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The Critical Study of Biblical Literature: Exegesis and Hermeneutics

THE EDITORS OF *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA*

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[Exegesis](#), or critical interpretation, and hermeneutics, or the science of interpretive principles, of the [Bible](#) have been used by both [Jews](#) and Christians throughout their histories for various purposes. The most common purpose has been [discovering the truths and values](#) of the [Old](#) and [New Testaments](#) by means of various techniques and principles, though very often, owing to the [exigencies](#) of certain historical conditions, polemical or apologetical situations anticipate the truth or value to be discovered and thus dictate the type of exegesis or hermeneutic to be used. The primary goal, however, is to arrive at biblical truths and values by an unbiassed use of exegesis and hermeneutics.

Nature and significance

Biblical exegesis is the actual interpretation of the sacred book, the bringing out of its meaning; hermeneutics is the study and establishment of the principles by which it is to be interpreted. Where the biblical writings are interpreted on a historical perspective, just as with philological and other ancient documents, there is little call for a special [discipline](#) of biblical hermeneutics. But it has been widely held that the factors of divine [revelation](#) and inspiration in the Bible—which, according to Jewish and Christian belief, set it apart from other literature—impose their appropriate hermeneutical principles, although there has been divergence of opinion on what these principles are. Again, because of the place that the biblical writings have occupied in synagogue and [church](#), their exploitation for apologetical or polemical ends, their employment as a source for [dogma](#) or as a means of grace, fostering individual and [community](#) devotion, and the use of certain parts (especially the psalms) in the congregational liturgy, the science of hermeneutics has been studiously [cultivated](#) as a theological discipline. To treat the Bible like any other book (even in order to discover that it is not like any other book) has been condemned by believers as an unworthy, not to say impious, attitude.

At times the languages in which the biblical texts were originally composed have for that reason been treated as sacred languages. Hebrew may be to the philologist a Canaanite [dialect](#), not substantially different from Phoenician, or Moabite, or other [Semitic languages](#), but for some people even today this language is invested with an aura of sacredness. As for the language of the New Testament, in the days before its place within

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the general development of Hellenistic Greek was properly appreciated, it could be called a “language of the Holy Ghost,” as it was by the German Lutheran theologian [Richard Rothe](#) (1799–1867). And even scholars who know very well the true character of the biblical languages are tempted at times to make the Old and New Testament vocabularies, down to the very prepositions, bear a greater weight of theological significance than sound linguistic practice permits. Where in other [Greek literature](#) the [context](#) would be allowed to determine the precise force of this or that synonym, there is a tendency to approach the New Testament with definitions ready made and to impose them on the text: to give one example, of two common Greek words meaning “new,” it is sometimes laid down in advance that *kainos* denotes new in character and *neos* new in time (“young”). Often such distinctions are valid, but their validity must be established by the context; where the context discourages such precise differentiations, they must not be forced upon it.

Again, it is a truism in linguistic study that the meaning of a word depends on its usage, not on its derivation. It may be of interest to know that the Hebrew word for “burnt offering” (*’ola*) etymologically means “ascending” (*cf.* the verb *’ala*, “ascend”), and to trace the stages by which it attained its biblical meaning, but this knowledge is almost wholly irrelevant to the understanding of the word in the [Old Testament](#) ritual vocabulary, and any attempt to link it, say, with the ascension of [Jesus](#) in the New Testament, as has been done, can lead only to confusion.

Similarly there has been a tendency to place the history contained in the biblical writings on a different level from “ordinary” history. Here the increasing knowledge of the historical setting of the biblical narrative, especially in the Old Testament, has helped to remove the impression that the persons and peoples portrayed in this narrative are not quite “real”; it has [integrated](#) them with contemporary life and promoted a better understanding of what they had in common with their neighbours and what their distinctive qualities were.

Critical methods

A prerequisite for the exegetical study of the biblical writings, and even for the establishment of hermeneutical principles, is their critical examination. Most forms of [biblical criticism](#) are relevant to many other bodies of literature.

Textual criticism

Textual [criticism](#) is concerned with the basic task of establishing, as far as possible, the original text of the documents on the basis of the available materials. For the [Old](#)

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Testament, until 1947, these materials consisted principally of: (1) Hebrew manuscripts dated from the 9th century CE onward, the Masoretic text, the traditional Jewish text with its vocalization and punctuation marks as recorded by the editors called Masoretes (Hebrew *masora*, “tradition”) from the 6th century to the end of the 10th; (2) Hebrew manuscripts of medieval date preserving the Samaritan edition of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible); (3) Greek manuscripts, mainly from the 3rd and 4th centuries CE onward, preserving the text of the pre-Christian Greek version of the Hebrew Bible together with most of the apocryphal books (the Septuagint); and (4) manuscripts of the Syriac (Peshitta) and Latin (Vulgate) versions, both of which were based directly on the Hebrew. Since 1947 the discovery of Hebrew biblical texts at Qumrān (then Jordan) and other places west of the Dead Sea has made it possible to trace the history of the Hebrew Bible back to the 2nd century BCE and to recognize, among the manuscripts circulating in the closing generations of the Second Jewish Commonwealth (c. 450 BCE–c. 135 CE), at least three types of Hebrew text: (1) the ancestor of the Masoretic text, (2) the Hebrew basis of the Septuagint version, and (3) a popular text of the Pentateuch akin to the Samaritan edition. A comparative examination of these three indicates that the ancestor of the Masoretic text is in the main the most reliable; the translators of the Revised Standard Version (1952) and the New English Bible (1970) have continued to use the Masoretic text as their Old Testament basis.

For the New Testament the chief text-critical materials are (1) manuscripts of the Greek text, from the 2nd to the 15th century, of which some 5,000 are known, exhibiting the New Testament text in whole or in part; (2) ancient versions in Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and other languages; and (3) citations in early Christian writers. A comparative study of this material enables scholars to get behind the Byzantine type of text (the type that first diffused from Constantinople from the 4th century onward, gained currency throughout Greek-speaking Christendom, and formed the basis of the earliest printed editions of the Greek Testament) to a variety of types current in various localities in the generations immediately preceding; but the more recent discovery of manuscripts (mainly on papyrus) of the 3rd and even 2nd centuries, which cannot be neatly assigned to one or another of these types, makes the earlier history of the text more problematic, and the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible are both based on an eclectic text (in which, where the witnesses show variant readings, the reading preferred is that which best suits the context and the author’s known style).

Philological criticism

Philological criticism consists mainly in the study of the biblical languages in their widest scope so that the vocabulary, grammar, and style of the biblical writings can be

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understood as accurately as possible with the aid not only of other biblical writings but of other writings in the same or cognate languages. [New Testament Greek](#), for example, is a representative of Hellenistic Greek written in the 1st century CE, ranging from the literary Hellenistic of Hebrews, 1 Peter, and portions of Luke–Acts to the [colloquial](#) or [vernacular idiom](#) of some other books (e.g., the conversations in the Gospels). Some [Aramaic](#) influences have been discerned in parts of the New Testament that have a Palestinian setting, but not to a point where scholars are obliged to conclude that some books, or parts of books, were originally composed in Aramaic. Moreover, the Septuagint version exercised on some New Testament writers the kind of influence that the [King James Version](#) has exercised on many English writers, especially in the provision of a theological vocabulary in areas such as law, [ethics](#), [atonement](#), and sacrifice. The study of Old Testament [Hebrew](#) has been enriched by the study of other Semitic languages—Akkadian and Ugaritic among the ancient languages, and Arabic, which preserves many [archaic](#) features. Such comparative study has led to the suggestion of new meanings for a considerable number of biblical Hebrew words—a tendency that is amply illustrated by the New English Bible—but this department of philological criticism requires much more carefully defined guiding lines than have hitherto been laid down.

Literary criticism

[Literary criticism](#) endeavours to establish the literary [genres](#) (types or categories) of the various biblical documents and to reach conclusions about their structure, date, and authorship. These conclusions are based as far as possible on internal evidence, but external evidence is also very helpful, especially where date is concerned. If the document under consideration is unmistakably quoted in another [composition](#), for example, that quotation forms a *terminus ante quem* (later limiting point in time) for dating purposes. If, on the other hand, the document is clearly dependent on another document that can be dated on independent grounds, the date of the earlier document provides a *terminus post quem* (earlier limiting point in time).

Proven dependence on such an earlier document may also throw light on the structure of the work being studied. But much of the evidence for the history of its structure is internal. The evaluation of such evidence is the province of what used to be called the higher [criticism](#), a term first employed with a biblical reference by the German biblical scholar and orientalist [Johann Gottfried Eichhorn](#) (1752–1827):

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I have been obliged to bestow the greatest amount of labour on a hitherto entirely unworked field, the investigation of the inner constitution of the separate books of the [Old Testament](#) by the aid of the higher criticism (a new name to no humanist).

Eichhorn paid special attention to the [Pentateuch](#); his work marks an important step forward in Pentateuchal criticism. The chronological arrangement of the successive law codes contained in the Pentateuch, or of the successive editions of one [fundamental law](#) code, has been related to the history of Israelite [culture](#) and [religion](#) recorded in the other Old Testament books—histories, [prophecies](#), and [psalms](#)—with the mounting aid supplied by contemporary non-Israelite documents. The development of some Old Testament books is indicated expressly in their contents: one can note the composition of the first and second editions of the Book of [Jeremiah](#) in Jeremiah 36:4, 32; and scholars can reach some conclusions about later editions by a comparison of the longer edition in the [Masoretic text](#) with the shorter edition in the Septuagint (now also attested in a fragmentary Hebrew text from Qumrān). In the absence of such explicit evidence, conclusions about the structure of other prophetic books, such as [Isaiah](#) and Ezekiel, must be more tentative.

In the New Testament, literary criticism has centred principally on the Gospels. In the [Synoptic Gospels](#) (that is, those having a common source—i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke) indicators as to source and composition are provided by the presence of so much material common to two or to all three of them. The majority opinion since the mid-19th century has been that Mark served as a source for Matthew and Luke and that the two latter had a further common source, generally labelled Q (for *Quelle*, the German term for “source”), [comprising](#) mainly sayings of Jesus. Aspects of the Gospel problem that literary criticism leaves unsolved are more likely to be [illuminated](#) by other critical approaches. The [Fourth Gospel](#) (John), having much less in common with the Synoptic Gospels than the latter three have among themselves, presents an independent line of transmission, and a comparative study of those areas where the Johannine and Synoptic traditions touch each other yields valuable conclusions for the beginnings of the gospel story.

— [Frederick Fyvie Bruce](#)

In the second half of the 20th century, some biblical scholars began applying the critical methods developed in [secular](#) literary criticism to the study of the Old and New Testaments. During the 1960s [New Criticism](#), an approach that views literary texts as [coherent](#) units of meaning and focuses on technique and form, began to attract scholars who were interested in preserving a sense of the [integrity](#) of biblical texts in the face of archaeological research that raised questions of historical authorship. Other scholars,

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however, have insisted that New Criticism favours certain notions of what [constitutes](#) a scripture—e.g., that it is the finished and unified product of a divinely inspired author, prophet, scribe, or scribal community—and emphasizes texts to the neglect of historical [context](#). Some detractors of New Criticism have adopted a contrasting approach, known as [New Historicism](#), which treats texts as historical [artifacts](#) that emerge among particular social, [intellectual](#), and economic circumstances. Since the late 20th century, similar perspectives have drawn upon [postmodern](#) theoretical movements—e.g., feminism, [deconstruction](#), and postcolonial studies. What New Historicism and related movements have in common is a tendency to emphasize the “voices”—the perspectives and [existential](#) concerns—of people or groups who were [marginalized](#) or unrepresented within biblical narratives or discriminated against because of their gender, [ethnicity](#), or [social class](#). Some scholars within or influenced by these movements also have emphasized the widely discussed intertextuality of the Bible—the ways in which different biblical texts are related and even refer to each other—and explored the ways in which popular ostensibly secular authors and artists have drawn inspiration or source material from biblical texts—e.g., the English poet [John Milton](#)'s use of [Genesis](#) in *Paradise Lost* (1667) and the American novelist [William Faulkner](#)'s use of Psalms in *The Wild Palms* (1939).

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[John Milton](#)

John Milton.

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[The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)

[Tradition criticism](#)

Tradition criticism takes up where literary criticism leaves off; it goes behind the written sources to trace the development of [oral](#) tradition, where there is reason to believe that this preceded the earliest documentary stages, and attempts to trace the development of the tradition, phase by phase, from its primary life setting to its literary presentation. The

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development of the tradition might cover a lengthy period, as in the Old Testament narratives of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and the judges, such as Deborah and Samuel, many of which were originally attached to particular sanctuaries. The recognition of the life setting of each successive phase is necessary to the interpretation of the material received and delivered by one generation after another.

In the New Testament too, special attention has been paid to the [oral stage](#) of the Gospel tradition, though here the preliterate period is measured in decades, not (as in the Old Testament) in generations and centuries. Not only the record of the ministry of Jesus but the development of Christian theology in the short preliterate stage has formed the subject matter of this study.

Form criticism

[Form criticism](#) has become one of the most valuable tools for the reconstruction of the preliterate tradition. This [discipline](#) classifies the literary material according to the principal “forms”—such as legal, poetic, and other forms—represented in its contents, and examines these in order to discover how they were handed down and what their successive life settings were until they assumed their present shape and position. In their various ways laws, narratives, psalms, and prophecies are [amenable](#) to this approach. By this means some scholars have undertaken to recover the *ipsissima verba* (“very own words”) of [Jesus](#) by removing the accretions attached to them in the course of transmission. The exegetical task assumes a threefold shape as scholars work back from (1) interpretation of the present Gospels through (2) interpretation of the tradition lying behind them to (3) reconstruction of the proclamation of Jesus.

Scholars are not left completely to speculation as they attempt to reconstruct the stages by which the Gospel tradition attained its final form: here and there in the New Testament letters, and in some of the speeches included in [Acts](#) (which convey the general sense of what was said and should not be regarded as the author’s free creations), there are fragments and outlines of the story of Jesus and of his teaching. Sometimes the characteristic terminology of tradition (“I received...I delivered”) is used when such fragments are introduced, a decade or so before the composition of the earliest Gospel (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3).

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Other types of exegetical critical techniques

Redaction criticism

Redaction criticism concentrates on the end product, studying the way in which the final authors or editors used the traditional material that they received and the special purpose that each had in view in incorporating this material into his literary composition. It has led of late to important conclusions about the respective outlooks and aims of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Historical criticism

Historical criticism places the documents in their historical setting and promotes their interpretation in the light of their contemporary environment. This is necessary for their understanding, whether they are historical in character or belong to another literary genre. If they are historical in character, it is important to establish how faithfully they reflect their dramatic date—the date of the events they record (as distinct from the date of final composition). This test has been applied with singularly positive results to Luke–Acts, especially in relation to Roman law and institutions; and in general the biblical outline of events from the middle Bronze Age (c. 21st–c. mid-16th century BCE) to the 1st century CE fits remarkably well into its Near Eastern context as recovered by archaeological research.

“History of religions” criticism

“History of religions” criticism, to use an ungainly expression, relates Old and New Testament religion to the religious situation of the contemporary world of the writings and tries to explain biblical religion as far as possible in terms of current religious attitudes and practices. This is helpful to a point, insofar as it throws into relief those features of Hebrew and Christian faith that are distinctive; it is carried to excess when it attempts to deprive those features of their unique qualities and to account completely for them in religious–historical terms. When the cult of Israel was practically indistinguishable from that of the Canaanites, the protests of the 8th-century-BCE Hebrew prophets Amos or Hosea stand out over against popular Yahweh worship (Hebrew) and Baal worship (Canaanite) alike. Another attempt has been made by historians of religion to re-create for the 1st century CE a pre-Christian Gnostic myth—referring to an esoteric dualism in which matter is viewed as evil and spirit good—of the primal or heavenly man who comes from the realm of light to liberate particles of a heavenly essence that are imprisoned on Earth in material bodies and to impart the true

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knowledge. By men's acceptance of this secret salvatory knowledge (gnosis), the heavenly essence within man is released from its thralldom and reascends to its native [abode](#). Fragments of this [myth](#) have been recognized in several books of the New Testament. But the attempt has not been successful: according to many recent (latter half of the 20th century) New Testament scholars and historians of the early [church](#), it is probable that the concepts of primal man and redeemer-revealer were not brought together in [Gnosticism](#) *except* under the influence of the Christian apostolic teaching, in which [Jesus](#) fills the role of Son of man (or Second Adam) together with that of Saviour and Revealer.

On the other hand, the Iranian religious influence, primarily that of [Zoroastrianism](#), on the angelology and [eschatology](#) (concepts of the last times) of Judaism in the last two centuries BCE is unmistakable, especially among the Pharisees (a liberal Jewish sect emphasizing piety) and the Qumrān [community](#) (presumably the [Essenes](#)) near the [Dead Sea](#). In the latter, indeed, Zoroastrian [dualism](#) finds clear expression, such as in the concept of a war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, although it is subordinated to the [sovereignty](#) of the one God of Israel.

The value of these critical methods of [Bible](#) study lies in their enabling the [reader](#) to interpret the writings as accurately as possible. By their aid he can better [ascertain](#) what the writers meant by the language that they used at the time they wrote and how their first readers would have understood their language. If the understanding of readers today is to have any validity, it must bear a close relationship to what the original readers were intended to understand.

For additional information about the various forms of [biblical criticism](#), *see above*: [Old Testament canon, texts, and versions](#); and [New Testament canon, texts, and versions](#).

Types of biblical hermeneutics

As has been said, the importance of biblical [hermeneutics](#) has lain in the [Bible's](#) status as a sacred book in Judaism and [Christianity](#), recording a divine [revelation](#) or reproducing divine [oracles](#). The "oracles" are primarily prophetic utterances, but often their narrative setting has also come to acquire oracular status. Quite different hermeneutical principles, however, have been inferred from this [axiom](#) of biblical [inspiration](#): whereas some have argued that the interpretation must always be literal, or as literal as possible (since "God always means what he says"), others have treated it as self-evident that words of divine origin must always have some profounder "spiritual" meaning than that which lies on the surface, and this meaning will yield itself up only to those who apply the appropriate rules of figurative [exegesis](#). Or again, it may be insisted that certain parts must be treated

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literally and others figuratively; thus, some expositors who regard the allegorical (symbolic) interpretation of the [Old Testament](#) histories as the only interpretation that has any religious value maintain that in the apocalyptic writings that interpretation that is most literal is most reliable.

Literal interpretation

Literal interpretation is often, but not necessarily, associated with the belief in [verbal](#) or [plenary](#) inspiration, according to which not only the biblical message but also the individual words in which that message was delivered or written down were divinely chosen. In an extreme form this would imply that God dictated the message to the speakers or writers word by word, but most proponents of verbal inspiration [repudiate](#) such a view on the reasonable ground that this would leave no room for the evident individuality of style and vocabulary found in the various authors. Verbal inspiration received classic expression by the 19th-century English biblical scholar John William Burgon:

The Bible is none other than the voice of Him that sitteth upon the Throne! Every Book of it, every Chapter of it, every Verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it, (where are we to stop?) every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High! (From Inspiration and Interpretation, 1861).

This explains Burgon's severe judgment that the revisers of the English New Testament (1881), in excluding what they believed to be scribal or editorial additions to the original text, "stand convicted of having deliberately rejected the words of Inspiration in every page" (*The Revision Revised*, p. vii, [London](#), 1883). Such a high view of inspiration has commonly been based on the statement in 2 Timothy 3:16 that "all [Old Testament] [scripture](#) is God-breathed" (Greek *theopneustos*, which means "inspired by God") or Paul's claim in 1 [Corinthians](#) 2:13 to impart the gospel "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths in spiritual language." On this latter passage the English bishop and biblical scholar [Joseph Barber Lightfoot](#) (1828–89) remarked:

The notion of a verbal inspiration in a certain sense is involved in the very [conception](#) of an inspiration at all, because words are at once the instruments of carrying on and the means of expressing ideas, so that the words must both lead and follow the thought. But the passage gives no [countenance](#) to the popular doctrine of verbal inspiration, whether right or wrong (From Notes on Epistles of St. Paul from Unpublished Commentaries, 1895).

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The detailed attention that Lightfoot and his [University of Cambridge](#) colleagues, [Brooke Foss Westcott](#) (1825–1901), successor of Lightfoot as bishop of Durham, and [Fenton John Anthony Hort](#) (1828–92), paid in their exegesis to the vocabulary and grammatical construction of the biblical documents, together with their concern for the historical [context](#), sprang from no [dogmatic](#) attachment to any theory of inspiration but, rather, represented the literal method of interpretation at its best. Such grammatico-historical [exegesis](#) can be practiced by anyone with the necessary linguistic tools and accuracy of mind, irrespective of confessional commitment, and is likely to have more permanent value than exegesis that reflects passing fashions of philosophical thought. Biblical theology itself is more securely based when it rests upon such exegesis than when it forms a hermeneutical presupposition.

Moral interpretation

[Moral](#) interpretation is necessitated by the belief that the [Bible](#) is the [rule not only of faith but also of conduct](#). The Jewish teachers of the late pre-Christian and early Christian Era, who found “in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth” (Romans 2:20), were faced with the necessity of adapting the requirements of the Pentateuchal codes to the changed social conditions of the [Hellenistic Age](#) (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE). This they did by means of a body of oral interpretation, which enabled the [conscientious](#) Jew to know his duty in the manifold circumstances of daily life. If, for example, he wished to know whether this or that activity [constituted](#) “work” that was forbidden on the sabbath, the influential school of legal interpretation headed by the rabbi [Hillel](#) (late 1st century BCE to early 1st century CE) supplied a list of 39 categories of activity that fell under the ban.

The Christian Church rejected the Jewish “tradition of the elders” but for the most part continued to regard the Ten Commandments as [ethically](#) binding and devised new codes of practice, largely forgetting Paul’s appeal to the liberty of the Spirit or viewing it as an invitation to indulge in [allegory](#). In order to deduce moral lessons from the Bible, allegorization was resorted to, as when the *Letter of Barnabas* (c. 100 CE) interprets the Levitical food laws prescribed in the

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book of [Leviticus](#) as forbidding not the flesh of certain animals but the vices imaginatively associated with the animals. Setting up principles of [exegesis](#) by which [ethical](#) lessons may be drawn from all parts of the Bible is not easy, since many of the commandments enjoined upon the Israelites in the [Pentateuch](#) no longer have any obvious relevance, such as the ban on boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19b, etc.) or on wearing a mixed woollen and linen garment (Deuteronomy 22:11); and much of the teaching of [Jesus](#) in the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is widely regarded as a [counsel](#) of perfection, impracticable for the average man, even when he professes the Christian faith. Even summaries of the biblical [ethic](#), such as the golden rule (Matthew 7:12; cf. [Tobit](#) 4:15) or the twofold law of love to God and love to one's neighbour (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18), in which the Decalogue ([Ten Commandments](#)) is comprehended (Mark 12:29–31; cf. Romans 13:8–10), involve casuistic interpretation (fitting general principles to particular cases) when they are applied to the complicated relations of present-day life. The difficulties of applying biblical [ethics](#) to modern situations do not mean that the task of application should be abandoned but mean that it should not be undertaken as though it provided an easy shortcut to moral solutions.

[Allegorical interpretation](#)

[Allegorical](#) interpretation places on biblical literature a meaning that, with rare exceptions, it was never intended to convey. Yet at times this interpretation seemed [imperative](#). If the literal sense, on which heretics such as the 2nd-century biblical critic Marcion and anti-Christian polemicists such as the 2nd-century philosopher Celsus, insisted, was unacceptable, then allegorization was the only procedure compatible with a belief in the Bible as a divine oracle. Law, history, prophecy, poetry, and even Jesus' parables yielded new meanings when allegorized. The surface sensuous meaning of the [Canticles](#) (the [Song](#)

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[of Solomon](#)) was gladly forgotten when its mutual endearments were understood to express the communion between God and the soul, or between Christ and the [church](#). There are still readers who can [reconcile](#) themselves to the presence of a book such as [Joshua](#) in the canon only if its battles can be understood as pointing to the warfare of Christians “against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). As for the [Gospel](#) parables, when in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) an allegorical meaning is sought for the thieves, the Samaritan’s beast, the inn, the innkeeper, and the two pence, the result too often is that the explicit point of the story, “Go and do likewise,” is blunted.

Closely allied to allegorical interpretation, if not indeed a species of it, is [typological interpretation](#), in which certain persons, objects, or events in the [Old Testament](#) are seen to set forth at a deeper level persons, objects, or events in the New. In such interpretations, [Noah’s](#) Ark (Genesis 6:14–22) is interpreted to typify the church, outside which there is no salvation; Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice (Gen. 22:6) typifies Jesus carrying the cross; Rahab’s scarlet cord in the window (Joshua 2:18–21) prefigures the blood of Christ; and so on. These are not merely sermon illustrations but rather aspects of a hermeneutical theory that maintains that this further significance was designed (by God) from the beginning. Traces of typology appear in the New Testament, as when Paul in Romans 5:14 calls Adam a “type” of the coming Christ (as the head of the old creation involved its members in the results of his disobedience, so the head of the new creation shares with its members the fruit of his obedience) or when in 1 Corinthians 10:11 he says that the Israelites’ experiences in the wilderness wanderings befell them “typically,” so as to warn his own converts of the peril of rebelling against God. The fourth evangelist stresses the [analogy](#) between the sacrificial Passover lamb of the Hebrews and Christ in his death (John 19). The writer of the Hebrews

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treats the priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek, who was involved with Abraham as a type of Christ (Hebrews 7)—without using the word *type*—and the Levitical ritual of the [Day of Atonement](#) as a model (though an imperfect one) of Christ's sacrificial ministry (Hebrews 9).

Other hermeneutical principles

[Anagogical interpretation](#)

Anagogical (mystical or spiritual) interpretation seeks to explain biblical events or matters of this world so that they relate to the life to come. Jordan is thus interpreted as the river of death; by crossing it one enters into the heavenly [Canaan](#), the better land, the “rest that remains for the people of God.” “The Jerusalem that now is” points to the new [Jerusalem](#) that is above. In [Judaism](#) of the closing centuries BCE, the [Eden](#) of [Genesis](#), the earthly [paradise](#), lent its name to the heavenly paradise mentioned occasionally in the New Testament (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:3; Revelation 2:7).

Another form of mystical interpretation is the Mariological (referring to [Mary](#), the mother of Jesus) application of scriptures that have another contextual sense. Thus, Mary is the second Eve, whose offspring bruises the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15); Mary is the star-crowned woman of Revelation 12, whose son is caught up to the throne of God, and in more popular piety the dark-faced [Madonna](#) of the [monastery](#) at [Montserrat](#), near [Barcelona](#), [Spain](#), can be identified with the “black but comely” bride of the [Song of Solomon](#).



[Virgin Mary](#)

Detail of a statue of the Virgin Mary.

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Parallelism

Parallelism, the interpretation of [scripture](#) by means of scripture, is a [corollary](#) of the belief in the unity of scripture. But as a hermeneutical principle it must be employed sparingly, since the unity of scripture should be based on [comprehensive](#) exegetical study rather than itself provide a basis. Where one or two biblical documents (e.g., the letters to the Romans and to the Galatians) are treated as the norm of biblical doctrine, there is a danger that other parts of the volume (e.g., the Letter to the Hebrews) will be forced to yield the same sense as the “normative” documents; the distinctiveness of certain biblical authors will then be blurred. One naive form of parallelism is the “[concordant](#)” method, in which it is [axiomatic](#) that a Hebrew or Greek word will always (or nearly always) have the same force wherever it occurs in the [Bible](#), no matter who uses it. There is, again, a harmonistic tradition that smooths out disparities in the biblical text (e.g., as between the gospel narratives or the parallel records of Kings and Chronicles) in a manner that imposes a greater strain on faith than do the disparities themselves.

One exegetical device of the Jewish rabbis (teachers, biblical commentators, and religious leaders) was that of *gezera shawa*, “equal category,” according to which an obscure passage might be [illuminated](#) by reference to another containing the same key term. There are several examples in Paul’s [Old Testament exegesis](#), one of the best known being in Galatians 3:10–14, where the mystery of [Christ’s](#) dying the death that incurred the divine curse ([Deuteronomy](#) 21:23) is explained by his bearing vicariously the curse incurred by the lawbreaker ([Deuteronomy](#) 27:26). One may compare the explanation in Hebrews 4:3–9 of God’s “rest” mentioned in [Psalms](#) 95:11 by reference to his resting on the seventh day after creation’s work ([Genesis](#) 2:3)—an explanation dependent on the Septuagint, not the Hebrew.

Analogical interpretation

Analogical interpretation traditionally includes not only interpretation according to the [analogy](#) of scripture (parallelism, in other words) but also interpretation according to the “analogy of faith”—an expression that misapplies the language of Romans 12:6 in the [King James Version](#) of 1611. It has at times been pressed to mean that no biblical interpretation is valid unless it conforms to the established teaching of a religious [community](#), to the verdict of tradition, or to the “unanimous [consensus](#) of the fathers.” Where the established teaching is based, in intention, on scripture, then an interpretation of scripture that conflicts with it naturally calls for further scrutiny, but such conflict does not rule out the interpretation beforehand; if the conflict is confirmed, it is the established teaching that requires revision.

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Other types

There is an unconscious tendency to conform hermeneutical principles to the climate of opinion in and around the community concerned and to change the hermeneutic pattern as the climate of opinion changes. It is not surprising that in the circles where [Pseudo-Dionysius](#) (early 6th-century writings attributed to Dionysius, a convert of St. Paul) was revered as a teacher, scripture was interpreted in Neoplatonic (idealistic and mystical) categories, and if in the latter half of the 20th century there is an influential and persuasive school of [existential hermeneutics](#), this may be as much due to a widespread contemporary outlook on life as was the liberal hermeneutic of the preceding generations.

At a far different level contemporary movements continue to influence biblical interpretation. The interpretation of prophecy and the apocalyptic in terms of events of the interpreter's day, which has ancient precedent, is still avidly pursued. Just as in the 16th century the apocalyptic beast of Revelation was interpreted to be the papacy or [Martin Luther](#) (in accordance with the interpreter's viewpoint), so also today in some nonacademic circles the ten kings denoted by the beast's horns in Revelation are identified with the [European Economic Community](#) in its ultimate development, or the threat to "destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt" (Isaiah 11:15) is believed to be fulfilled in the condition of the [Suez Canal](#) in the years following 1967. Whatever critical exegetes think of such [aberrations](#), historians of [exegesis](#) will take note of them and recognize the doctrine of scripture that underlies them.

The development of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics in Judaism

Early stages

The beginnings of biblical [exegesis](#) are found in the [Old Testament](#) itself, where earlier documents are interpreted in later documents, as in the recasting of earlier laws in later codes or in the Chronicler's reworking of material in Samuel and Kings. In addition, even before the [Babylonian Exile](#) (586 BCE) there is evidence of the kind of midrashic exposition (nonliteral interpretations) familiar in the rabbinical period (c. 300 BCE–c. 500 CE) and after.

In [Isaiah](#) 40 and following, the restoration of Israel after the return from exile is portrayed as a new creation: the characteristic verbs of the [Genesis](#) creation narrative—"create" (*bara*), "make" (*asa*) and "form" (*yatzar*)—are used of this new act of God (e.g., Isaiah 43:7). Even more clearly are the same events portrayed as a new Exodus: on their journey

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back from Babylon, as earlier through the wilderness, the God of Israel makes a way for his people; he protects them before and behind; he champions them “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”; he brings water from the rock for their sustenance (Isaiah 43:2, 16, 19; 48:21; 52:12; Ezekiel 20:33).

A pattern of divine action in mercy and judgment is discernible as one moves from the earlier prophets to the later prophets and apocalyptists (those concerned with the intervention of God in history). Yahweh’s “strange work” in bringing the Assyrians against Israel in the 8th century BCE (Isaiah 28:21; 29:14) is repeated a century later when he raises up the Chaldaeans (Babylonians) to execute his judgment (Habakkuk 1:5 fol.). Ezekiel’s visionary figure Gog is the invader whose aggression was foretold in earlier days by Yahweh through his “servants the prophets” (Ezekiel 38:17), and one may recognize in him a revival not only of Isaiah’s Assyrian (Isaiah 10:4 fol.) but also of [Jeremiah’s](#) destroyer from the north (Jeremiah 1:14 fol.; 4:6 fol.). The same figure reappears in the last “king of the north” in Daniel 11:40 fol.; he too is diverted from his path by “tidings from the east and the north” (cf. Isaiah 37:7) and “shall come to his end, with none to help him” (cf. Isaiah 31:8).

In some degree these later predictions are interpretations, or reinterpretations, of the earlier ones, as when the non-Israelite prophet Balaam’s “ships...from Kittim” (Numbers 24:24) are interpreted in Daniel 11:30 as the Roman vessels off Alexandria in 168 BCE that frustrated the Syrian king [Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#) (c. 215–164/163 BCE) in his attempt to annex Egypt.

[Ezra](#) (c. 400 BCE), whose role as the archetypal “scribe” is magnified by tradition, is said in the [canonical](#) literature to have brought the law of God from Babylonia to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:14), where it was read aloud to a large assembly by relays of readers “with interpretation”—and “they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8). This may be the first recorded use of an Aramaic Targum—a paraphrase of the Hebrew that included interpretation as well as translation.

In the scribal and rabbinic tradition, two forms of exposition were early distinguished—[peshat](#), “plain meaning,” and [derash](#), “interpretation,” by which religious or social [morals](#) were derived, often artificially, from the text. There was, however, no sense of conflict between the two.

The Hellenistic period

The translation of the [Hebrew Bible](#) into [Greek](#) by Alexandrian Jews in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE provided opportunities for recording interpretations that were probably

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current in [Hellenistic Judaism](#). Literal translations might be misleading to Greek readers; [metaphors](#) natural in Hebrew were rendered into less-figurative Greek. “Walking with God” or “walking before God” was rendered as “pleasing God.” Such renderings are scarcely to be called antianthropomorphisms (that is, against depicting God in human terms or forms). In certain books there are some renderings that might be so described; in [Exodus](#) 24:10, for example, “they saw the God of Israel” becomes “they saw the place where the God of Israel stood,” but an examination of the Hebrew [context](#) suggests that this is precisely what was seen.

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There was a tendency to universalize certain particularist statements of the Hebrew: in Amos 9:11 fol. the prophecy that David’s [dynasty](#) will repossess the residue of Edom becomes a promise that the residue of men (the Gentiles) will seek the true God—a promise that is quoted in the New Testament as a “testimony” to the Christian Gentile mission.

The other main contribution to biblical [exegesis](#) in Alexandria was made by the Jewish philosopher [Philo](#) (c. 30/c. 20 BCE–after 40 CE), whose interpretation of the [Pentateuch](#) in terms of [Platonic](#) idealism and [Stoic ethics](#) had more influence on Christian than on Jewish [hermeneutics](#).

In Palestinian Judaism the most distinctive exegetical work in the Hellenistic period belonged to the [Qumrān community](#) (c. 130 BCE–70 CE), which, believing itself raised up to prepare for the new age of everlasting righteousness, found in [scripture](#) the divine purpose about on the point of fulfillment, together with its own duty in the impending crisis. Biblical prophecies in the Qumrān commentaries refer to persons and events of the recent past, the present, or the [imminent](#) future. The time of their fulfillment was concealed from the prophets; only when this was revealed to the Teacher of Righteousness, the organizer of the [community](#), could their intent be grasped.

Rabbinic exegesis was present in all the varieties of rabbinic literature but is found especially in the [Targumim](#) and [Midrashim](#) (plural of [Targum](#) and Midrash). Among the former, special interest attaches to the early Palestinian Pentateuch Targum; it preserves, for example, messianic (referring to the expected anointed deliverer) exegesis of certain passages to which later rabbis gave a different interpretation because of the Christians’ appeal to them. The earlier Midrashim—those whose contents are not later than 200 CE—expound Exodus, [Leviticus](#), [Numbers](#), and [Deuteronomy](#) and are almost entirely Halakhic—i.e., recording legal interpretations from various schools. The later Midrashim are more homiletic and include a considerable element of Haggada—i.e., illustrative material drawn from all sources.

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Rabbinic exegesis observed rules, which were variously formulated in the schools. The name of the famous interpreter [Hillel](#) is linked with seven *middot*, or norms: (1) [inference](#) from less important to more important and vice versa, (2) inference by [analogy](#), (3) the grouping of related passages under an interpretative principle that primarily applies to one of them, (4) similar grouping where the principle primarily applies to two passages, (5) inference from particular to general and vice versa, (6) exposition by means of a similar passage, (7) inference from the context. By the time of [Rabbi Ishmael](#) (c. 100 CE), these rules had been expanded to 13, and Eliezer ben Yose the Galilaean (c. 150 CE) formulated 32 rules, reflecting rational principles of exegesis, which remained normative into the [Middle Ages](#).

The medieval period

By the beginning of the Middle Ages, the [Masoretes](#) of Babylonia and Palestine (6th–10th century) had fixed in writing, by points and [annotation](#), the traditional pronunciation, punctuation, and (to some extent) interpretation of the biblical text. The rise of the [Karaites](#), who rejected rabbinic tradition and appealed to [scripture](#) alone (8th century onward) stimulated exegetical study in their own sect and in Judaism generally. In reaction against them [Sa'adia ben Joseph](#) (882–942), who was the *gaon*, or head, of the Sura academy in Babylonia, did some of his most important work. He adopted as one basic principle that biblical interpretation must not contradict reason. He translated most of the [Bible](#) into Arabic and composed an Arabic commentary on the text.

The French Jewish biblical and Talmudic scholar [Rashi](#) (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi of Troyes, 1040–1105), the most popular of all Jewish commentators, paid careful heed to the language and rejected those midrashic traditions that were inconsistent with the plain meaning of the text. [Abraham ibn Ezra](#), of Spanish birth (1092/93–1167), in some respects anticipated the Pentateuchal [literary criticism](#) of later centuries. Other important names are [Joseph Qimhi](#) of Narbonne and his sons Moses and [David](#), the last of whom (c. 1160–1235) commented on the prophets and psalms; his psalms [commentary](#) took issue especially with Christian [exegesis](#).

The great philosopher and codifier Maimonides ([Moses ben Maimon](#), 1135–1204) composed, among many other works, his [Guide of the Perplexed](#) to help readers who were bewildered by apparent contradictions between the biblical text and the findings of reason. Like his younger contemporary [David Qimhi](#), he classified some biblical narratives as visionary accounts.

Far removed from the rational [exegesis](#) of these scholars was the mystical tradition, or [Kabbala](#), which combined with an earlier [mysticism](#)—involving reflection on Ezekiel's

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inaugural chariot vision—the [Neoplatonic](#) doctrine of emanations. Adherents of this mystical exegesis found encouragement in the [Pentateuch](#) commentary of the Spanish Talmudist, Kabbalist, and biblical commentator [Moses ben Nahman](#) (c. 1195–1270). The tracing of mystical significance in the numerical values of Hebrew letters and words (*gematria*) made a distinctive contribution to mystical exegesis. The chief monument of mystical exegesis is the 13th-century Spanish [Sefer ha-zohar](#) (“Book of Splendour”), in form a midrashic commentary on the Pentateuch. In the *Zohar* the *peshat* (literal) and *derash* (nonliteral meanings) types of interpretation are accompanied by those called *remez* (“allusion”), including [typology](#) and [allegory](#), and *sod* (“secret”), the mystical sense. The initials of the four were so arranged as to yield the word PaRDeS (“Paradise”), a [designation](#) for the fourfold meaning. The highest meaning led by knowledge through love to ecstasy and the beatific vision.

The modern period

Following a line marked out earlier by the Spanish philosopher and poet Moses ibn Ezra (1060–1139), [Benedict de Spinoza](#) (1632–77) put forward a thoroughgoing reappraisal of the traditional account of the origin of the Pentateuch in his [Tractatus Theologico-Politicus](#) (1679). In the following century the Jewish Enlightenment ([Haskala](#)) brought a fresh appreciation of the Bible as literature. The pioneer of the Enlightenment, [Moses Mendelssohn](#) (1729–86), prepared a German translation of the Pentateuch, which he furnished (along with Solomon Dubno and others) with a commentary. He also translated the psalms and the [Song of Solomon](#).

The tradition of orthodox Jewish exegesis has persisted. In the 19th century the Russian rabbi Meir ben Yehiel Michael, “Malbin,” (1809–79) wrote commentaries on the prophets and the writings, emphasizing the differences between synonyms. In the 20th century the traditional values of Judaism were popularly expounded in [Joseph Herman Hertz’s](#) commentary on *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (1929–36) and in the *Soncino Books of the Bible* (1946–51). [Martin Buber](#) (1878–1965), the great modern Jewish philosopher, imparted to his many studies in biblical literature and religion—including his revolutionary German translation of the Bible (1926 and following), partly executed in association with the religious philosopher [Franz Rosenzweig](#) (1886–1926)—the qualities of his personal genius that was influenced by Ḥasidic (18th-century mystical) piety and an [existential](#) interpretation of life.

In recent decades the most valuable Jewish exegesis has been in association with the wider world of biblical scholarship. Journals such as the *Jewish Quarterly Review* and the *Hebrew Union College Annual* welcome contributions from non-Jewish scholars; in

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interconfessional projects such as the Anchor Bible, Jewish scholars cooperate in the Old and New Testament alike.

The whole field of biblical study, including exegesis, is [cultivated](#) most intensively in Israel. Yehezkel Kaufmann (1890–1963) produced the encyclopaedic *History of Israelite Religion from Its Beginnings to the End of the Second Temple* (8 vol., 1937–56) in Hebrew that pursues a path involving a radical revision of current [biblical criticism](#) and interpretation. Mosheh Zevi Hirsh Segal (died 1968) dealt with a wide area of biblical and related literature, maintaining the essential Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (supplemented by later editors who worked in Moses' spirit). The most ambitious enterprise in this field is the "Bible Project" of the [Hebrew University of Jerusalem](#), which aims to produce a critical edition of the [Hebrew Bible](#) but also fosters a number of [ancillary](#) studies in biblical text and interpretation, mostly published in its annual report *Textus*, in which non-Jewish as well as Jewish scholars participate.

The development of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics in Christianity

Early stages

The earliest Christian exegesis of the [Old Testament](#) is found in the New Testament, not in the written texts only but in the oral tradition lying behind them. Some lines of exegesis are present in so many separate strands of primitive Christian teaching that they are most reasonably assigned to [Jesus](#), who began his Galilaeen ministry with the announcement that the time appointed for the fulfillment of prophecy, and the [Kingdom of God](#) that was its main theme, had arrived. If the accomplishment of his ministry involved his death, that was accepted in the same spirit; he submitted to his captors with the words "Let the scriptures be fulfilled" (Mark 14:49). The [church](#) began with the [conviction](#) that Jesus, crucified and risen, was the one of whom the prophets spoke. He was the prophet like Moses, prince of the house of David, priest of the order of Melchizedek, servant of the Lord, Son of man, and exalted Lord. If the prophets themselves were uncertain about the person or time indicated by their oracles, the early Christians were certain: the person was Jesus, the time was now. The New Testament writers shared a creative and flexible principle of exegesis that has regard for the literary and historical [context](#) and traces a consistent pattern of divine action in judgment and mercy, reproduced repeatedly in the history of Israel and [manifested](#) definitively in Christ. This exegesis is elaborated at times by means of typology and [allegory](#), as when Paul illustrates the relationship between law and gospel by the story of Hagar and Sarah, the concubine and wife of Abraham,

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respectively (Galatians 4:21–31), or when Israel's tabernacle in the wilderness becomes the material counterpart to the heavenly sanctuary in which believers of the new age offer spiritual worship to God (Hebrews 8:2 fol.). The writer to the Hebrews, indeed, occasionally relates the old order to the new order platonically in terms of the earthly copy of an eternal [archetype](#).

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At an early date Christians developed a line of Old Testament exegesis designed to show that they, not the Jews, stand in the true succession of the original people of God. This line is seen in the [Letter of Barnabas](#), the apologist Justin's (c. 100–c. 165) *Dialogue with Trypho*, and the 3rd-century *Against the Jews* ascribed to the North African bishop Cyprian (c. 200–258).

The patristic period

[Alexandria](#) had long boasted a school of classical study that practiced the allegorical interpretation of the Homeric epics and the Greek [myths](#). This method of [exegesis](#) was taken over by Philo and from him by Christian scholars of Alexandria in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. [Clement of Alexandria](#) (c. 150–c. 215) and [Origen](#) (c. 185–c. 254) did not completely rule out the literal sense of scripture—Origen's [Hexapla](#), a six-column edition of various biblical versions, was a monument to his painstaking study of the text—but claimed that the most meaningful aspects of divine revelation could be extracted only by allegorization. Clement stated that the [Fourth Gospel](#) was a “spiritual gospel” because it unfolds the deeper truth concealed in the matter-of-fact narratives of the other three. Origen treated literal statements as “earthen vessels” preserving divine treasure; their literal sense is the body as compared with the [moral](#) sense (the soul) and the spiritual sense (the spirit). The true exegete, he claimed, pursues the threefold sense and recognizes the spiritual (allegorical) as the highest. Later, the [Antiochene fathers](#), [represented](#) especially by [Theodore of Mopsuestia](#) (c. 350–428/429) and John [Chrysostom](#) (c. 347–407), patriarch of Constantinople, developed an [exegesis](#) that took more account of literal meaning and historical [context](#). But the allegorizers could claim that their method yielded lessons that (while arbitrary) were more relevant and interesting to ordinary Christians.

In the West the Alexandrian methods were adopted by [Ambrose](#) (c. 339–397), bishop of Milan, and [Augustine](#) (354–430), bishop of Hippo, especially as formulated in the seven “rules” of [Tyconius](#) (c. 380), a Donatist heretic (one who denied the [efficacy](#) of sacraments administered by an allegedly unworthy priest), which classified allegorical interpretation in relation to: (1) the Lord and his [church](#), (2) true and false believers, (3) promise and law, (4) genus and species, (5) numerical significance, (6) “recapitulation,” and (7) the devil and his followers. There were other Latin exegetes, like [Ambrosiaster](#)

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(commentaries ascribed to Ambrose) and, supremely, [Jerome](#) (c. 347–419/420), the learned Latin Father, who paid close attention to the grammatical sense. In the [Old Testament](#), Jerome appealed from the Greek version to the “Hebraic verity” and in such a work as his commentary on Daniel provided some fine examples of historical exegesis. Augustine, though not primarily an exegete, composed both literal and allegorical commentaries and expository homilies on many parts of [scripture](#), and his grasp of divine love as the essential element in revelation supplied a unifying hermeneutical principle that compensates for technical deficiencies.

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[Sandro Botticelli: fresco of St. Augustine](#)

St. Augustine, fresco by Sandro Botticelli, 1480; in the Church of Ognissanti, Florence.

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The medieval period

As the patristic age gave way to the scholastic age, the English monk [Bede of Jarrow](#) (died 735) wrote commentaries designed to perpetuate patristic exegesis, mainly allegorical; thus, Elkanah with his two wives (1 Samuel 1:2) is interpreted as referring to [Christ](#) with the synagogue and the church.

In the early [Middle Ages](#) the fourfold sense of scripture—developed from Origen’s threefold sense by subdividing the spiritual sense into the allegorical (setting forth the doctrine) and the anagogical (relating to the coming world)—was increasingly expounded and received its final authority from Thomas [Aquinas](#) (1225/26–74). For Thomas the literal sense, expressing the author’s intention, was a fit object of scientific study; the figurative senses unfolded the divine intention.

[Medieval](#) exegesis was greatly influenced by the *Glossa Ordinaria*, a digest of the views of the leading fathers and early medieval doctors (teachers) on biblical interpretation. This [compilation](#) owed much in its initial stages to [Anselm of Laon](#) (died 1117); it had

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reached its definitive form by the middle of the 12th century and provided the exegetical norm of the [Summa theologiae](#) ("Summation of Theology") of Thomas Aquinas and others.

For all the interest in [allegory](#), literal interpretation was [cultivated](#) in many centres in the West, often with the aid of [Hebrew](#), knowledge of which was obtainable from Jewish rabbis. One such centre was the Abbey of Saint-Victor at [Paris](#), where Hugh (died 1141) compiled biblical commentaries that fill three volumes of [Jacques-Paul Migne's](#) (1800–75) *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Series Latina) and indicate the commentator's dependence on [Rashi](#) as well as on his Christian predecessors. Of Hugh's [disciples](#), Andrew, abbot of Wigmore (died 1175), carried on his master's tradition of literal scholarship, and Richard, the Scottish-born prior of Saint-Victor (died 1173) pursued a line more [congenial](#) to his mystical temperament. Herbert of Bosham (c. 1180) produced a commentary on Jerome's Hebrew Psalter. [Robert Grosseteste](#), bishop of Lincoln (died 1253), wrote commentaries on the days of creation and the [Psalter](#) that both drew on the Greek fathers and profited by his direct study of the Hebrew text. [Nicholas of Lyra](#) (c. 1265–c. 1349), the greatest Christian Hebraist and expositor of the later Middle Ages, compiled *postillae*, or commentaries, both literal and figurative, on the whole Bible; he insisted that only the literal sense could establish proof. Luther ranked him among the best exegetes: "a fine soul, a good Hebraist and a true Christian."

The [Reformation](#) period

The English theologian [John Colet](#) (c. 1466–1519) broke with [medieval](#) scholasticism when he returned from the Continent to Oxford in 1496 and lectured on the Pauline letters, expounding the text in terms of its plain meaning as seen in its historical [context](#). The humanist [Erasmus](#) (c. 1466–1536) owed to him much of his insight into biblical [exegesis](#). By the successive printed editions of his Greek New Testament (1516 and following), Erasmus made his principal, but not his only, contribution to biblical studies.

[Martin Luther](#) (1483–1546) was a voluminous expositor, insisting on the primacy of the literal sense and dismissing [allegory](#) as so much rubbish—although he indulged in it himself on occasion. The core of [scripture](#) was to him its proclamation of [Christ](#) as the one in whom alone lay man's [justification](#) before God. [John Calvin](#) (1509–64), a more systematic expositor, served his apprenticeship by writing a youthful commentary on the Roman statesman and philosopher [Seneca the Younger's](#) (c. 4 BCE–65 CE) *De clementia* ("Concerning Mercy"); systematic theologian though he was, he did not allow his theological system to distort the plain meaning of scripture, and his philological–historical interpretation is consulted with profit even today.

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Scientific [exegesis](#) was pursued on the Catholic side by scholars such as F. de Ribera (1591) and L. Alcasar (1614), who showed the way to a more satisfactory understanding of the Revelation. On the Reformed side, the *Annotationes in Libros Evangeliorum* (1641–50) by the jurist [Hugo Grotius](#) (1583–1645) were so objective that some criticized them for rationalism.

The modern period

The modern period is marked by advances in [textual criticism](#) and in the study of biblical languages and history, all of which contribute to the interpretation of the [Bible](#). The German theologian [J.A. Bengel's](#) (1687–1752) edition of the Greek text of the New Testament with critical apparatus (1734), in which he framed the canon that “the more difficult reading is to be preferred,” was followed by his exegetical *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (“Introduction to the New Testament,” 1742): “apply thyself wholly to the text,” he directed; “apply the text wholly to thyself.” The English bishop [Robert Lowth's](#) (1710–87) Oxford lectures on *The Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, published in Latin in 1753, greatly promoted the understanding of the poetry of the [Old Testament](#) by expounding the laws of its parallelistic structure. The German philologist [Karl Lachmann](#) (1793–1851) applied his expertise in classical [criticism](#) to editing the text of the New Testament; to him also belongs the credit of arguing that Mark was the earliest of the Gospels and a main source of Matthew and Luke (1835). The problem of the source analysis of the [Pentateuch](#) was given what long appeared to be its final solution by [Julius Wellhausen](#) (1844–1918), who related the successive law codes to the development of the Israelite cultus. For the period preceding the 9th century BC, however, he operated in a historical vacuum that Near Eastern archaeology was in his day only beginning to fill; its subsequent findings have dictated radical modifications in his reconstruction of Israel's religious history. In the middle half of the 19th century, New Testament exegesis was overshadowed by the school of [Ferdinand Christian Baur](#) (1792–1860), which [envisaged](#) a sharply opposed Petrine (Peter) and Pauline (Paul) [antithesis](#) in the primitive church, followed in the 2nd century by a synthesis that is reflected in most of the New Testament writings. In [France](#), [Ernest Renan's](#) (1823–92) works on early [Christianity](#) were helpful philological and historical studies; the most popular volume, his *Vie de Jésus* (1863), was the least valuable. In England, where the poet and educator [Matthew Arnold](#) (1822–88) endeavoured to find an impregnable [moral](#) foundation for biblical authority, New Testament exegesis received contributions of unsurpassed worth between 1865 and the end of the century from J.B. Lightfoot, B.F. Westcott, and F.J.A. Hort.

At the beginning of the 20th century a new direction was given to [Gospel](#) interpretation by the German scholar [William Wrede](#) (*Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*, 1901) and

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the medical missionary theologian [Albert Schweitzer](#) (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Eng. trans., 1910), who revolutionized New Testament scholarship with his emphasis on the eschatological orientation of Jesus' mind and message. The writings of the biblical scholar [C.H. Dodd](#) (*The Parables of the Kingdom*, 1935; *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, 1936) stressed realized eschatology—that the standards of the last times were realized by Jesus and his disciples—in the preaching of Jesus and of the primitive church. He was a leading pioneer of the “biblical theology” movement. [Karl Barth's](#) (1886–1968) commentary on Romans (1919) launched an [existential](#) interpretation of the New Testament, which was pursued more radically by [Rudolf Bultmann](#) (1884–1976), under the influence of [Wilhelm Dilthey](#) (1833–1911), according to whom the interpreter must project himself into the author's experience so as to relive it, and of [Martin Heidegger](#) (1889–1976), whose [conception](#) of the truly authentic man as capable of freedom because he has faced reality provides the “pre-understanding” for Bultmann's existential theology. Bultmann's [disciple](#) Ernst Fuchs considers the hermeneutical task to be the creation of a “language event” in which the authentic language of scripture encounters one now, challenging decision, awakening faith, and accomplishing salvation. The chief rival to existential exegesis is the “salvation-history” hermeneutic espoused by Oscar Cullmann.

Rudolf Bultmann and [Martin Dibelius](#) (1883–1947) pioneered the modern form-critical study of the Gospels. The form-critical method was fruitfully applied to the Old Testament by [Hermann Gunkel](#) (1862–1932) and Sigmund Mowinckel (1884–1965). Among Catholic scholars, exegetical studies have been vigorously promoted by Jean Daniélou (with his researches into early Jewish Christianity), the Dominicans of the *École Biblique et Archéologique* (The School of the Bible and Archeology) in Jerusalem (to whom one must credit the Jerusalem Bible), and the Jesuits of the Pontifical Biblical Institute and others.

The [Second Vatican Council](#) (1962–65) of the [Roman Catholic Church](#) encouraged biblical scholarship that was [cultivated](#) in association with “separated brethren” and with consideration for the requirements of non-Christians. This was one indication of a new direction in biblical exegesis: the [discipline](#) was pursued no longer as a [vindication](#) of sectional traditions but rather as a cooperative enterprise aiming at making widely available the permanent value of the Bible.

— [Frederick Fyvie Bruce](#)

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Developments since the mid-20th century

Since the mid-20th century, the study of biblical literature has been greatly expanded by developments in [archaeology](#), [linguistics](#), literary theory, [anthropology](#), and [sociology](#). Many of these approaches to the study of the [Bible](#) arose out of or were developed within an academic tradition that had been heavily influenced by Christian scholars. Biblical scholars who were practicing Jews adopted and transformed such social-scientific and theoretical methods. Scholars who employ the method of [historical criticism](#) have drawn upon advances in archaeology and a burgeoning philological study of religious and [secular](#) texts of nonbiblical [cultures](#) of the eastern Mediterranean and of [Mesopotamia](#). [New Criticism](#) and postmodern literary theory have inspired not only literary scholars of the Bible but also those who approach the Old and New Testaments from social-scientific perspectives to focus on such topics as the demarcation of gender roles, sexuality, and social and economic oppression. There have even been ecological and “ecocritical” interpretations of the Jewish and Christian scriptures—for example, *The Earth Bible* (2000–2002), a series of “green” readings and exegetical commentary on the Old and New Testaments.

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