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Defining Biblical Hermeneutics

How Biblical interpretations, or hermeneutics of the Bible, affect the way we read the scriptures

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This vellum copy of the Gutenberg Bible is owned by the Library of Congress. The Gutenberg Bible, the Vulgate (Latin) translation, is the first book printed using moveable type. Printed in the 1450s in Mainz Germany, this is one of only 48 copies that still survive (11 in the United States), and is considered to be one of the most valuable books in existence. *Photo: Raul654's image is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.*

For as long as there have been Biblical texts, there have been Biblical hermeneutics, or Biblical interpretations. One definition of hermeneutics ([given by Bernhard W. Anderson in a piece he wrote for Bible Review](#)) is that Biblical hermeneutics are “modes of [Bible] interpretation[s].” In another *Bible Review* article, [James A. Sanders offered a Biblical hermeneutics definition](#) as “interpretive lens[es]” through which one reads the Bible. Going a step further, the Merriam-Webster dictionary extends its hermeneutics definition to include not only the methods or principles of the interpretations but also the study of those very Biblical interpretations. In short, the hermeneutics of the Bible are the many ways people read the Bible.

Biblical hermeneutics even take place within the Biblical text itself. In the Hebrew Bible, the authors of the Psalms and the prophets often referred back to the Torah and incorporated their own interpretations and understanding of the text from their social locations.

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In the years leading up to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., several different Jewish groups had risen to prominence, [including the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes](#). Although they were all Jewish, each group had very different Biblical hermeneutics. Definition of what happened to the soul after death, proper temple sacrifice and the importance of studying the law differed among these groups because of their varying approaches. Christianity also began as a Jewish sect, but as Jesus' followers developed their own hermeneutics in relation to the law and the role of the messiah, it became a distinct religion.

Today there are many hermeneutics applied to the Bible. These methodologies range from historical-critical, to post-colonial, to rhetorical, to cultural-critical, to ecological to canonical-critical. These are all types of Biblical hermeneutics. Part of the reason that so many hermeneutics exist is that interpreters have different goals. For example, if you want to understand how Moses's life in the wilderness differed from daily life in the ancient Levant, you would use an archaeological/anthropological hermeneutic. However, if you want to understand the gender politics between Miriam and Moses in the wilderness, you would use a feminist or womanist approach to the text. Different hermeneutics lead to different types of interpretations. Cheryl Exum famously wrote two articles on Exodus 1-2:10 focusing on the women in the narrative. Her conclusions in these articles appear contradictory, but that is because she used two different hermeneutics (rhetorical and feminist) and each method focused on different elements of the text, which led to different interpretations of the text.

Even archaeology, which is the focus of **BAR**, is a Biblical hermeneutic. By studying the remains of ancient people and how they lived, and comparing their finds to the texts, archaeologists are able to offer exciting new interpretations. For example, the sacrifice of Isaac is one of the most interpreted stories throughout history. The disturbing narrative about a God who orders his follower to sacrifice his son, but ultimately withdraws this command at the final moment, has caused great discomfort in readers for several reasons. Many of these reasons revolve around the modern revulsion regarding child sacrifice. The world of archaeology [provides insight into the practice \(or non-practice\) of sacrifice in the ancient world](#), as well as the hilltop altars, which appear in the story. For more on this topic see ["Infants Sacrificed? The Tale Teeth Tell"](#) by Patricia Smith in the July/August 2014 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

There are many ways in which you can approach the text, and your method will determine your interpretation. It is important then to be transparent about what is

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essential to you as a reader and recognize how that impacts the interpretations that you develop. Your interpretive goal will ultimately determine your Biblical hermeneutic.

The religion section of most bookstores includes an amazing array of Bibles. In our **free eBook [The Holy Bible: A Buyer's Guide](#)**, prominent Biblical scholars Leonard Greenspoon and Harvey Minkoff expertly guide you through 21 different Bible translations (or versions) and address their content, text, style and religious orientation.

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Read how noted scholars arrive at a definition of Biblical hermeneutics:

- Bernhard W. Anderson, "[The Bible: Word of God in Human Words](#)," *Bible Review*, June 1997.
- James A. Sanders, "[Spinning' the Bible](#)," *Bible Review*, June 1998.

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<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/defining-biblical-hermeneutics/> Retrieved August 3, 2021.