

Hermeneutics

Why are there so many different interpretations? How do we determine which interpretations are faithful to the Biblical account? Much of the disconnect stems from a lack of clearly defined principles of interpretation. Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpreting the Bible. The skillful application of the principles of biblical hermeneutics is the task of the theological discipline of interpretation. ***Interpretation is thus applied hermeneutics.*** That is, your interpretation of the Bible is determined by your hermeneutical principle(s).

Four hermeneutical principles:

1) Allegorical:

An allegory is a story which contains several points of comparison. Examples:

- Old age under the figure of a deteriorating house (Ecc. 12: 3-7)
- Israel as a vine brought from Egypt (Psalm 80: 8-15)
- False prophets in Israel who built flimsy walls (Exodus 13: 8-16)
- Parable of the good shepherd (John 10: 1-16)
- The armor of God (Ephesians 6: 11-17)

All of these are intended to be allegories and recognized as a legitimate way of teaching truth. It is a different story if an interpreter would allegorize a plainly historical narrative in the Bible.

For example: David and Goliath. Allegorical interpretation says that the meaning of the story is that God will conquer the “goliaths” in your life. Such allegorizing transforms the narrative into a springboard for teaching an idea which is different from that intended by the Biblical author. This imposes a meaning on the Bible text that is not there. ***The misuse of the allegorical method influenced the rise of literalism.***

Pros: Multiple writers and even Jesus used allegory to teach truth. Helpful in making application to people.

Cons: Misuse of allegory can disrespect the historical reality and form of the original texts. Assumes a pluralistic meaning of Scripture.

Literal or literalism:

Literalism means giving to language its reasonable and grammatical meaning. A true literalist applies this principle to all Scripture. What does this mean for prophecy? Literal exegesis demands an identical or literal fulfillment. ***Literalism grew from the misuse of the allegorical method.***

Examples:

- According to this principle of interpretation the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7) demands a literal fulfillment. This means that Jesus must reign on David's throne on the earth over David's people forever.
- The earthly reign of Jesus will last for a literal 1000 years (Rev. 20 1-6)

Pros: Takes the Biblical text seriously. Greater clarity because interpretation moves from concrete to concrete. Honors the historical context.

Cons: Complete literalism is impossible which creates inconsistency. Forgets that the Apostles often use an allegorical method of interpretation (Galatians 4:24-31). Does not allow that Jesus provided a new perspective for interpreting the Old Testament. Therefore, literalism can overemphasize the Old Testament instead of the Cross.

Typology or Typological:

Typology believes that "types" (institutions, events, people) are often fully understood only in light of their consequences in later history. Typology or "types" are not fictitious, but real and meaningful in salvation history, e.g., the tabernacle, the Exodus, Abraham, Moses, etc. Typology is based on the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel's prophecy and that the New Testament is a living continuation and completion of the Old Testament.

Examples:

- Jesus is greater than Solomon's wisdom (Matthew 12:42)
- Jesus is greater than David's kingship (Mark 2: 25-28) and Psalm 110
- Jesus is greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6)
- Jesus the "real" Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7)
- Typological relationship between Adam and Jesus (1 Corinthians 15: 45; 47)

In these examples, Jesus is presented as the ultimate reality to which all types, symbols, and messianic prophecies had pointed.

Pros: Applies the holistic principle that Scripture interprets Scripture.

Cons: Can be overused. For example, every mention of water is a reference to Baptism. Difficult for application.

Christological:

This method of interpretation believes that Christ and the New Testament are the Christian's final authority and highest norm for the theological understanding of Israel's history, prophecy, wisdom, and poetry. That is, the revelation of Jesus through the New Testament is the **key** to understanding the Old Testament. In light of the New Testament, the following categories of messianic prophecies can be distinguished in the Old Testament.

1) Direct or rectilinear prophecies

- Messiah's birthplace (Micah 5:2/Matthew 2: 5-6)
- Messiah's Substitutionary Atonement (Isaiah 53/Luke 22:37, Romans 5:19, 2 Corinthians 5:21)

- Messiah putting an end to sacrifice (Daniel 9:26-27/Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:8-9)
 - Messiah's triumphal entry (Zechariah 9:9/Matthew 21:12, 23)
- 2) Succession of prophets and kings until both lines would culminate in the one and only Messiah
- Although the immediate fulfillment of the promised prophet came in Moses' successor Joshua (Numbers 27, Deuteronomy 34) and the immediate fulfillment of the promised king came in David's son Solomon (2 Samuel 7:14, Psalm 132:12), only the Messiah himself would be the greatest Prophet and eternal King, according to the New Testament (Acts 3:22-26; Luke 1:32-33).
- 3) The ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
- Messiah's fulfillment of Genesis 12, 2 Samuel 7, Exodus 19 and Jeremiah 31 and 33 (Hebrews 13:20)

Pros: Views the Scriptures as pointing to and being fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 24:27; 44) Upholds the Bible as the story of salvation.

Cons: Difficult to apply because it requires a deep understanding of Scripture. Can lead to ignoring clear Biblical mandates ("The law does not apply any longer since Jesus accomplished it for me.")

Moralism and Mythology:

Strict moralism and mythology are principles of interpretation that are NOT consistent with saving faith in Jesus.

Moralism:

This method views Scripture only as teaching about how to live a moral life of love and tolerance. A strict application of this method views Jesus as the ultimate example of love, self-sacrifice, acceptance, inclusion, tolerance, etc. While Scripture does provide some moral principles for living, the salvation story of the Bible highlights the activity of God, not man.

Mythological:

Mythology is something that determines the essence of our world and of our existence. Do not think of mythology in terms of something being untrue. This method of interpretation understands Scripture as being the description of reality from the perspective of the author. A strict mythological reading will argue that the author was not inspired by God but simply described reality as they understood it. It is further argued that the understanding of the authors was limited but now through science we can fully understand. For example, the crossing of the Red Sea did not happen in the way it was described. In addition, Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead; his appearance was a way of describing what happened after his death. To summarize, mythology attempts to describe reality but does it in such a way that the stories are more folk tales than actual events.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation:

- Scripture interprets Scripture:

- This means that current events, science, archaeology, culture, reason, and feelings, do not override the Word of God. These are utilized only as tools. They do not interpret Scripture but Scripture interprets them.
- Clear passages interpret unclear passages
 - For example, speaking in tongues. This principle also comes into play when interpreting Biblical Prophecy – especially Daniel 9 and Revelation
- Scripture speaks in two Words: Law and Gospel

<u>Law</u>	<u>Gospel</u>
Kills	Makes Live
Condemns	Forgives
Command “to do”	Invitation “to believe”
Shows our sin	Shows our Savior
DO	DONE
Our works of love for our neighbor	God’s work of love for sinners

Methods of Biblical Interpretation:

Historical / Literary Critical method:

A method of interpretation that presupposes that the Bible is no different than other religious writings and should be treated solely as a human composition and not as divine revelation. This method rejects the principle that Scripture must be its own interpreter; that the Bible IS the Word of God; and that the canonical books of Scripture are inspired by God, are His revelation, and therefore are inerrant.

Adherents to this method believe, 1) The Bible ONLY speaks to the culture into which it was written and not to ours or any other, 2) The supernatural claims of Scripture must be approached with skepticism, 3) The Bible, in its current form, is the result of multiple authors and editors known as “redactors,” 4) As a result of these redactors, the goal of Biblical scholarship and interpretation is to determine which parts of the Bible are Word of God and which are not. This leads to many who claim that the Bible “contains the Word of God,” and not, “IS the Word of God.” 5) Claims that people in the Old Testament like Jonah were not real people but made-up stories to teach moral principles.

Historical Grammatical method:

This method examines the historical setting and context of a passage and seeks to discover the meaning through consideration of the grammar of that text itself. Its aim is to determine the meaning intended by the divine Author of all Scripture, whose agent was the human author with their own way of using words and language. This method operates under the principle that the sentences of Scripture carry a single, simple, unified sense.

This method assumes the literal meaning of the text while also interpreting the text within its literary genre. For example, the historical grammatical method believes that Job and his friends are real people in history. While the Scripture does not record their conversations verbatim, it does record the essence of their conversations within the genre of Wisdom literature and Hebrew poetry.