

Hermeneutics 101: How to Interpret the Bible

1. What is Hermeneutics?

- a. Greek: 'To explain or interpret.' See John 1:42; 9:7; Heb 7:2; Lk 24:27.
- b. Simply stated, 'hermeneutics' is the study that helps us read, understand, and apply Scripture properly. It includes everything from exegesis to application/contextualization.
- c. *Why is it important? What is our aim/goal?* See 2 Tim 2:14-17 and 2 Tim 3-4.

2. The Bible and Hermeneutics.

- a. In order to be *biblical* (=true to Scripture), our *reading* and *application* (=hermeneutics, interpretation) must reflect and do justice to what Scripture is. *What is it?*
- b. *Scripture is God's Word written, over time, through the agency of human authors.*
 - i. *God's Word written.*
 - ii. *Through the agency of human authors.*
 - iii. *Scripture is given to us over time.*

3. The 'Big Picture' of Biblical Interpretation.

- a. ***The Three Horizons of Biblical Interpretation*** (=Context, context, context).
 - i. ***The Textual Horizon*** (=We start with any text).
 - ii. ***The Epochal Horizon*** (=Where are we in the unfolding story of God's plan?).
 1. Scripture does not come to us all at once (=progressive revelation).
 2. As we read any text, we must locate it in its place in redemptive history. It is *not* necessary to be precise as to what the epochal differences are in Scripture. People disagree on this. Obviously the most obvious epochal division is between the OT and NT. But there are also other divisions that we can make (see Matthew 1):
 - a. *Genesis 1-11* (=creation, fall, and early history).
 - b. *Abraham-David* (=Gen 12-).
 - i. God's election of the nation (=Israel).
 - ii. Covenant promises to Abraham/seed: descendants who will possess a land, live as God's people, be the means of a blessing to all nations.
 - iii. The captivity and bondage in Egypt, which appears to negate the covenant promises to the patriarchs.
 - iv. The redemption from captivity to become the liberated people of God.
 - v. The Sinai covenant as the structure for the life as the people of God.

- vi. Entry into and possession of the promised land.
 - vii. God's rule of the people expressed through the kingship of David.
 - c. *Solomon-Exile*. After Solomon builds the temple, which serves as the focus of God's dwelling among his people, things go drastically wrong through increasing apostasy. In the epoch from Solomon to the end of the OT, there is a progressive decline of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah under judgment. However, during this period the prophets speak of a coming salvation and kingdom of God as a more glorious 'recapitulation' of what has happened in the past history of Israel.
 - d. *Christ (=NT epoch)*. In the NT, Jesus Christ is declared to be the fulfiller of the OT expectations. He is the one of which the history and prophetic expressions of the OT are the foreshadowing.
3. *Note: Epochal differences tied to before/after in Scripture (=progressive revelation) are hermeneutically significant. E.g. Rom 4; Gal 3; Heb 7-8.*
- iii. **The Canonical Horizon** (=What is the meaning of the text in light of whole canon?). It is only when we read texts in light of the canon that we are reading Scripture in a 'biblical' manner – according to its truest, fullest, *divine* intention.
- 1. A crucial way God has glued the diverse epochs of redemptive-history together is by the '*promise-fulfillment*' motif.
 - 2. In addition, *one* of the means by which God's redemptive-historical plan unfolds is by the use of God-given 'typology.' *What is typology?* In the NT there are at least 6 texts that deal with typology (=Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 10:6, 11; 1 Pet 3:21; Heb 8:5; 9:24). In the NT, there is a consistent picture of typology that emerges.
 - a. Typology is symbolism with a *prospective* reference to fulfillment in a later epoch of biblical history. All typology finds its fulfillment in Christ.
 - b. Typology is rooted in *historical* realities (=contra allegory). Typology involves an *organic* relation, in history, between *events, persons, and institutions* in one epoch and their counterparts in later epochs. The early event, person, or institution is the 'type' and the later one the 'antitype.'
 - c. Typology is *prophetic* and *predictive* and thus it is divinely given. It is built off of models and patterns that God has established which is preparatory to what comes later 'in Christ.'
 - 3. *How does typology work?*
 - a. There is a *twofold* character with typology:
 - i. *1st*: A *repetition* of the promise-fulfillment pattern of redemptive history.
 - ii. *2nd*: There is a difference in *quality* between the former acts of God and the new ones, i.e. the fulfillment of God's promises.

- b. *Examples of Typology.*
 - i. Adam (Gen 1-2; Rom 5).
 - ii. Abraham and his seed (Gen 12; Gal 3).
 - iii. Moses (Ex 32-34; Jn 1:1-18; Heb 3:1-6).
 - iv. Israel (son language; Ex 4; Isa 5; Hos 11:1; Mt 2:15; Jn 15).
 - v. Leaders (=prophets [Deut 18:15], priests [Ps 110], kings).
 - vi. Institutions (temple [tabernacle], sacrifices; cf. Heb 8-9).
 - vii. Events (Exodus; 1 Cor 10; Flood [1 Peter 3]).
 - viii. *David* (2 Sam 7; Is 9:6-7; 11:1ff; Mt 22:41f; Acts 2:22-36; Hebrews).
- iv. ***The Three Horizons and the Reading and Application of Scripture.***
 - 1. *Applying Scripture.*
 - 2. *Teaching/Preaching.*

- b. **The 'Big Picture' Grid of the Bible.**
 - i. ***'Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation.'***
 - ii. ***Knowing Overall Biblical History.***

4. Some General Hermeneutical Principles.

- a. **1st: Read the Bible Over and Over Again.** *Recommendation:* At least once a year, read the whole Bible through. See D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway).
- b. **2nd: The Priority of the Original Languages.** If you do not know the originals, then use helps – commentaries, good translations, etc.
- c. **3rd: The Immediate Context takes Precedence over the Remote Context.** *Examples.*
 - i. *John 3:5 and 'Born of Water and the Spirit.'*
 - ii. *Gospels.* Read each Gospel on its own, in its own context. What is the intention of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? E.g. Mark 13 needs to be read in the context of Mark, while Matthew 24-25 the same.
 - 1. Context provides the 'flow-of-thought' of the author
 - 2. Structure/purpose of the author's argument is crucial as well.
 - 3. The smaller the context being studied the more chance for error in interpretation. E.g. Rom 8:28 must be applied in context.
 - 4. Biblical books were written and preserved as complete documents intended to be read as a unit. Context is key in this regard. Possible exception: Proverbs. But even here there is unity.
 - iii. *Context may be viewed in terms of circles.*
 - 1. The immediate context and then book context.
 - 2. The author's corpus of writings context.
 - 3. Epochal context and then canonical context.

- d. **4th: Place the text in its historical, geographical, and cultural setting.** Because there are so many historical referents in the biblical text, it is appropriate to seek relevant background information where such information would be shared by the human author and the first readers. This is a corollary of Scripture written in space-time history. E.g.
- i. *Isaiah 6:1.*
 - ii. *Revelation 3:15.*
 - iii. *How do we get at the historical, cultural, geographical context?* Commentaries, OT and NT Introductions, Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, Archaeological works, etc.
 - iv. *Authorship* is important to know, but not crucial. E.g. Prophets in the OT – Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah. Knowing when they ministered, etc. is helpful. However we do not always know, particularly in the OT, authorship.
 - v. *Date* of the book also gives us help in understanding the meaning of the text.
 - vi. *People to whom the book is addressed* (=audience). E.g. Hebrews.
 - vii. *Issues of geography, politics, history, culture.* Who are Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Herodians, inter-testamental history and politics, etc.
- e. **5th: The importance of becoming a good reader.**
- i. *Literary Form.*
 1. Wisdom literature is not law. To read Proverbs as if it offered judgments in case law is a fundamental mistake.
 2. Or, to read Apocalyptic as mere narrative is a mistake as well.
 3. Or to confuse Jonah with fable is a mistake of literary category. A fable tells a story of animals or other non-human, natural life-forms in order to draw a moral; it does not intermingle with human beings.
 4. We must also learn how to read 'lament' (see Jer 20:14-18).
 5. We need to read narratives well. Most, if not all, are not haphazardly thrown together, but instead are carefully constructed to tell a story. See Mark 4:35-5:43 (=miracle stories); Mt 11-12 (=rest theme and Sabbath); Genesis 38 contrasted with Genesis 39.
 6. Poetry. Hebrew poetry is less interested in rhyme than in parallelism. See Ps 73:21-22 – the second line repeats the first (=synonymous parallelism). You can also find antithetic parallelism (see Prov 14:31).
 - ii. *Literary Devices.*
 1. *Inclusio.*
 - a. Mt 5:3-10 – begin and end with the same reward.
 - b. Mt 5:17; 7:12 – main body of the Sermon begins/ends in the same spot.
 - c. John 1:1-18.
 - d. Genesis 39.

2. *Chiasms*. Two or more lines work into the center and then out again.
 - a. *Matthew 23:13-32* – 7 woes.
 - i. A. 1st (13) – failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.
 - ii. B. 2nd (15) –superficially zealous, doing more harm than good.
 - iii. C. 3rd (16-22) – misguided use of Scripture.
 - iv. D. 4th (23-24) – *failure to discern thrust of Scripture*.
 - v. C. 5th (25-26) – misguided use of Scripture.
 - vi. B. 6th (27-28) – superficially zealous, doing more harm than good.
 - vii. A. 7th (29-32) – heirs of those who did not recognize the prophets.
- f. **6th: Scripture interprets Scripture (=Analogy of Faith)**.
 - i. *More difficult passages must be read in terms of more clear*. E.g. 1 Cor 15:29.
 - ii. *A didactic or systematic discussion of a subject is more significant for that subject than a historical or descriptive narrative*. When a historical narrative reports something as happening in a specific circumstance, one must be careful in drawing theological conclusions from it. Is it merely descriptive or prescriptive? E.g. (1) Acts 2: church having “all things in common;” (2) Acts 2: reception of the Spirit with tongues. Other questions: Should we drive out money changers with whips? Should we preach only in parables?
 - iii. *The NT helps interpret OT texts*.
- g. **7th: Locate the text in its place in redemptive history**. See ‘epochal horizon.’
- h. **8th: Some Thoughts on ‘Words.’**
 - i. *The basic unit of meaning is not the word, but the sentence*.
 1. *Words have a range of meaning*.
 2. *Word meanings overlap (=synonyms)*.
 3. *Word meanings change over time*.
 - ii. *Steps for Performing Word Studies*.
 1. 1st: Select words that require detailed analysis – e.g. propitiation, covenant, justification, etc. Also *hapax legomenon*.
 2. 2nd: Determine the range of meaning for the word during that period of time in which the text is written. How? Use a lexicon.
 3. 3rd: Identify the meaning of the word in the text by tying it to the specific context of the sentence, paragraph, etc.
 4. *Be careful of various word fallacies*.
- i. **9th: Reading Texts (=Syntactical and Grammatical Analysis)**.
- j. **10th: The Importance of Literary Forms (=Genres) for Biblical Hermeneutics**.