

Hermeneutics

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

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Historical-Grammatical Method

The Historical-Grammatical Method of interpreting Scripture uses the author's historical context, grammar and the analogy of Scripture (analogia scriptura) to determine the meaning of the passage. Remember these two maxims.

FIRST MAXIM - The author's context must control interpretation!!

Why? - Because the message was given to a specific audience, at a specific time for a specific purpose. The message given speaks to the same issues of humanity we have today, despite our technological advancements.

SECOND MAXIM - No Biblical passage can have two conflicting, or contradicting, interpretations.

Why? - Because it is impossible for God to contradict Himself. God would then be wrong, and not perfect, and therefore, not God.

RIGHT WAY TO INTERPRET

1. Since the Bible is written by human beings (WE are NOT denying supernatural inspiration here), it must be treated as any other human communication in determining the meaning intended by the writer.
 - a. Base the study on historical, physical and cultural settings.
 - b. Research each unclear and important word or phrase.
 - c. Analyze the sentence (the basic unit of thought), paying particular attention to structure and verbage. This includes grammar, word order, pronouns, verbs (tense, voice, mood), adverbs, adjectives and objects. Go to our Quick Grammar Review for a refresher!
 - d. Examine the immediate context: the passage as a whole; the book as a whole.
 - e. Identify figurative language and determine its literal, intended meaning.
 - g. Use the parallelism of Hebrew poetry to gain insight into meaning.
 - f. Interpret parables strictly according to the special principles required by this type of literature.

Find the single meaning of the parable, what is the one central lesson the speaker/writer is teaching and communicating.

Find the context of the parable: intended audience, timing, context of parable.

Find the relevant details (not all the details are relevant to the meaning)

Find the irrelevant details (Yes, there are some!)

2. Since Scripture is God-breathed and true in all its parts, the unity of its teachings must be sought, and its supernatural elements recognized and understood.

a. Use the parallelism of Hebrew poetry to gain insight into meaning. Compare Scripture with Scripture for light on each passage, and discover the unity of its teaching.

b. Establish the coherence of revealed truth. It is impossible for God to contradict Himself, so there are NO true Bible contradictions. Seek unity within the immediate context and then move out from there.

c. Since we hold the Bible is God-breathed and true in all its parts, when a statement appears to be in error, we are committed to seek an explanation.

d. To understand predictive prophecy in Scripture, faithfully observe Biblical guidelines.

Seek meanings of symbols in immediate context. Many New Testament symbols have their meaning in the Old Testament. (See Revelation 10:7)

Predictive prophecy was to deal with the issues of our hearts, just as much as dealing with future events.

3. Since Scripture is God-breathed, it is absolute in its authority for doctrine and life.

a. Every teaching of Scripture is to be received universally, unless the Bible itself limits the audience, either in the context of the passage itself or in other biblical teaching. Previous revelation is superseded by later revelation in the written Word.

b. God desires the response of faith and obedience to both the direct teachings and the principles of Scripture.

WRONG WAY TO INTERPRET

In opposition to the Historical-Grammatical Method is the fourth century teaching of Origen called the "Quadrige". The "Quadrige" was based on Greek philosophy such as Plato's allegories and Origen used this method of interpretation on the Scripture. Origen taught that each passage simultaneously has a four-fold method of interpretation (hence the name Quadrige). The four-fold methods are as follows:

Literal (plain-sense meaning)

Moral (tropologic) - moral lesson which the passage is trying to teach.

Mystical (allegorical) - some hidden, underlying meaning, usually symbolic or figurative. Attach meanings to the symbols.

Prophetic (analogic) - foreshadow of future events, prediction of future events.

[An example might be "Jerusalem": Literal - city of Jerusalem; Moral (tropologic) - the human soul; Mystical (allegorical) - the Church; Prophetic (analogic) - the heavenly city. This method of interpretation leads to subjectivism and heresy. Beware!]

Hebrew Poetry

Hebrew poetry comprises almost 50% of the Old Testament. Hebrew poetry differs from English poetry in that the emphasis is on parallel thoughts, where in English poetry the emphasis is on rhyme and meter. This correspondence of thought in Hebrew poetry is called parallelism. It is the distinguishing mark the Hebrew poet. Each line has a correspondence with the lines of poetry which surround it. It is up to the reader to make the connections between the lines of parallel thought. The parallel thought is redundant to us, but is important to see the correlation in the thought in order to understand its meaning. This is true in the New Testament, even though written in the Greek language, is full of Hebrew thought forms and parallelisms.

Types of Hebrew Parallelisms:

Synonomous Parallelism - an idea is expressed a second or third time. See example of Proverbs 1:2-9. Note the theme of the passage, the value of wisdom, and the repetition of the theme.

2 To know wisdom and instruction, To discern the sayings of understanding. 3 To receive instruction in wise behavior, Righteousness, justice and equity; 4 To give prudence to the naive, To the youth knowledge and discretion, 5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel, 6 To understand a proverb and a figure, The words of the wise and their riddles. 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction. 8 Hear, my son, your father's instruction And do not forsake your mother's teaching; 9 Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head And ornaments about your neck.

Synthetic Parallelism - the poet adds to the original concept. See example below of Psalm 1:1-3. Note the theme of the passage, the blessedness of righteousness, and the building upon the original concept.

1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

Antithetic Parallelism - ideas are contrasted. See example below of Proverbs 12:1. Note the theme of the verse is the contrast of loving discipline as contrasted to the person who does not. The word "but" is a dead give-away in English as it is in grammar an adversative!

1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, But he who hates reproof is stupid.

Emblematic - the poet uses pictures to express his thought. Note the picture of the gold ring the nose of a pig. The gold ring is out of place at first glance. You would also think a women's physical beauty would also reflect an inner beauty. Not so! Hence the proverb!!

22 As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, So is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion.

Some concluding thoughts:

Hebrew poetry has a context in which to interpret it. Find the background of the author, the issues and history which surround his time and use that in the interpretive process.

Because poetry's nature is figurative, it does NOT mean it is obscure. The interpretive process is the same for any Biblical literature. Follow the guidelines found on the Hermeneutics page.

Interpretation takes prayer! Interpretation takes thought! It takes focus! It takes time! Consistent use of the principles will yield their fruit over time, effort and patience.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

Revelation 10:7....but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets.

APPROACHES TO INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Idealist- the idealist view removes the correlation of symbolic language of Revelation with any future events. It sees the book representing the constant struggle for supremacy of good over evil. This view usually arises from an anti-supernatural position of biblical prophecy.

Historical - the Historical view interprets Revelation as the symbolic history of the "Church" from apostolic times to the return of Christ and judgment. It denies a literal Thousand Year Reign of Christ, and makes the predictions more general in their application through history. This view can lead to subjectivism and widely differing opinions as to the meaning and fulfillment of the symbols.

Preterist - the preterist view limits the predictions of Revelation to the first century, to the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor and has its fulfillment in the Jewish Wars and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This view is currently popular with the post-millennial position. It dates the writing of Revelation by the Apostle John before 70 AD. Of course this clashes with the Ane-Nicene Writers who place John's authorship between 81-95 AD, as Irenaeus states.

Futurist - (this is our view) the futurist view recognizes that Revelation arose out of Christian persecution in the first century, but that the majority of the book describes in detail future events (with some parallels to the present persecution of the first century church) to include: the Great Tribulation, the Anti-Christ, the Beast and False Prophet, the Plagues and Judgment, the Second Coming of Christ, the Resurrections (in their respective order), the Binding of Satan, the Thousand Year Reign (the Millennium), the release of Satan, the Final Confrontation (Gog and Magog), the Great White Throne Judgment, the Lake of Fire, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

DATING REVELATION

Eusebius' The Church History of Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter XVIII

Chapter XVIII. The Apostle John and the Apocalypse.

1 It is said that in this persecution the apostle and evangelist John, who was still alive, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos in consequence of his testimony to the divine word.

2 Irenaeus, in the fifth book of his work *Against Heresies*, where he discusses the number of the name of Antichrist which is given in the so-called *Apocalypse of John*, speaks as follows concerning him:

3 "If it were necessary for his name to be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been declared by him who saw the revelation. For it was seen not long ago, but almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian."

4 To such a degree, indeed, did the teaching of our faith flourish at that time that even those writers who were far from our religion did not hesitate to mention in their histories the persecution and the martyrdoms which took place during it.

5 And they, indeed, accurately indicated the time. For they recorded that in the fifteenth year of Domitian Flavia Domitilla, daughter of a sister of Flavius Clement, who at that time was one of the consuls of Rome, was exiled with many others to the island of Pontia in consequence of testimony borne to Christ.

This excerpt demonstrates the validity of the late date of the *Book of Revelation*. Dionysius' argument of stylistic differences between *Revelation* and *John's Gospel* don't measure up as the subject matter and literature type differ dramatically. The traditional date of *Revelation* is during the reign of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) as attested to by Polycarp and Irenaeus. Polycarp was the author's pupil and was martyred in Smyrna. Any other claims of earlier dates (before the fall of Jerusalem) lack the Classical evidence to back the claim.

Narrative, History and Epistles

Guidelines for Interpreting Narrative and History

History and Narrative is actually the simplest form of Biblical literature to interpret. It is straight forward because it is usually the description, and sometimes commentary, on Classical events in the Bible.

The rules apply consistently. Know the author's context (history, geography, culture), know his purpose for writing the book (for example John 20:30-31 clearly states the author's purpose in writing the Gospel), analyze the thought structure (chapters, paragraphs, sentences, grammar, words) and seek the unity of the passage with its surrounding context.

Avoid quick judgments upon the meaning and prayerfully consider all the evidence before confirming the passages' interpretation.

Seek the ordinary meaning of the language, unless absurd to do so.

Identify the literary style of the language.

Seek the single intended meaning by the author.

Guidelines for Interpreting Epistles

1. Pray for Wisdom.
2. Know the author's history, context and circumstances. Know the audience.
3. Study the grammar.
4. Identify the issue(s) that the author is addressing. (e.g. 1 Corinthians is written to address a variety of topics brought to Paul by Chloe's people 1 Corinthians 1:11, and Paul's answers are delineated by "Now concerning..." as he begins certain sections of the epistle.)
5. Identify the single intended meaning of the author. Write it down.
6. Ponder this for a while.

Go back to step #1

Parables

Parables are true-to-life stories designed to teach a truth or answer a question. When Jesus spoke in parables it was also to hide the truth from the unresponsive in the audience (both then and now).

Guidelines for interpretation:

Start with the immediate context of the parable.

What was the occasion for telling the parable? Is the meaning of the parable given in the immediate context (sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't)?

Identify the central meaning. Remember, seek the single intended meaning of the author. (Usually can be summed up in one sentence)

Identify irrelevant details. Not every detail is relevant to the central meaning. By know the central meaning, one can identify the details which have no bearing on the meaning of the parable.

Identify the relevant details. This will be easier when the other steps are accomplished in order.

Compare parallel and contrasting passages. Sometimes Jesus would tell the same parable, but change some elements(s) in it. Jesus might vary the parable according to His audience, or the timing in His earthly ministry.

Base interpretation on the clear, literal passages after prayerful diligence.

AN EXERCISE - Luke 7:36-50

36 Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, 38 and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 "When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." 44 Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 "You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. 46 "You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. 47 "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 Then He said to her, "Your sins have been

forgiven." 49 Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" 50 And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Who were the Pharisees? What they did? What they believed? Why they opposed Jesus? How did one become a Pharisee? Etc...). Obviously, the disciples are there too, or at least some of them. A prostitute came in uninvited to see Jesus (What were the customs of the times for invitations and visitation?). She wept at His feet and dried His feet with her hair. (The feet were the dirtiest part of the body at that time.). The reaction of Simon and his friends was obvious and the occasion led into Jesus giving the Parable of the Two Debtors.

IDENTIFY THE CENTRAL MEANING

The central meaning is given in the parable in verse 47. Be careful here as you might miss the whole point. Jesus' shows us that Simon thought himself a "little sinner" (50 denarii) and the prostitute a "great sinner" (500 denarii). His central meaning explained is that our love for God (and others) is directly proportional to our acknowledgement of our sin before God and desire for forgiveness. Hence, one who sees themselves as a "little sinner", has little love for God, little love for others (Simon's example of no greeting to Jesus upon His entrance into the house), and a little knowledge of forgiveness. The prostitute, on the other hand, knew she was a "great sinner" (the 500 denarii debt) and needed much forgiveness, seeking it at the feet of her Savior. If Simon had understood the truth about himself, he would know himself to be a "great sinner" (500 denarii debt) and seek the same at the feet of Jesus.

IDENTIFY IRRELEVANT DETAILS

Perfume is irrelevant for the central meaning except that it contrasts with Simon's lack of manners (lack of love) with the prostitute's.

The amount of the debt owed except to contrast the appreciation of its forgiven.

IDENTIFY RELEVANT DETAILS

All the other details in the parable are relevant to the central meaning.

COMPARE PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES

Though there are no other exact passages, the interpreter might want to examine other parables dealing with debt and forgiveness.

Andy's Quick Grammar Review

Questions to Ask Yourself!!

Who or what is the main subject of thought?

What action does the subject do?

Who or what is the object of the action?

How have the parts of the thought been modified by a word or a phrase?

What are the relationships among the various parts of the thought?

How does the key idea or thought relate to those before and after it?

SUBJECTS

Noun - person, place or thing (masculine, feminine, neuter)

Pronoun - take the place of nouns in a sentence: he, she, it, this, that, you, we, they

Phrase standing in place of a noun.

VERBS

Verb - action word

Tense - Present, past (aorist, perfect, imperfect), future

Voice - Active, Middle or Passive

Mood - Indicative or Subjunctive

Imperative Command

OBJECTS

Object - what receives the action (directly or indirectly) from the subject.

Direct Object (singular or plural?)

Indirect Object (singular or plural?)

MODIFIERS

Adjectives - modifiers of nouns

Adverbs - modifiers of verbs

PREPOSITIONS

Stand before nouns/pronouns showing a relationship of that noun/pronoun to some action or state, or some other word in the sentence

Direction: up, from, through, out of, into, unto, to, up to, along, down, upon, throughout, beyond, to the side of, from, around, about, toward

Relation: in, by, in exchange for, for, besides, as, for, against, in respect to, after, in the time of, according to, with reference to, after, contrary to, in behalf of, concerning, about, pertaining to, instead of, on behalf of

Position: on, in, at, among, within, upon, by, before, over, down, from, beside, over, under, above, next to

Agency: by, in

Means: through, by means of, with

Cause: because of, on account of

Association: with

Purpose: for the sake of, for the purpose of, for

CONJUNCTIONS OR CONNECTIVES

Joins sentences, clauses, phrases, words together (coordinate, subordinate or adversative)

Continuative: and, either/or, or, neither, neither/nor, nor

Causal: because, for, for this reason, since

Purpose: for this very purpose, in order that, so as....., so that, that

Comparison: as, as...so, as though, as to, in as much as, how, just as, just as...so, than

Time: as long as, since, until, when, whenever, while

Conditional: if

Emphatic: how, indeed, Oh

Adversative: but, but on the other hand, except, however, indeed, much more, nevertheless, not only...but, also, on the contrary, on the one hand...on the other hand, otherwise, rather, yet

Inference: even so, so, so then, then

Result: so that

Explanatory: for example, in fact, now, that is

Place: so far as, where, wherever

Concession: although, even though, though

Noun Clauses: how, that, what, whatever, which

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