

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Hermeneutics: Principles of Biblical Interpretation

THE EDITORS OF *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA*

1



El Greco: Saint Jerome As Scholar

**Hermeneutics**, the study of the general principles of biblical interpretation. For both Jews and Christians throughout their histories, the primary purpose of hermeneutics, and of the exegetical methods employed in interpretation, has been to discover the truths and values expressed in the [Bible](#). The term *hermeneutics* has also been used in connection with the interpretation of the [sacred](#) texts of other religious traditions, including the [Qur'ān](#). In a contemporary sense unrelated to [religion](#), *hermeneutics* refers to the philosophical study of interpretation (see [philosophy of language: The hermeneutic tradition](#) and [continental philosophy: Gadamer](#)).



[WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG](http://WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG)

© 2021, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The sacred status of the Bible in [Judaism](#) and [Christianity](#) rests upon the [conviction](#) that it is a receptacle of divine [revelation](#). This understanding of the Bible as the word of God, however, has not generated one uniform hermeneutical principle for its interpretation. Some persons have argued that the interpretation of the Bible must always be literal because the word of God is explicit and complete; others have insisted that the biblical words must always have a deeper “spiritual” meaning because God’s message and truth is self-evidently profound. Still others have maintained that some parts of the Bible must be treated literally and some figuratively. In the history of biblical interpretation, four major types of hermeneutics have emerged: the literal, [moral](#), [allegorical](#), and [anagogical](#).

[Literal interpretation](#) asserts that a biblical text is to be interpreted according to the “plain meaning” conveyed by its grammatical construction and historical [context](#). The literal meaning is held to correspond to the intention of the authors. This type of hermeneutics is often, but not necessarily, associated with belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, according to which the individual words of the divine message were divinely chosen. Extreme forms of this view are criticized on the ground that they do not account adequately for the evident individuality of style and vocabulary found in the various biblical authors. [St. Jerome](#), an influential 4th-century biblical scholar, championed the literal interpretation of the Bible in opposition to what he regarded as the excesses of allegorical interpretation. The primacy of the literal sense was later advocated by such [diverse](#) figures as [St. Thomas Aquinas](#), [Nicholas of Lyra](#), [John Colet](#), [Martin Luther](#), and [John Calvin](#).

A second type of biblical hermeneutics is [moral interpretation](#), which seeks to establish exegetical principles by which [ethical](#) lessons may be drawn from the various parts of the Bible. Allegorization was often employed in this endeavour. The [Letter of Barnabas](#) (c. 100 CE), for example, interprets the dietary laws prescribed in the [Book of Leviticus](#) as forbidding not the flesh of certain animals but rather the vices imaginatively associated with those animals.

[Allegorical interpretation](#), a third type of hermeneutics, interprets the biblical narratives as having a second level of reference beyond those persons, things, and events explicitly mentioned in the text. A particular form of allegorical interpretation is the typological, according to which the key figures, main events, and principal institutions of the [Hebrew Bible \(Old Testament\)](#) are seen as “types” or foreshadowings of persons, events, and objects in the [New Testament](#). According to this theory, interpretations such as that of [Noah’s](#) ark as a “type” of the Christian church have been intended by God from the beginning.

[Philo Judaeus](#), a Jewish philosopher and contemporary of [Jesus](#), employed [Platonic](#) and [Stoic](#) categories to interpret the Jewish scriptures. His general practices were adopted

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

by [St. Clement of Alexandria](#), a Christian theologian and leader of the catechetical [School of Alexandria](#), who sought the allegorical sense of biblical texts. Clement discovered deep philosophical truths in the plain-sounding narratives and precepts of the Bible. His successor as head of the school, [Origen](#), systematized these hermeneutical principles. Origen distinguished the literal, moral, and spiritual senses but acknowledged the spiritual (i.e., allegorical) to be the highest. In the [Middle Ages](#), Origen's threefold sense of scripture was expanded into a fourfold sense by a subdivision of the spiritual sense into the allegorical and the anagogical.



[Philo Judaeus](#)

Philo Judaeus.

*From Les vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres Grecs, Latins et Payens, Vol. 2, by André Thevet, 1584.*

The fourth major type of biblical hermeneutics is the [anagogical](#), or [mystical](#), interpretation. This mode seeks to explain biblical events as they relate to or prefigure the life to come. Such an approach to the Bible is exemplified by the Jewish [Kabbala](#), which sought to disclose the mystical significance of the numerical values of [Hebrew](#) letters and words. A chief example of such mystical interpretation in Judaism is the [medieval Sefer ha-zohar](#). In Christianity, many of the interpretations associated with [Mariology](#) (the study of doctrines related to [Mary](#), the mother of Jesus) fall into the anagogical category.

In modern times as in other periods, shifts in hermeneutical emphases reflected broader academic and philosophical trends; historical-critical, [existential](#), and structural interpretation have figured prominently during the 20th and 21st centuries. On the nonacademic level, the interpretation of prophetic and apocalyptic biblical material in terms of present-day events remains a vigorous pursuit in some circles. *See also* [exegesis](#).

© Encyclopaedia Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/hermeneutics-principles-of-biblical-interpretation>. Retrieved August 3, 2021.