

Interpreting the Bible Correctly

A. **THE BIBLE IS GOD'S WORD**

As Christians, we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. If God has spoken to us, then we need to be able to understand and interpret what he has said to us. This brings us quite naturally to the issue of hermeneutics.

1. Hermeneutics, in a nutshell, is the theory of interpretation.
2. More specifically, it is the discipline that studies the principles and theories of how texts ought to be interpreted, particularly sacred texts as Scriptures. Hermeneutics concerns itself with the roles and relationships between the author, the text, and the original hearers.

B. **ADDITIONAL DEFINITIONS**

1. **Exegesis**—Literally, “drawing meaning out of.” It is the process of seeking to understand what a text means or communicates on its own.
2. **Eisegesis**—Literally, “reading meaning into.” It refers to imposing a preconceived or foreign meaning onto a text. We want to avoid eisegesis!

* Exegesis involves observation, interpretation, and application.

C. **WHY IS HERMENEUTICS IMPORTANT?**

1. We need hermeneutics to prevent eisegesis.
2. We need hermeneutics to prevent private revelation.
3. We need hermeneutics to provide us with a basic roadmap to the Scriptures.

D. **THE FOUR MAJOR GAPS WHICH MUST BE BRIDGED**

1. The Linguistic Gap—The Bible was written in languages that are not native to us.
2. The Cultural Gap—The customs and cultural contexts of the Biblical writers differ from our own.
3. The Historical Gap—Historical factors may shed light on the meaning of a text.
4. The Geographical Gap—Geographical factors may shed light on the meaning of a text.

E. **THE TOOLS OF HERMENEUTICS**

1. A Good Study Bible/ The Bible in Several Translations
2. A Good Bible Dictionary or Handbook
3. Good Commentaries
4. Internet References
5. Other Theological References such as Concordances

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F. A DAILY PLAN FOR BIBLE STUDY

- Pray and ask God for wisdom.
- Read the introduction in your study Bible of the book that you want to study.
- Read a large section of the book or the entire book if you can so that you will understand what the story is about. Who is the author? To whom is the writer speaking? Where does the story take place? Who are the main characters in the story? What is the main issue being discussed?
- Read a short passage.
- Look up any words that you don't understand.
- Try to explain the passage in your own words.
- Read the study notes in your Bible.
- Read a commentary to help you with dates and background information.
- Discuss the passage with others, especially teachers.
- Know that the Bible is written in different styles to make it easier to understand. Some scripture is literal. For example, most of the historical books are literal. The Bible also is filled with parables. Jesus spoke using parables, stories that get a point across. Some scripture is symbolic. An object is used to represent something else. Revelation contains a lot of symbolism.

BIBLE STUDY IS A LIFELONG PROCESS! NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU KNOW THERE WILL ALWAYS BE MORE TO LEARN.

G. INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES (Some examples)

1. Read the following story. What are the hermeneutical issues here?

The story is told about the well meaning but foolish young Christian who wanted guidance from God. He prayed that God would lead him through his Word, and then closed his eyes, opened his Bible and put his finger on the page. "Judas went out and hanged himself." Troubled, he repeated the practice. "Go and do likewise." Extremely agitated at this point, he prayed and tried it one more time. "What you do, do quickly," he read!

2. Don't get too eager to dive into Hebrew and Greek.

The Hebrew and Greek languages are important for exegetical study because these are the original languages of the Old and New Testaments, respectively. We must be careful, though, to treat these languages as "normal languages" that are subject to rules of context, grammar, logic, etc. In other words, when we appeal to the Hebrew or Greek, we must not do so uncritically.

- a. You have probably heard many preachers refer to the Greek word *agape*. What does *agape* mean?

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- b. Our word “dynamite” is etymologically derived from the Greek word *dynamis*, meaning “power” or “miracle.” The word is found, for example, in Romans 1:16; “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the **power** of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.” Analyze the following statement: “The gospel of Jesus Christ is the dynamite power of God.”

3. Analyze the following statement: WHY ARE FIRE ENGINES RED?

They have four wheels and eight men;
 Four plus eight is twelve;
 Twelve inches make a ruler;
 A ruler is Queen Elizabeth;
 Queen Elizabeth sails the seven seas;
 The seven seas have fish;
 The fish have fins;
 The Finns hate the Russians;
 The Russians are red;
 Fire engines are always rushin’;
 So they’re red.

H. INTERPRETING A PASSAGE: SOME BASIC QUESTIONS

1. What do the words mean?
2. How are the words used?
3. What is the context in which the words are used?
4. What is the historical, cultural, and geographical setting?
5. Does the interpretation make sense? Is it logical?
6. Is there a precedent for the interpretation?
7. Does the interpretation cohere with other Scriptures?
8. Is the interpretation a logical consequence of what is already known?

I. GENRE

Definition: A term that refers to different types or varieties of literature or media. In the interpretation of texts, particularly the Bible, most exegetes agree that identifying the genre of the text to be interpreted is crucial and that the text must be understood in light of the common conventions that typified that genre at the time of its writing. Thus, poetry is not to be interpreted in the same manner as historical narrative, nor is prophecy read in the same manner as an epistle (letter).

J. SOME EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT GENRES IN THE BIBLE:

Old Testament Narratives, The Law, The Psalms, Wisdom Literature, The Prophets, Gospels, Parables, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation.

- A narrative is a story.
- The Law generally refers to the first five Books (Torah or Pentateuch).
- The Book of Psalms is poetry.
- Wisdom Literature includes books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and parts of James.

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- Prophecy refers to a speaking forth. Prophets were messengers for the Lord who enforced the covenants.
- A Gospel (meaning good news) is an account of the life and teachings of Jesus.
- A parable is a short, simple story meant to teach a lesson.
- The Book of Acts provides us with the history of the Early Church.
- Epistles are letters, generally written to a particular congregation.
- Revelation is apocalyptic literature.

K. EXAMPLES AND EXERCISES FROM DIFFERENT GENRES

1. Read Proverbs 22:6. Is this promise absolute? Read Proverbs 1:33. Do not some believers experience suffering because of their faithfulness to God? Read Proverbs 10:3-4? Is all poverty due to laziness?
2. Read Romans 10:9-10 and Acts 16:29-31. Are these promises absolute? How are these verses different from Proverbs 22:6?
3. Read Isaiah 11:6-9 and 35:8-10. In these two passages it is evident that we have a problem if we interpret the passage *literally*. In the first passage wild beasts are present in the messianic age, living peaceably with the rest of creation. In the second passage wild beasts are not present. Is there a contradiction here?
4. Read Jonah 3:4, 5, and 10. Does the lack of divine judgment make Jonah a false prophet?
5. Read Matthew 7:7-8. Do these verses signify different kinds of prayer or different intensities of prayer?
6. Read Malachi 1:2-3. Does the love/hate language bother you? What about the language of Luke 14:26?
7. Read Psalm 137:8-9. What's up?
8. Read Matthew 23:24, Psalm 22:14, 2 Samuel 1:23, and Genesis 22:17. What literary device is being used in these passages?
9. Read Leviticus 24:19-20. Does this apply to us today? How do we determine what in the OT applies to us and what does not?

L. FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*.
2. Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*.
3. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*.
4. Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
5. Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*.