



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 130 – THE CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF THE BIBLE

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF, PGS. 113-128
KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL, PGS. 114-122

UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED, ALL SCRIPTURE TAKEN FROM THE NEW KING JAMES VERSION. COPYRIGHT © 1982 BY THOMAS NELSON, INC. USED BY PERMISSION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ Grammatical and historical interpretation, when rightly understood, are synonymous, as we seek to understand the meaning of the words as they are used in their original sense. They were written in a peculiar circumstance, and so we seek to understand those specific historical circumstances that put their stamp on different books of the Bible.
- ▶ The grammatical side looks at the logical and formal aspects in which the Scripture is couched.
- ▶ The historical refers to the material contents of the Bible itself.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ The Word of God originated in a historical way, and can therefore be understood only in light of history. Not everything can be explained by the historical context, as the supernatural revelation of God naturally harbors elements that transcend the limits of the historical. But it does mean that the contents of the Bible are to a great extent historically determined, and that to that extent find their explanation in understanding that history.
- ▶ A word is never fully understood until it is apprehended as a living word – that is, as it originated in the soul of the author.
- ▶ It is impossible to understand an author and to interpret his words correctly unless he is seen against the proper historical background.
- ▶ The place, time, circumstances, and prevailing view of the world and of life in general, will naturally color the writings that are produced under those conditions of time, place, and circumstances.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ Seeking to understand the historical circumstances of the writer makes these demands on the exegete:
- ▶ He must seek to know the author whose work he would explain.
- ▶ It will be incumbent upon him to reconstruct, as far as possible, from the historical data at hand, and with the aid of historical hypotheses, the environment in which the particular writings under consideration originated.
- ▶ He will find it to be of the utmost importance that he consider the various influences which determined more directly the character of the writings under consideration.
- ▶ He will have to transfer himself mentally into the time of the author instead of trying to transfer the author into our time and historical context.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ Next we must examine carefully the personal characteristics of the author or speaker.
- ▶ 1. Who is the author? Some books name their author, others do not. The mere knowledge of his name does not afford the exegete any material aid. He seeks to know the author's character, temperament, disposition, and habits of thought. His profession, family life, position in society, manner, and language all help paint a portrait of who he was.
- ▶ The best and most effective way to get to know an author is to spend time with his writings.
- ▶ 2. Who is the speaker? We must carefully distinguish between the author of a work and others introduced as speakers. Is it the writer, apostle, or prophet speaking, or is it God? Is it a priest, a prophet, a judge, a Pharisee, a Sadducee...etc.?

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ Social Circumstances help us place the author in an arena with his contemporaries. This may be geographical, political, religious, or ethnic considerations – Jews/Gentiles, Jews/Samaritans, nations, kingdoms, regions,. Etc.
- ▶ Some circumstances are particular in regard to the intended audience – who is the hearer of what has been written.
- ▶ The authors also had some purpose in mind as to why they were writing, therefore, the knowledge of the end he had in mind will not only aid in understanding the book as a whole, but also illumine the details.
- ▶ It is not always easy to determine the object of a writing. In some cases the interpreter will have to depend upon ecclesiastical or academic tradition that is not always reliable, but should be received with reserve.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ The time of life, special circumstances, and frame of mind in which an author writes as important considerations.
- ▶ How can we understand the lamentations of Jeremiah without a knowledge of the plight of Jerusalem?
- ▶ It is impossible to interpret the touching elegy of David on the occasion of Saul and Jonathan's death, except in light of his profound reverence for the anointed of the Lord and his great love for Jonathan.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ Helps for Historical Interpretation
- ▶ 1. Internal – the principal resources for the historical interpretation of Scripture are found in the Bible itself. In distinction from all other writings, it contains the absolute truth, and therefore its information deserves to be preferred to that gleaned from other sources.
- ▶ This reminder is not superfluous in light of the fact that many seem inclined to give more credibility to the voices of antiquity or archaeology rather to the infallible Word of God.
- ▶ The believing and conscientious expositor will ask first of all, “What does the Bible say?”

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ For example:
- ▶ In 2 Chron. 30:1, King Hezekiah commands the keeping of the Passover. If the interpreter desires more light on this feast, he should not turn to Josephus or other historians, but to passages of Scripture that announce and explain the Feast. The ways in which later Jews observed the Passover included traditions, additions, and elements not originally intended or given by the Lord through Moses.
- ▶ In Judges 13:5 we learn from the angel that Samson was to be a Nazarite. But what was a Nazarite? The answer is found in Numbers 6.
- ▶ Zephaniah pronounces judgment on those that swear by “Milcom” and other Scriptures identify him as a god of the Ammonites who was served by human sacrifices.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ Helps for the Historical Interpretation
- ▶ 2. External – if the expositor has exhausted the resources of Scripture and still needs further information, he should turn to historical resources at hand.
- ▶ This includes writings from the same time period that may help to understand the context or language, as well as other historical accounts of the times from outside of Scripture, like Josephus, and others.
- ▶ The History of Herodotus is valuable for study of the Persian period, but he is not always reliable.
- ▶ The Talmud and writings of the Rabbis also help us see the historical and religious contexts.

Historical Interpretation

- ▶ In the event that a historical or archaeological source contradicts the Scripture, we should hastily conclude that Scripture is accurate and the historical or archaeological account is in error.
- ▶ The only legitimate course in these circumstances is to cling faithfully to the statement of the Bible, and to wait patiently for additional light. It is not uncommon for history and archaeology to confirm a Biblical account, however, we must give priority to the Scriptural account and not lean on history or archaeology to uphold the truth.
- ▶ Next week, Lesson 131 – The Culture and Customs of the Bible (Cont'd)