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What is Biblical Hermeneutics and Why Does it Matter?

DENNIS A. WRIGHT, D.MIN.

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Hermeneutics is a generic term and may refer to any work of literature. It is the theory and methodology of interpretation,¹ especially the interpretation of Biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts.² Hermeneutics is more than interpretative principles or methods used when immediate comprehension fails and includes the art of understanding and communication.³

Hermeneutics (Greek *hermeneuo*, “to explain, interpret”) is the science of Bible interpretation. Paul stated the aim of all true hermeneutics in 2 Timothy 2:15 as “rightly dividing the word of truth.” That means correctly or accurately teaching the word of truth. The apostle boasted that he did not corrupt, or adulterate, the Scriptures.⁴ A proper hermeneutical approach will enable us to say the same.⁵

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia: “Interpretation”

1. General Principles

Referred specifically to the sacred Scriptures, the science of interpretation is generally known as hermeneutics, while the practical application of the principles of this science is exegesis. In nearly all cases, interpretation has in mind the thoughts of another, and then, further, these thoughts expressed in another language than that of the interpreter. In this sense it is used in Biblical research. A person has interpreted the thoughts of another when he has in his own mind a correct reproduction or photograph of the thought as it was conceived in the mind of the original writer or speaker. It is accordingly a purely reproductive process, involving no originality of thought on the part of the interpreter. If

¹ Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing. *The American Heritage Dictionary* entry: “hermeneutics”. www.ahdictionary.com. “Definition of HERMENEUTICS”. www.merriam-webster.com.

² Audi, Robert (1999). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 377. Reese, William L. (1980). *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*. Sussex: Harvester Press. p. 221.

³ Zimmermann, Jens (2015). *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. p. 2.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 2:17.

⁵ Cairns, A. (2002). In *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (p. 207). Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International.

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the latter adds anything of his own it is *eisegesis* and not *exegesis*. The moment the Bible student has in his own mind what was in the mind of the author or authors of the Biblical books when these were written, he has interpreted the thought of the Scriptures.

The interpretation of any specimen of literature will depend on the character of the work under consideration. A piece of poetry and a chapter of history will not be interpreted according to the same principles or rules. Particular rules that are legitimate in the explanation of a work of fiction would be entirely out of place in dealing with a record of facts. Accordingly, the rules of the correct interpretation of the Scriptures will depend upon the character of these writings themselves, and the principles which an interpreter will employ in his interpretation of the Scriptures will be in harmony with his ideas of what the Scriptures are as to origin, character, history, etc. In the nature of the case the dogmatical stand of the interpreter will materially influence his hermeneutics and exegesis. In the legitimate sense of the term, every interpreter of the Bible is “prejudiced,” i.e. is guided by certain principles which he holds antecedently to his work of interpretation. If the modern advanced critic is right in maintaining that the Biblical books do not differ in kind or character from the religious books of other ancient peoples, such as the Indians or the Persians, then the same principles that he applies in the case of the Rig Veda or the Zend Avesta he will employ also in his exposition of the Scriptures. If, on the other hand, the Bible is for him a unique collection of writings, Divinely inspired and a revelation from the source of all truth, the Bible student will hesitate long before accepting contradictions, errors, mistakes, etc, in the Scriptures.

2. Special Principles

The Scriptures are a Divine and human product combined. That the holy men of God wrote as they were moved by the Spirit is the claim of the Scriptures themselves. Just where the line of demarkation is to be drawn between the human and the Divine factors in the production of the sacred Scriptures materially affects the principles of interpreting these writings. That the human factor was sufficiently potent to shape the form of thought in the Scriptures is evident on all hands. Paul does not write as Peter does, nor John as James; the individuality of the writer of the different books appears not only in the style, choice of words, etc, but in the whole form of thought also. There are such things as a Pauline, a Johannine and a Petrine type of Christian thought, although there is only one body of Christian truth underlying all types. In so far as the Bible is exactly like other books, it must be interpreted as we do other works of literature. The Scriptures are written in Heb and in Gr, and the principles of forms and of syntax that would apply to the explanation of other works written in these languages and under these circumstances must be applied to the OT and NT also. Again, the Bible is written for men, and its thoughts are those of mankind and not of angels or creatures of a different or higher

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spiritual or intellectual character; and accordingly there is no specifically Biblical logic, or rhetoric, or grammar. The laws of thought and of the interpretation of thought in these matters pertain to the Bible as they do to other writings.

But in regard to the material contents of the Scriptures, matters are different and the principles of interpretation must be different. God is the author of the Scriptures which He has given through human agencies. Hence the contents of the Scriptures, to a great extent, must be far above the ordinary concepts of the human mind. When John declares that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to redeem it, the interpreter does not do justice to the writer if he finds in the word “God” only the general philosophical conception of the Deity and not that God who is our Father through Christ; for it was the latter thought that was in the mind of the writer when he penned these words. Thus, too, it is a false interpretation to find in “Our Father” anything but this specifically Biblical conception of God, nor is it possible for anybody but a believing Christian to utter this prayer (Mt 6:9) in the sense which Christ, who taught it to His disciples, intended.

Again, the example of Christ and His disciples in their treatment of the OT teaches the principle that the *ipse dixit* of a Scriptural passage is to be interpreted as decisive as to its meaning. In the about 400 citations from the OT found in the NT, there is not one in which the mere “It is written” is not regarded as settling its meaning. Whatever may be a Bible student’s theory of inspiration, the teachings and the examples of interpretation found in the Scriptures are in perfect harmony in this matter.

These latter facts, too, show that in the interpretation of the Scriptures principles must be applied that are not applicable in the explanation of other books. As God is the author of the Scriptures He may have had, and, as a matter of fact, in certain cases did have in mind more than the human agents through whom He spoke did themselves understand. The fact that, in the NT, persons like Aaron and David, institutions like the law, the sacrificial system, the priesthood and the like, are interpreted as typical of persons and things under the New Covenant shows that the true significance, e.g. of the Levitical system, can be found only when studied in the light of the NT fulfilment.

Again, the principle of parallelism, not for illustrative but for argumentative purposes, is a rule that can, in the nature of the case, be applied to the interpretation of the Scriptures alone and not elsewhere. As the Scriptures represent one body of truth, though in a kaleidoscopic variety of forms, a statement on a particular subject in one place can be accepted as in harmony with a statement on the same subject elsewhere. In short, in all of those characteristics in which the Scriptures are unlike other literary productions, the principles of interpretation of the Scriptures must also be unlike those employed in other cases.

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3. Historical Data

Owing chiefly to the dogmatical basis of hermeneutics as a science, there has been a great divergence of views in the history of the church as to the proper methods of interpretation. It is one of the characteristic and instructive features of the NT writers that they absolutely refrain from the allegorical method of interpretation current in those times, particularly in the writings of Philo. Not even Gal 4:22, correctly understood, is an exception, since this, if an allegorical interpretation at all, is an *argumentum ad hominem*. The sober and grammatical method of interpretation in the NT writers stands out, too, in bold and creditable contrast to that of the early Christian exegetes, even of Origen. Only the Syrian fathers seemed to be an exception to the fantasies of the allegorical methods. The Middle Ages produced nothing new in this sphere; but the Reformation, with its formal principle that the Bible and the Bible alone is the rule of faith and life, made the correct grammatical interpretation of the Scriptures practically a matter of necessity. In modern times, not at all prolific in scientific discussions of hermeneutical principles and practices, the exegetical methods of different interpreters are chiefly controlled by their views as to the origin and character of the Scriptural books, particularly in regard to their inspiration. — G. H. Schodde⁶

Modern Hermeneutics

Modern hermeneutics⁷ includes both verbal and non-verbal communication⁸ as well as semiotics,⁹ presuppositions, and pre-understandings. Hermeneutics has been broadly applied in the humanities, especially in law, history and theology.

⁶ Schodde, G. H. (1915). "Interpretation." In J. Orr, J. L. Nuelsen, E. Y. Mullins, & M. O. Evans (Eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Vol. 1–5, pp. 1489–1490). Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company. Literature. — Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, New York, 1884. Here the literature is fully given, as also in Weidner's Theol. Enc, I, 266 ff.

⁷ The discipline of hermeneutics emerged with the new humanist education of the 15th century as a historical and critical methodology for analyzing texts. In a triumph of early modern hermeneutics, the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla proved in 1440 that the *Donation of Constantine* was a forgery. This was done through intrinsic evidence of the text itself. Thus hermeneutics expanded from its medieval role of explaining the true meaning of the Bible. However, biblical hermeneutics did not die off. For example, the Protestant Reformation brought about a renewed interest in the interpretation of the Bible, which took a step away from the interpretive tradition developed during the Middle Ages back to the texts themselves. Martin Luther and John Calvin emphasized *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (scripture interprets itself). Calvin used *brevitas et facilitas* as an aspect of theological hermeneutics. [Myung Jun Ahn, "*Brevitas et facilitas*: a study of a vital aspect in the theological hermeneutics of John Calvin"]

⁸ *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy in Organization Studies*, Routledge, 2015, p. 113.

⁹ Semiotics (also called semiotic studies) is the study of sign processes (semiosis), which are any activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, where a sign is defined as anything that communicates

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Hermeneutics was initially applied to the interpretation, or exegesis, of scripture, and has been later broadened to questions of general interpretation.¹⁰ It should be pointed out at this point that the use of so-called modern hermeneutical methods have resulted in a pronounced degrading of the authority of the Bible in the minds of both the scholars and the people of God.

The terms *hermeneutics* and *exegesis* are sometimes used interchangeably. **Hermeneutics** is a wider discipline which includes written, verbal, and non-verbal communication. **Exegesis** focuses primarily upon the word and grammar of texts.

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Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation of the Bible. While Jewish and Christian Biblical hermeneutics have some overlap, they have distinctly different interpretive traditions.

The early patristic traditions of Biblical exegesis had few unifying characteristics in the beginning but tended toward unification in later schools of biblical hermeneutics.

Augustine offers hermeneutics and homiletics in his *De doctrina christiana*. He stresses the importance of humility in the study of Scripture. He also regards the duplex commandment of love in Matthew 22 as the heart of Christian faith. In Augustine's hermeneutics, signs have an important role. God can communicate with the believer through the signs of the Scriptures. Thus, humility, love, and the knowledge of signs are an essential hermeneutical presupposition for a sound interpretation of the Scriptures. Although Augustine endorses some teaching of the Platonism of his time, he recasts it according to a theocentric doctrine of the Bible. Similarly, in a practical discipline, he modifies the classical theory of oratory in a Christian way. He underscores the meaning of diligent study of the Bible and prayer as more than mere human knowledge and oratory skills. As a concluding remark, Augustine encourages the interpreter and preacher of the Bible to seek a good manner of life and, most of all, to love God and neighbor.¹¹

a meaning that is not the sign itself to the sign's interpreter. The meaning can be intentional such as a word uttered with a specific meaning, or unintentional, such as a symptom being a sign of a particular medical condition. Signs can communicate through any of the senses: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory.

¹⁰ Grondin, Jean (1994). *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Yale University Press.

¹¹ Woo, B. Hoon (2013). "Augustine's Hermeneutics and Homiletics in *De doctrina christiana*". *Journal of Christian Philosophy*. 17: 97–117.

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There is traditionally a fourfold sense of Biblical hermeneutics: literal, moral, allegorical (spiritual), and anagogical.¹²

Literal

Encyclopædia Britannica states that literal analysis means “a biblical text is to be deciphered according to the ‘plain meaning’ expressed by its linguistic construction and historical context.” The intention of the authors is believed to correspond to the literal meaning. Literal hermeneutics is often associated with the verbal inspiration of the Bible.

Moral

Moral interpretation searches for moral lessons which can be understood from writings within the Bible. Allegories are often placed in this category.

Allegorical

Allegorical interpretation states that biblical narratives have a second level of reference that is more than the people, events and things that are explicitly mentioned. One type of allegorical interpretation is known as typological, where the key figures, events, and establishments of the Old Testament are viewed as “types” (patterns). In the New Testament this can also include foreshadowing of people, objects, and events. According to this theory, readings like Noah’s Ark could be understood by using the Ark as a “type” of the Christian church that God designed from the start.

Anagogical

This type of interpretation is more often known as mystical interpretation. It claims to explain the events of the Bible and how they relate to or predict what the future holds. This is evident in the Jewish Kabbalah, which attempts to reveal the mystical significance of the numerical values of Hebrew words and letters.

¹² "Hermeneutics | Definition & Facts". *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

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In Judaism, analogical interpretation is also evident in the medieval Zohar.¹³ In Christianity, it can be seen in Mariology.¹⁴

Talmudic Hermeneutics

Talmudical hermeneutics (Hebrew: approximately, מידות שהתורה נדרשת בהן) refers to Jewish methods for the investigation and determination of the meaning of the Hebrew Bible, as well as rules by which Jewish law could be established. One well-known summary of these principles appears in the Baraita of Rabbi Ishmael.¹⁵

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¹³ The Zohar (Hebrew: זוהר, lit. "Splendor" or "Radiance") is a foundational work in the literature of Jewish mystical thought known as Kabbalah. It is a group of books including commentary on the mystical aspects of the Torah (the five books of Moses) and scriptural interpretations as well as material on mysticism, mythical cosmogony, and mystical psychology. The Zohar contains discussions of the nature of God, the origin and structure of the universe, the nature of souls, redemption, the relationship of Ego to Darkness and "true self" to "The Light of God". Its scriptural exegesis can be considered an esoteric form of the rabbinic literature known as Midrash, which elaborates on the Torah.

¹⁴ Mariology is the theological study of Mary, the mother of Jesus. [Llywelyn, Dorian SJ (June 2016). "Oxford Handbooks Online - Mary and Mariology". [doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.013.62](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.013.62)] Mariology seeks to relate doctrine or dogma about Mary to other doctrines of the faith, such as those concerning Jesus and notions about redemption, intercession and grace. Christian Mariology aims to place the role of the historic Mary in the context of scripture, tradition and the teachings of the Church on Mary.¹⁴ In terms of social history, Mariology may be broadly defined as the study of devotion to and thinking about Mary throughout the history of Christianity.¹⁴ There exist a variety of Christian (and non-Christian) views on Mary as a figure ranging from the focus on the veneration of Mary in Roman Catholic Mariology to criticisms of "mariolatry" as a form of idolatry. The latter would include certain Protestant objections to Marian devotion.

¹⁵ The Baraita of Rabbi Ishmael (Hebrew: ברייתא דרבי ישמעאל) is a baraita [*Baraita* (Aramaic: בְּרִייתָא "external" or "outside"; pl. *Barayata* or *Baraitot*) designates a tradition in the Jewish oral law not incorporated in the Mishnah. *Baraita* thus refers to teachings "outside" of the six orders of the Mishnah. Originally, "Baraita" probably referred to teachings from schools outside the main Mishnaic-era academies – although in later collections, individual *Baraitot* are often authored by sages of the Mishna (*Tannaim*)] which explains the 13 rules of Rabbi Ishmael, and their application, by means of illustrations from the Torah. The name is inaccurately given also to the first part of the Baraita, which only enumerates the thirteen rules. The Baraita constitutes the introduction to the Sifra, and precedes it in all editions, containing principles which in the Sifra are given their application. The *Hekalot* are also called by some the "Baraita of R. Ishmael."

The 13 Rules

The thirteen rules were compiled by Rabbi Ishmael b. Elisha for the elucidation of the Torah and for making *halakic* deductions from it. They are, strictly speaking, mere amplifications of the seven Rules of Hillel, and are collected in the Baraita of R. Ishmael, forming the introduction to the Sifra and reading as follows:

1. *Kal wa-homer*: Identical with the first rule of Hillel (a *minore ad maius* - an argument that denotes an inference from smaller to bigger and vice versa).

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Methods by which the Talmud¹⁶ explores the meaning of scripture:

2. *Gezerah shawah*: Identical with the second rule of Hillel.
3. *Binyan av*: Rules deduced from a single passage of Scripture and rules deduced from two passages. This rule is a combination of the third and fourth rules of Hillel.
4. *Kelal u-Perat*: The general and the particular.
5. *u-Perat u-kelal*: The particular and the general.
6. *Kelal u-Perat u-kelal*: The general, the particular, and the general.
7. The general which requires elucidation by the particular, and the particular which requires elucidation by the general.
8. The particular implied in the general and excepted from it for pedagogic purposes elucidates the general as well as the particular.
9. The particular implied in the general and excepted from it on account of the special regulation which corresponds in concept to the general, is thus isolated to decrease rather than to increase the rigidity of its application.
10. The particular implied in the general and excepted from it on account of some other special regulation which does not correspond in concept to the general, is thus isolated either to decrease or to increase the rigidity of its application.
11. The particular implied in the general and excepted from it on account of a new and reversed decision can be referred to the general only in case the passage under consideration makes an explicit reference to it.
12. Deduction from the context.
13. When two Biblical passages contradict each other the contradiction in question must be solved by reference to a third passage.

Rules seven to eleven are formed by a subdivision of the fifth rule of Hillel; rule twelve corresponds to the seventh rule of Hillel, but is amplified in certain particulars; rule thirteen does not occur in Hillel, while, on the other hand, the sixth rule of Hillel is omitted by Ishmael.

¹⁶ The Talmud (Hebrew: תַּלְמוּד *Tálmūd*) is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law (*halakha*) and Jewish theology. [Steinsaltz, Adin (2009). "What is the Talmud?". *The Essential Talmud* (30th anniversary ed.). Basic Books. Neusner, Jacob (2003). *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. p. ix.] Until the advent of modernity, in nearly all Jewish communities, the Talmud was the centerpiece of Jewish cultural life and was foundational to "all Jewish thought and aspirations", serving also as "the guide for the daily life" of Jews. [Safrai, S. (1969). "The Era of the Mishnah and Talmud (70–640)". In Ben-Sasson, H.H. (ed.). *A History of the Jewish People*. Translated by Weidenfeld, George. Harvard University Press (published 1976). p. 379.]

The term "Talmud" normally refers to the collection of writings named specifically the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*), although there is also an earlier collection known as the Jerusalem Talmud (*Talmud Yerushalmi*). [Goldberg, Abraham (1987). "The Palestinian Talmud". In Safrai, Shmuel (ed.). *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, Volume 3 The Literature of the Sages*. Brill. pp. 303–322. doi:10.1163/9789004275133_008] It may also traditionally be called *Shas* (ש"ס), a Hebrew abbreviation of *shisha sedarim*, or the "six orders" of the Mishnah.

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- grammar and exegesis
- the interpretation of certain words and letters and apparently superfluous and/or missing words or letters, and prefixes and suffixes
- the interpretation of those letters which, in certain words, are provided with points
- the interpretation of the letters in a word according to their numerical value (known as Gematria)¹⁷
- the interpretation of a word by dividing it into two or more words (this is known as Notarikon)¹⁸

The Talmud has two components; the Mishnah (משנה, c. 200), a written compendium of Rabbinic Judaism's Oral Torah; and the Gemara (גמרא, c. 500), an elucidation of the Mishnah and related Tannaitic writings that often ventures onto other subjects and expounds broadly on the Hebrew Bible. The term "Talmud" may refer to either the Gemara alone, or the Mishnah and Gemara together.

The entire Talmud consists of 63 tractates, and in the standard print, called the Vilna Shas, there are 2,711 double-sided folios. It is written in Mishnaic Hebrew and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and contains the teachings and opinions of thousands of rabbis (dating from before the time of Christ through to the fifth century) on a variety of subjects, including *halakha*, Jewish ethics, philosophy, customs, history, and folklore, and many other topics. The Talmud is the basis for all codes of Jewish law and is widely quoted in rabbinic literature.

¹⁷ Gematria (Hebrew: גמטריא or gimatria גימטריה, plural גמטראות or גימטריאות, *gimatriot*) [Solomon Schechter and Caspar Levias (1901–1906). "GEMATRIA". In Singer, Isidore; et al. (eds.). *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls] is an alphanumeric code of assigning a numerical value to a name, word or phrase according to its letters. A single word can yield several values depending on the cipher used. *Gematria* is a Hebrew alphanumeric code or cipher that was probably used in biblical times and was later adopted by other cultures. It is still widely used in Jewish culture. Similar systems have been used in other languages and cultures: the Greeks *isopsephy*, and later, derived from or inspired by Hebrew *gematria*, Arabic *abjad* numerals, and English *gematria*.

¹⁸ Notarikon (Hebrew: נטריון *Notriqōn*) is a method of deriving a word, by using each of its initial (Hebrew: ראשי תיבות) or final letters (סופי תיבות) to stand for another, to form a sentence or idea out of the words. Another variation uses the first *and* last letters, or the two middle letters of a word, in order to form another word.^[1] The word "notarikon" is borrowed from the Greek language (νοταρικόν), and was derived from the Latin word "notarius" meaning "shorthand writer." [*The Dictionary of Jewish usage: a guide to the use of Jewish terms*, By Sol Steinmetz, 2005, article "Notarikon"] Notarikon is one of the three ancient methods used by the Kabbalists (the other two are gematria and temurah) to rearrange words and sentences. These methods were used in order to derive the esoteric substratum and deeper spiritual meaning of the words in the Bible. Notarikon was also used in alchemy.

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- the interpretation of a word according to its consonantal form or according to its vocalization
- the interpretation of a word by transposing its letters or by changing its vowels
- the logical deduction of a *halakah*¹⁹ from a Scriptural text or from another law

The rabbis of the Talmud considered themselves to be the receivers and transmitters of an Oral Torah as to the meaning of the scriptures. They considered this oral tradition to set forth the precise, original meanings of the words, revealed at the same time and by the same means as the original scriptures themselves. Interpretive methods listed above such as word play and letter counting were never used as logical proof of the meaning or teaching of a scripture. Instead they were considered to be an *asmakhta*, a validation of a meaning that was already set by tradition or a homiletic backing for rabbinic rulings.

Biblical Source Criticism

Among non-Orthodox Jews, there is growing interest in employing biblical source criticism, such as the Documentary Hypothesis²⁰ and the Supplementary hypothesis, for constructing modern Jewish theology,²¹ including the following objectives:

- Reconciling modern morals with biblical passages that condone morally problematic acts, such as genocide and other collective punishment

¹⁹ *Halakha* (Hebrew: הַלְכָה, Sephardic: [חֻלְכָה]; also transliterated as *halacha*, *halakhah*, *halachah*, or *halocho*; Ashkenazic: [חֻלְכָה]) is the collective body of Jewish religious laws derived from the written and Oral Torah. *Halakha* is based on biblical commandments (*mitzvot*), subsequent Talmudic and rabbinic law, and the customs and traditions compiled in the many books such as the *Shulchan Aruch*. *Halakha* is often translated as "Jewish law", although a more literal translation might be "the way to behave" or "the way of walking". The word derives from the root that means "to behave" (also "to go" or "to walk"). *Halakha* guides not only religious practices and beliefs, but also numerous aspects of day-to-day life. ["Halacha: The Laws of Jewish Life." *My Jewish Learning*. 8 April 2019.]

²⁰ The Documentary Hypothesis was one of the models historically used by Biblical scholars to explain the origins and composition of the Torah (or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). More recent models include the supplementary hypothesis and the fragmentary hypothesis. Originally developed by those who accepted Higher Critical methods, it has been largely dismissed today as being inaccurate in its assumptions and methodology.

²¹ <https://images.shulcloud.com/3205/uploads/Documents/Why-should-a-Jew-or-anyone-read-the-Bible.pdf>; <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28655/discussions/3194699/cfp-biblical-scholarship-modern-jewish-hermeneutic-special-issue>; <https://zeramim.org/past-issues/volume-iii-issue-1-fall-2018-5779-2/a-biblical-challenge-can-an-academic-approach-aimed-at-best-explanation-of-the-biblical-text-be-imported-into-the-synagogue-sermon-world-of-interpretation/>; <https://zeramim.org/past-issues/volume-iii-issue-3-spring-summer-2019-5779/contemporary-jewish-theology-in-light-of-divergent-biblical-views-on-revelations-content-david-frankel/>

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- Rejecting or accepting folkways, social norms, and linguistic trends, picking and choosing as more fully informed Jews
- Learning lessons in spite of biblical underrepresentation, or outright exclusion, of particular modern phenomena

To at least some extent, this is an application of Talmudical hermeneutics to traditional source criticism of the competing Torah schools: Priestly, Deuteronomic, and one, two, or more that are non-Priestly and non-Deuteronomic.

Biblical Interpretation



Theologian John Frame writes, "Interpretation is the attempt to help readers and hearers of Scripture understand and apply the biblical text."

Some philosophers, such as Heidegger and Gadamer, have treated interpretation as a comprehensive epistemology—as a way of understanding all reality, not just verbal documents. These writers prefer the term "hermeneutics" to the term "interpretation," but their program depends on an analogy between the interpretation of texts and human knowledge in general: the world is like a "text" that our knowledge seeks to interpret. But in the context of the doctrine of Scripture, interpretation usually has a more literal meaning: it is the attempt to help students of Scripture understand and apply biblical passages. "Passages" here include biblical language of all levels: words, sentences, paragraphs, sections, books, testaments, and the Bible as a whole.

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It is wrong to think of *the* interpretation as a unified layer of meaning submerged beneath the actual text, which people can reach if they dig very deep. It is better to think of *interpretations*, in the plural: responses to readers' perplexities about the meaning of the words. Interpretations are attempts to answer someone's complaint that "I cannot understand this." Note: the problem that necessitates interpretation is not a deficiency in Scripture; it is a deficiency in the reader or hearer.

Misunderstandings are of many types. One kind is when English speakers, for example, confront the Greek text and say that they don't understand Greek. In response to this complaint, one might translate the text into English. In that case the interpretation is the translation. Another type of misunderstanding occurs when a reader misconstrues the grammar of a sentence. To remedy that, an interpreter might offer a paraphrase or give a lesson in grammar. In other cases, interpretations might describe the historical background of the problem text, or the logical relations between the text and other texts, or the systematic theological concepts joining the problem text to others, or the worldview presuppositions of the biblical author.

Sometimes interpretations can be very practical. A reader asks, "What does this text mean to me?" In response to this kind of question, the interpreter might cite various practical situations of human life in which the text could make a difference. We can see that the task of interpreting Scripture is very nearly identical with the work of teaching.

Though interpretations are responses to human perplexities, it is wrong to suggest that all meaning is in the eye of the beholder rather than being objectively present in the text. Problems of interpretation may not be resolved simply by reporting the reader's response. Rather, there must be engagement to find out what the text itself, as God's own word, requires the reader to think and to do.

In the history of the church, there have been controversies over how literally or how figuratively we should interpret the Bible. Some, as in the Alexandrian tradition, have sought to find multiple meanings in every passage: (1) the literal, (2) the "allegorical" (using the passage as a figure of something far removed from the original context), (3) the "tropological" (using the text to teach moral lessons that may or may not be based in the original context), and (4) the "anagogical" (the fulfillment of the passage in the consummation of history, the new heavens and new earth). Others, as in the Antiochene tradition, have sought to make interpretations as literal as possible so as to avoid importing meaning that is not in the text.

The rule, of course, is that the interpretation must be true to the original, to the possibilities of understanding and application warranted by the text in question. Interpretations should not all seek maximum literality since some texts clearly warrant

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nonliteral interpretations (for example, the allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21–31). The intentions of the divine and human authors and the actual context of the passage must be our guides in such questions. When a study of a “problem passage” cannot be solved from the original context, often a resolution can be found in other passages of Scripture that take up the same subject matter. Hence the Reformation slogan *Scriptura Ipsius Interpres*, “Scripture is its own interpreter.”

Thus, interpretation, as a form of teaching, must be sound (or “healthy,” 2 Tim 1:13), true to God’s revelation and therefore able to communicate spiritual health to its hearers.²²

Christian Biblical Hermeneutics

Until the Enlightenment, Biblical hermeneutics was usually seen as a form of special hermeneutics (like legal hermeneutics); the status of scripture was thought to necessitate a particular form of understanding and interpretation.

Presuppositions

Bible interpretation proceeds upon certain presuppositions that yield certain clear principles by which we must explain the word of God.

The Inspiration of Scripture. Behind the human writers of the Bible books is the true author of each, God Himself (2 Tim. 3:15, 16; 1 Pet. 1:16–21).

The Uniqueness of Scripture. As the word of God, the Bible stands entirely apart from all other literature, sacred or secular. For this reason we cannot approach it in the same way we would approach any other book. It is its own interpreter. The principles by which we seek to learn its meaning are those the Bible itself demands or proposes.

The Unity of Scripture. Though composed of 66 parts, the Bible is one book with one divine author. It does not contradict itself. Where we imagine it does, we simply display our lack of understanding of its meaning. Thus we must never interpret any text of Scripture in such a way as to make it contradict another.

The unity of Scripture has other implications. The most obvious feature of the Bible is its division into two Testaments. Any system of interpretation must come to grips with their differences, similarities, and relationship. These matters raise some far-reaching questions, the answers to which will have a strong bearing on our hermeneutics.

²² Frame, J. (2018). “Biblical Interpretation.” In M. Ward, J. Parks, B. Ellis, & T. Hains (Eds.), *Lexham Survey of Theology*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

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The key to answering those questions must be that all Scripture is God's special redemptive revelation, with the person and work of Christ as its focal point. The progressive nature of this revelation must never be forgotten. Thus, while each Testament throws light on the other, the movement is always irreversibly from the Old to the New. "He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second" (Heb. 10:9). The importance of this one-way movement should be clear. There can be no going back to Old Testament shadows that have found their substance in Christ. Those premillennialists who insist that there will be a return to animal sacrifices in the millennium, a view based largely on their interpretation of Ezek. 40–48, fail to hold on to this fundamental principle. A return to animal sacrifices clearly controverts the central message of the book of Hebrews. Any interpretation of an Old Testament prophecy that produces such a conclusion is wrong and must be abandoned. There can be no return to Jewish sacrifices. The religion of the millennium cannot regress from Christianity to Old Testament Judaism.

Not only must the progressive nature of revelation never be forgotten, it must never be abused. That is, it must not become an excuse to deny the plain meaning of Old Testament prophecy, or to replace what the Bible states in the most literal fashion with idealist or spiritualized interpretations. Those who make over to the church all the blessings predicted for Israel while retaining all the curses for the nation (and sometimes both are in the same verse) are abusing the principle of progressive revelation. Those who refuse to see any reference to literal Israel and her future in places such as Zech. 12–14 do the same. This is all the more unreasonable when the language of the prophet plainly aims at describing literal Israel: "Jerusalem shall be inhabited again in her own place, even in Jerusalem" (Zech. 12:6).²³

In the nineteenth century it became increasingly common to read scripture just like any other writing, although the different interpretations were often disputed. Friedrich Schleiermacher²⁴ argued against a distinction between "general" and "special" hermeneutics, and for a general theory of hermeneutics applicable to all texts, including

²³ Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, pp. 207–208.

²⁴ Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) was a German Reformed theologian, philosopher, and biblical scholar known for his attempt to reconcile the criticisms of the Enlightenment with traditional Protestant Christianity. He also became influential in the evolution of higher criticism, and his work forms part of the foundation of the modern field of hermeneutics. Because of his profound effect on subsequent Christian thought, he is often called the "Father of Modern Liberal Theology" and is considered an early leader in liberal Christianity. The neo-orthodoxy movement of the twentieth century, typically (though not without challenge) seen to be spearheaded by Karl Barth, was in many ways an attempt to challenge his influence. As a philosopher he was a leader of German Romanticism.

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the Bible. Various methods of higher criticism sought to understand the Bible purely as a human, historical document.

The concept of hermeneutics has acquired at least two different but related meanings which are in use today. Firstly, in the older sense, biblical hermeneutics may be understood as the theological principles of exegesis which is often virtually synonymous with 'principles of biblical interpretation' or methodology of biblical exegesis. Secondly, the more recent development is to understand the term 'biblical hermeneutics' as the broader philosophy and linguistic underpinnings of interpretation. The question is posed: "How is understanding possible?" The rationale of this approach is that, while Scripture is "more than just an ordinary text," it is certainly "no less than an ordinary text." Scripture is in the first analysis "text" which human beings try to understand; in this sense, the principles of understanding any text apply to the Bible as well (regardless of whatever other additional, specifically theological principles are considered).

In this second sense, all aspects of philosophical and linguistic hermeneutics are considered to be applicable to the biblical texts, as well. There are obvious examples of this in the links between 20th century philosophy and Christian theology. For example, Rudolf Bultmann's²⁵ hermeneutical approach was strongly influenced by existentialism, and in particular by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger;²⁶ and since the 1970s, the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer²⁷ have had a wide-ranging

²⁵ Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884 – 1976) was a German Lutheran theologian and professor of the New Testament at the University of Marburg. He was one of the major figures of early-20th century biblical studies. A prominent critic of liberal theology, Bultmann instead argued for an existentialist interpretation of the New Testament. His hermeneutical approach to the New Testament led him to be a proponent of dialectical theology. Bultmann is known for his belief that the historical analysis of the New Testament is both futile and unnecessary, given that the earliest Christian literature showed little interest in specific locations. Bultmann argued that all that matters is the "thatness", not the "whatness" of Jesus, i.e. only *that* Jesus existed, preached, and died by crucifixion matters, not what happened throughout his life. [Borg, Marcus J. (1994). *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, page 187.; Broadhead, Edwin K. (2011). "Implicit Christology and the Historical Jesus". In Holmén, Tom; Porter, Stanley E. (eds.). *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*. 2. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill. pp. 1170-1172.] Bultmann relied on demythologization, an approach interpreting the mythological elements in the New Testament existentially. Bultmann contended that only faith in the kerygma, or proclamation, of the New Testament was necessary for Christian faith, not any particular facts regarding the historical Jesus.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) was a key German philosopher of the 20th Century. He is best known for contributions to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism.

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002) was a German philosopher of the continental tradition, best known for his 1960 *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, on hermeneutics.

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influence on biblical hermeneutics as developed by a wide range of Christian theologians. The French-American philosopher René Girard²⁸ follows a similar trail.²⁹

²⁸ René Noël Théophile Girard (1923 – 2015) was a French polymath, historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science whose work belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. Girard was the author of nearly thirty books, with his writings spanning many academic domains. Although the reception of his work is different in each of these areas, there is a growing body of secondary literature on his work and his influence on disciplines such as literary criticism, critical theory, anthropology, theology, psychology, mythology, sociology, economics, cultural studies, and philosophy. Girard's main contribution to philosophy, and in turn to other disciplines, was in the field of epistemological and ethical systems of desire. Girard believed that human development occurs initially through a process of observational mimicry, where the infant develops desire through a process of learning to copy adult behaviour, fundamentally linking acquisition of identity, knowledge and material wealth to the development of a desire to have something others possess.

All conflict, competition and rivalry therefore originate in mimetic desire (mimetic rivalry), which eventually reaches destructive stages of conflict both between individuals and social groups that requires them to blame someone or something in order to defuse conflict through the scapegoat mechanism. Unable to assume responsibility or engage in self-reflection to recognize their own part in the conflict, humans individually and cross-tribally unite, to defuse conflict, by murdering the king or whoever appears to have the least support in the conflict, and then recognizing when the person has died how much less stress they have, and the unification leads to them eventually thinking of the deposed dead king as a god, i.e. deification or sanctification. Or, guilt is ascribed to an innocent third-party, whose murder permits the creation of a common unifying mythological underlay necessary for the foundation of human culture.

For Girard, religion and mythology were therefore necessary steps in human evolution to control the violence that arises from mimetic rivalry and unequal distribution of desirable things. Religion directed the scapegoat impulse on imaginary concepts, such as Satan or demons, the absence of which would see an increase in human conflict, according to Girard. His ideas ran sharply contrary to the post-modernism in vogue through most of his life, and his views of human nature were pessimistic in contrast with the mainstream currents of his time. Girard saw religion as an essential instrument of cohesion, believing that the primary purpose of sacred texts was to end the practice of human sacrifice through ritualistically surrogating for the behaviour triggered by scapegoat mechanism, adopting and expanding many of Nietzsche's ideas.

²⁹ Perry, Simon (2005). *Resurrecting Interpretation*. Bristol Baptist College: University of Bristol.

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Diverse Interpretations

Biblical scholars have noted the diversity of interpretations by Protestants and to a lesser extent by Catholics. In his forward to R. C. Sproul's³⁰ *Knowing Scripture*, J. I. Packer³¹ observes that Protestant theologians are in conflict about biblical interpretation.³² To illustrate the diversity of biblical interpretations, William Yarchin³³ pictures a shelf full of religious books saying different things, but all claiming to be faithful interpretations of the Bible.³⁴ Bernard Ramm³⁵ observed that such diverse interpretations underlie the doctrinal variations in Christendom.³⁶ A mid-19th century book on biblical interpretation

³⁰ Robert Charles Sproul (1939 – 2017) was an American Calvinist theologian and ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America. He was the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries (named for the Ligonier Valley just outside Pittsburgh, where the ministry started as a study center for college and seminary students) and could be heard daily on the *Renewing Your Mind* radio broadcast in the United States and internationally. Under Sproul's direction, Ligonier Ministries produced the *Ligonier Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, which would eventually grow into the 1978 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, of which Sproul, alongside Norman Geisler, was one of the chief architects. Sproul has been described as "the greatest and most influential proponent of the recovery of Calvinist theology in the last century."

³¹ James Innell Packer (1926 – 2020) was an English-born Canadian evangelical theologian, cleric and writer in the low-church Anglican and Calvinist traditions. He was considered one of the most influential evangelicals in North America, known for his best-selling book, *Knowing God*, written in 1973, as well as his work as an editor for the English Standard Version of the Bible. He was one of the high-profile signers on the 1978 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, a member on the advisory board of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and also was involved in the ecumenical book *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* in 1994. His last teaching position was as the board of governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, in which he served from 1996 until his retirement in 2016 due to failing eyesight.

³² R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Rev. ed., InterVarsity Press, 2009), 10.

³³ "[Archived copy](#)". Archived from [the original](#) on 2014-08-19. Retrieved August 2, 2021.

³⁴ William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: a Reader* (Hendrickson, 2004), xi.

³⁵ Bernard L. Ramm (1916 - 1992) was a Baptist theologian and apologist within the broad evangelical tradition. He wrote prolifically on topics concerned with biblical hermeneutics, religion and science, Christology, and apologetics. [Bernard Ramm entry (written by Kevin Vanhoozer) in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*. Walter A. Elwell. Baker Books, 1993. pp.290-306.] The hermeneutical principles presented in his 1956 book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* influenced a wide spectrum of Baptist theologians. During the 1970s he was widely regarded as a leading evangelical theologian as well-known as Carl F.H. Henry. His equally celebrated and criticized 1954 book *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* was the theme of a 1979 issue of the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, while a 1990 issue of Baylor University's *Perspectives in Religious Studies* was devoted to Ramm's views on theology.

³⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics, 3rd rev ed* (Baker Academic, 1980), 3.

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observed that even those who believe the Bible to be the word of God hold the most discordant views about fundamental doctrines.³⁷

The Catholic Church asserts the capital importance of biblical interpretation and Catholic scholars recognize some diversity in the Bible. This allows for an openness of interpretation as long as it stays within the Catholic Church's theological Tradition.³⁸ So it is that theological factors set the parameters for interpreting the Scripture that Catholics believe to be the word of God.³⁹ Such parameters disallow the widely differing interpretations that make it possible for Protestants to prove almost anything by the Bible.⁴⁰

Theological Hermeneutics as Traditional Christian Biblical Exegesis

This form of theological hermeneutics in the mainstream Protestant tradition considers Christian biblical hermeneutics in the tradition of explication of the text, or exegesis, to deal with various principles that can be applied to the study of Scripture. If the canon of Scripture is considered as an organic whole, rather than an accumulation of disparate individual texts written and edited in the course of history, then any interpretation that contradicts any other part of scripture is not considered to be sound. Biblical hermeneutics differs from hermeneutics and within traditional Protestant theology, there are a variety of interpretive formulae. Such formulae are generally not mutually exclusive, and interpreters may adhere to several of these approaches at once. These formulae include:⁴¹

Theological Group of Principles:

- The **Historical-grammatical** principle based on historical, socio-political, geographical, cultural and linguistic / grammatical context
- Alternate, mutually-exclusive, models of history:

³⁷ *The Interpretation of the Bible* (Boston; Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1844), 15-16.

³⁸ Peter Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"* (Gregorian Biblical BookShop, 2001), 23, 121, 254.

³⁹ David M. Williams, *Receiving the Bible in Faith: Historical and Theological Exegesis* (CUA Press, 2004), 6-7.

⁴⁰ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (David C. Cook, 1991), 7.

⁴¹ This list of "principles" in conservative [evangelical](#) hermeneutics appears to derive from: Hartill, J E 1960. *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

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- The **Dispensational model** or The **Chronometrical Principle**: "During different periods of time, God has chosen to deal in a particular way with man in respect to sin and man's responsibility."
- The **Covenantal model**: "We differentiate between the various contracts that God has made with his people; specifically their provisions, their parties and their purposes."
- The **New-Covenantal** model: The Old Testament Laws have been fulfilled and abrogated or cancelled with Christ's death, and replaced with the Law of Christ of the New Covenant, although many of the Old Covenant laws are reinstated under the New Covenant.
- The **Ethnic Division Principle**: "The word of truth is rightly divided in relation to the three classes which it treats, i.e. Jews, Gentiles and the Church."
- The **Breach Principle**: Interpretation of a certain verse or passage in Scripture is aided by a consideration of certain breaches, either breaches of promise or breaches of time.
- The **Christo-Centric Principle**: "The mind of deity is eternally centered in Christ. All angelic thought and ministry are centered in Christ. All Satanic hatred and subtlety are centered at Christ. All human hopes are, and human occupations should be, centered in Christ. The whole material universe in creation is centered in Christ. The entire written word is centered in Christ."
- The **Moral Principle**
- The **Discriminational Principle**: "We should divide the word of truth so as to make a distinction where God makes a difference."
- The **Predictive Principle**
- The **Application Principle**: "An application of truth may be made only after the correct interpretation has been made"
- The **Principle of Human Willingness in Illumination**
- The **Context Principle**: "God gives light upon a subject through either near or remote passages bearing upon the same subject."

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Sub-divided Context/Mention Principles:

- The **First Mention Principle**: "God indicates in the first mention of a subject the truth with which that subject stands connected in the mind of God."
- The **Progressive Mention Principle**: "God makes the revelation of any given truth increasingly clear as the word proceeds to its consummation."
- The **Comparative Mention Principle**
- The **Full Mention Principle** or The **Complete Mention Principle**: "God declares his full mind upon any subject vital to our spiritual life."
- The **Agreement Principle**: "The truthfulness and faithfulness of God become the guarantee that he will not set forth any passage in his word that contradicts any other passage."
- The **Direct Statement Principle**: "God says what he means and means what he says."
- The **Gap Principle**: "God, in the Jewish Scriptures, ignores certain periods of time, leaping over them without comment."
- The **Threefold Principle**: "The word of God sets forth the truths of salvation in a three-fold way: past - justification; present - sanctification/transformation; future - glorification/consummation."
- The **Repetition Principle**: "God repeats some truth or subject already given, generally with the addition of details not before given."
- The **Synthetic Principle**
- The **Principle of Illustrative Mention**
- The **Double Reference Principle**

Figures of Speech Group of Principles:

- The **Numerical Principle**
- The **Symbolic Principle**
- The **Typical Principle**: "Certain people, events, objects and rituals found in the Old Testament may serve as object lessons and pictures by which God teaches us of his grace and saving power."

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- The **Parabolic Principle**
- The **Allegorical Principle**

Techniques

In the interpretation of a text, hermeneutics considers the original medium⁴² as well as what language says, supposes, doesn't say, and implies. The process consists of several steps for best attaining the Scriptural author's intended meaning(s). One such process is taught by Henry A Virkler, in *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (1981):

- **Lexical-syntactical analysis:** This step looks at the words used and the way the words are used. Different order of the sentence, the punctuation, the tense of the verse are all aspects that are looked at in the lexical syntactical method. Here, lexicons and grammar aids can help in extracting meaning from the text.
- **Historical/cultural analysis:** The history and culture surrounding the authors is important to understand to aid in interpretation. For instance, understanding the Jewish sects of the Palestine and the government that ruled Palestine in New Testament times increases understanding of Scripture. And, understanding the connotations of positions such as the High Priest and that of the tax collector helps us know what others thought of the people holding these positions.
- **Contextual analysis:** A verse out of context can often be taken to mean something completely different from the intention. This method focuses on the importance of looking at the context of a verse in its chapter, book and even biblical context.
- **Theological analysis:** It is often said that a single verse usually doesn't make a theology. This is because Scripture often touches on issues in several books. For instance, gifts of the Spirit are spoken about in Romans, Ephesians and 1 Corinthians. To take a verse from Corinthians without taking into account other passages that deal with the same topic can cause a poor interpretation.
- **Special literary analysis:** There are several special literary aspects to look at, but the overarching theme is that each genre of Scripture has a different set of rules that applies to it. Of the genres found in Scripture, there are: narratives, histories, prophecies, apocalyptic writings, poetry, psalms and letters. In these, there are differing levels of allegory, figurative language, metaphors, similes and literal

⁴² Perry, Peter. "[Biblical Performance Criticism](http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org)". www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org.

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language. For instance, the apocalyptic writings and poetry have more figurative and allegorical language than does the narrative or historical writing. These must be addressed, and the genre recognized to gain a full understanding of the intended meaning.

Howard Hendricks,⁴³ longtime professor of hermeneutics at Dallas Theological Seminary, set out the method of observing the text, interpreting the text, applying the text in his book, *Living By the Book*. Other major Christian teachers, such as Charles R. (Chuck) Swindoll, who wrote the foreword, Kay Arthur and David Jeremiah have based their hermeneutics on the principles Hendricks teaches.

In his book *God Centered Biblical Interpretation* (1999), Vern Poythress, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, presented a hermeneutical technique based on the pattern of "speaker, discourse, and hearer".⁴⁴ According to Poythress, the study of the Bible must acknowledge all three aspects: God as the speaker, the Bible as His speech, and the people to whom He speaks. Thus, context plays a primary role in Poythress's study of biblical teachings. He lists three general concepts to understand about any passage of Scripture:

- **Original time and context:** This includes the personal perspective of the writer, the normative perspective of the text itself, and the situational perspective of the original audience.
- **Transmission and its context:** Understanding the transmission of Scripture includes contemplating the message being sent through the text, taking into account the concerns of individual writers/translators as well as its broader role in the unraveling narrative of history.

⁴³ Howard George Hendricks (1924 – 2013) was a longtime professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and speaker for Promise Keepers. Upon his graduation from Dallas, Hendricks accepted the pastorate at Calvary Independent Presbyterian Church (now Calvary Bible Church) in Fort Worth, Texas. An opening on the seminary staff led Hendricks to begin teaching twice per week in the fall of 1951. After one year on staff, Hendricks resigned his post to pursue a doctorate at Yale University. However, the founder and President of Dallas Theological Seminary, Lewis Sperry Chafer, died and the new President, John Walvoord, asked Hendricks to delay his doctorate and return to Dallas as a teacher. For over fifty years, Howard G. Hendricks was a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, where he taught "Bible Exposition and Hermeneutics" to freshmen. He mentored many Christian leaders, including Chuck Swindoll, Tony Evans, Joseph Stowell, Robert Jeffress, Chip Ingram and David Jeremiah.

⁴⁴ Poythress, Vern S. (1999). *God Centered Biblical Interpretation*, p. 109. P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey.

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- **Modern context:** Poythress calls interpreters to understand Scripture as "what God is saying now" to the individual as well as to the modern church.⁴⁵

David L. Barr states there are three obstacles that stand in the way of correctly interpreting the biblical writings: We speak a different language, we live approximately two millennia later, and we bring different expectations to the text.⁴⁶ Additionally, Barr suggests that we approach the reading of the Bible with significantly different literary expectations than those in reading other forms of literature and writing.

Why Does it Matter?

With so many modern Biblical scholars using hermeneutical methods that are suspect at best and dangerous at worst, I must agree with Barr that serious scholarship must approach the reading of the Bible in a very different manner than one would while reading other forms of literature. A correct understanding of Scripture requires following correct principles of interpretation. To do otherwise is to succumb to the well-known axiom of "Garbage In-Garbage Out."

Principles of Interpretation

The Protestant Reformation called the church back to the Bible and demanded that it pay attention to the plain sense of Scripture. For centuries the fourfold sense of Scripture had all but closed up the meaning and message of the Bible. The Reformers reinstated the literal, or clearly intended, meaning of Scripture as the only legitimate interpretation. This approach depends heavily on a grammatical study of the text and has the invaluable advantage of heeding what is actually written—a procedure which modern schools of hermeneutics have all but given up.

Context. The context of a passage is both immediate and remote. That is, it is in the surrounding verses and chapters of the text being studied, but it is also in related passages in other books, especially by the same writer. The proper understanding of a text is always obtained by seeing it in its context.

Scope. The scope of a passage sets the boundaries of what the writer intends to say or teach in it. This will often be the key to understanding a difficult expression or text. Taking note of the writer's aim in writing the passage, and setting the text under consideration in its proper place in accomplishing that aim, will help the interpreter grasp its meaning.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121 -122

⁴⁶ *New Testament Story*, Wadsworth Publishing, 1995, pg. 15.

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Language. Morphology (the form of words), lexicology (the meaning of words), and syntax (the relationship of words in a sentence or clause) are vital to the understanding of any text. The rules of grammar and the Scripture's usage of language are indispensable to the interpretation of the word.

Figures of Speech. Figures of speech are too often neglected in Bible study. Failure to identify them and give them their natural force often leads to error. E. W. Bullinger's great work on the subject should be on every Bible interpreter's bookshelf. It should be noted that figurative language often occurs in passages that demand a literal interpretation. If I say, "Jim ran off like a frightened deer," I mean that he literally ran off. The presence of the figure *simile* does not alter the literalness of his running off.

Typology. The Bible identifies certain things, people, and events as typical. That is, beyond their place in Old Testament history they foreshadow the realities of the gospel. The ceremonial rites and laws of Israel portrayed the gospel and have been fulfilled by it. They have therefore a unique place in Bible interpretation, but they must never be used to establish a doctrine that cannot be established by the plain statements of Scripture.

Symbolism. Symbols, especially in prophetic passages, must be interpreted as the Bible itself indicates (e.g., Jer. 1:11–16; 24:1–10; Ezek. 37). And it should be noted that the interpretation of a symbol is literal, not symbolic. For example, when Rev. 17:9 tells us that the seven heads of the beast are seven mountains, the mountains are actual mountains, not a further symbol whose meaning we are left to discover (yet even the acute prophetic scholar B. W. Newton fails to observe this in his treatment of the passage).

Poetry. Poetry has its own peculiarities. Insisting on treating poetry as plain prose will not lead to the Scripture's meaning but will obscure it. Learning the features of Hebrew poetry will open the word of God in a wonderful way to the careful student.

Historical Interpretation. Scripture is historically and culturally mediated. That is, God dipped His pen in actual history to give us the Bible. He did not drop it complete out of heaven. The historical background of the writer and those whom he addresses will be of real help in establishing his meaning. Here the study of introduction is important.

However, we must not carry this emphasis on historical setting too far. The Bible is historically and culturally *mediated* but it is not historically and culturally *conditioned*, as most modern interpreters insist. By *conditioned* they mean that it is locked in its own time and place in history, that it is a product of its time, that its meaning for us depends on

e.g. For example

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our ability to translate its ancient forms (and myths) into a modern equivalent. This has been the general procedure of modern hermeneutical methods.

Rationalist critics employed a *grammatical-historical* method allied to literary criticism. Their evolutionary view of the history of the religion of the Bible governed their approach.

Liberal critics, following Friedrich Schleiermacher and his consciousness theology, adopted *romanticist hermeneutics* to discover, not what the written words of the Bible actually mean, but what they mean *for me*. In other words, the reader's response took the place of the writer's intent.

Martin Heidegger's early writings led to a school of interpretation that tried to get inside the mind of the writer to discover what he meant. Heidegger's later writings produced what is called *The New Hermeneutic*. This does not try to get inside the writer's mind but inside his *world*. The idea is that it is only by understanding the world projected by a Bible book that we can understand it. This is the adaptation of Form Criticism* to hermeneutics.

All these methods do two things. First, they fasten on to something that is in itself a legitimate idea—historical background, the writer's purpose, the need to apply the message personally—and blow it out of all proportion so as to pervert it. Second, they fail to come to grips with what is actually written.

Dealing with what is actually written is the great task of all true interpretation. That is how the Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles dealt with the Scriptures. Any hermeneutical approach that fails here cannot do justice to Scripture.⁴⁷

Oh, how the modern Church needs a new Reformation! Yea, Verily, Amen!

⁴⁷ Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, pp. 208–210.