"I prayed and God gave me a revelation."*)
- #10 PONTIFICATING: Presenting interpretations with brash, arrogant self-confidence instead of with humble caution. (*"I know THIS is the right interpretation."*)

CONTROLLING PRINCIPLES

- A. The Accommodation of Biblical Revelation: The Scriptures present incomprehensible realities in finite terms. Only then can humans have any hope of knowing any divine revelation.
- B. Progressive Revelation: The light of God's revelation becomes progressively clearer and brighter from the oldest of Old Testament writings through the latest New Testament books.
- C. Scripture Interprets Scripture: Obscure passages give way to clear passages.
- D. The Illuminating Work of the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit brings yielded, humble learners to better (and improved) understandings of the Scriptures.
- E. Hermeneutical Circles Awareness:
 - 1) The *parts* are understood through the *whole*; the *whole* is understood through the *parts*.
 - 2) One's *interpretation* refines (or defines) one's *theology*; one's *theology* refines (or defines) one's *interpretation*.

(NOTE: These also exist with other disciplinary studies; ex. earth science, sociology.)
- F. The Clarity of Scripture: The Scriptures are clear enough to instruct the beginner in the essential matters of faith and practice; yet they are profound enough to stimulate and challenge experts.

Bible Study Methods (for use in the study of modern language Bibles)

1. Humble yourself before God and ask for His Spirit's illuminating assistance in your Bible study.
2. Read the passage several times...slowly. Read it again...in different translations.
3. Utilize the processes and principles of

general hermeneutics (and special hermeneutics, when necessary).

4. Determine the single intended meaning of the passage. Deciding what it is that answers these questions will help:
 - a) What would this mean to a (hypothetical) reader who has no religious and/or cultural bias?
 - b) What would this have meant to a (hypothetical) reader 500 years ago?
 - c) What would this mean to a (hypothetical) reader 500 years from now?
 - d) What would this mean to a (hypothetical) reader 10,000 miles from here?
5. Compare your conclusions to others' conclusions. Improve your interpretation with others' input (ex. study Bibles, commentaries, live discussions, internet searches, etc.).
6. Determine whether the passage is *prescriptive* or *descriptive* and then apply the interpretation to contemporary life. Ask: Is this a prescription for us to obey or a description of divine and/or human activity for us to live by, in principle?
 - + If it's *prescriptive*...the more you identify with the receiver of this divine prescription, the more directly you should obey its instructions.
 - + If it's *descriptive*...the more your situation parallels this description of divine and/or human activity, the more you should live by its principles.
7. While reviewing the (one) interpretation and the (potentially many) applications, pray for God's continued illumination and empowerment.
8. Ask God to help you live in tune (in harmony) with His written Word—The Bible.