

Biblical Hermeneutics

“Hermeneutics” is a word often used by seminarians, pastors, theologians, and intellectuals. But what on earth does it mean? Though hermeneutics as a study is an incredibly complicated subject, the definition of hermeneutics is not. As a simple definition, biblical hermeneutics is the science of interpretation of the Bible and the methods of that interpretation.

As the methods of study of an ancient, inspired text written over the span of 1,500 years in multiple languages by dozens of authors from three continents, biblical hermeneutics is understandably a difficult topic. Let’s explore some interesting facts about hermeneutics.

What Is the Study of Hermeneutics?

The word hermeneutics comes from a Greek root meaning “interpreter” or “interpret.” Thus, hermeneutics is an interpretation.

Merriam-Webster defines hermeneutics as “the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible)” and “a method or principle of interpretation.”

Hermeneutics, in general, does not necessarily have to refer to biblical study but could be an interpretation of another story, text, etc. However, the word is most often used in relation to the Bible.

One might call a hermeneutic a mode of interpretation or a specific interpretive lens.

Biblical hermeneutics is about the approaches of looking at the Bible and interpreting what it means. There are many ways of looking at the Bible and interpreting it, thus leading to multiple hermeneutic approaches.

What Is the Purpose of Hermeneutics?

The ultimate goal of hermeneutics is to discover the truths and values in the Bible and what the text truly means. In reality, everyone who approaches the Bible is engaging with a hermeneutic, taking in what it says and making sense of it through their own personal hermeneutic lens.

The goal of hermeneutics as a study, however, is not to look at the Bible with a subjective or tainted lens, as a person might do approaching the Bible on their own, but to try to discern what the intended meaning of the passage is, whether for readers at the time it was written or for us today.

With no context or just a cursory glance, many biblical passages can be incorrectly interpreted and may be taken in potentially harmful ways.

The purpose of hermeneutics is to discover what God wants us to take away.

What's Different about Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics?

Exegesis and hermeneutics—sometimes it felt like my Bible professors used these two words interchangeably. Honestly, there is a very fine line between them.

The simplest explanation of the difference is that exegesis is the act of studying a passage critically and objectively and interpreting the meaning, while hermeneutics is the study of the principles by which the passage is to be interpreted.

Neither hermeneutics nor exegesis, however, should be confused with eisegesis. Whereas someone engaged in exegetical study comes to conclusions based on careful, objective analysis of a text, someone who engages in eisegesis approaches the text with preconceived ideas and attempts to find passages and interpret the text in a way that will support those claims.

Taken out of context, it's possible to justify many terrible things with biblical passages; the Bible contains records of both good and evil deeds and people, after all. It's also easy to completely miss the point of a passage. For example: Philippians 4:13 plastered on sports lockers and inspirational posters as a promise of invincibility to Christians, instead of being used as an example of faith enduring all trials.



What Is the Origin and History of Hermeneutics?

Biblical hermeneutics take place within the Bible itself. Authors of the psalms and the prophets often looked back to the books of the Law and incorporated their own understandings. Differing biblical hermeneutics led to the notorious religious factions Jesus dealt with in the Gospels, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. The groups differed in their interpretation of the Law's teaching on issues such as the afterlife, proper sacrifice, and the study of the Law itself.

As noted above, biblical hermeneutics were in effect even in the time of the psalmists and prophets, and continued with various Jewish sects up to the time of Jesus.

The history of hermeneutics, hermeneutical debates, and hermeneutical approaches is so complex that it may be more practical to outline **four major hermeneutical branches that arose**:

1. Literal interpretation. This is most prominent in Protestant circles. However, it has a long history. Literal interpretation was championed by, among others, Jerome (4th century), Thomas Aquinas (13th century), Martin Luther (15/16th century), and John Calvin (16th century). This approach interprets the text according to its plain or literal meaning according to grammatical construction, historical context, and the intention of the author.

2. Moral interpretation. This strove to derive ethical lessons from different parts of the Bible. For example, a document called the *Letter of Barnabas* dating from around the turn of the second century, employed this approach to interpret the Levitical dietary laws not as forbidding eating the flesh of certain animals, but rather as forbidding certain vices associated with these animals.

3. Allegorical interpretation. This interprets the Bible as having a second level of meaning beyond the actual people, places, and events mentioned. Clement of Alexandria and Origen were two adherents of this approach, although Origen embraced a threefold approach to Scripture as literal, moral, and spiritual (allegorical). As is evident from Origen, multiple types of hermeneutics can be synthesized.

4. Anagogical or mystical interpretation. The anagogical approach was more typical to Jewish study than Christianity. This approach interprets biblical events as prefigures of the afterlife.

What Kinds of Hermeneutics Are There?

Today, there are many kinds of hermeneutics, and many of them can be used in tandem. Each emphasizes different approaches to Scripture. Some focus on approaching the Bible from a historical or archeological standpoint, while others see the meaning of the Bible as shifting and adapting with culture.

A hermeneutic approach depends on the goal in mind. As Dr. Ellen White writes for the Biblical Archaeology Society,

“These methodologies range from historical-critical, to post-colonial, to rhetorical, to cultural-critical, to ecological to canonical-critical...For example, if you want to understand how Moses’s life in the wilderness differed from daily life in the ancient Levant, you would use an archaeological/anthropological hermeneutic. However, if you want to understand the gender politics between Miriam and Moses in the wilderness, you would use a feminist or womanist approach to the text.” (read the rest here)

Different hermeneutical approaches can sometimes lead to wildly different interpretations. This is why, even among noted theologians (and perhaps especially here), there is a wide variety of opinion and teaching.

How Do I Engage in Hermeneutics?

We all use some sort of hermeneutic when we approach the biblical text. The question is, are we using a good hermeneutic?

There are three guidelines that will generally contribute to a healthy approach. The first is to assume that the Bible, in general, says what it means. That is, the Bible is generally to be interpreted literally, taking the plain meaning of the passage over a more complicated, esoteric interpretation, unless it’s obviously meant to be symbolic or a figure of speech.

A second tip is to consider the passage in context. What was the historical context? Who wrote it? Who were they writing to, if anyone? Why? What was the cultural context? What was going on at the time?

Finally, it’s essential to interpret the passage within the context of the Bible itself. What verses precede and follow the passage? What is the passage as a whole about? What about the book? Is it referencing a different part of Scripture?

Dr. Dane C. Ortlund of Crossway offers four more tips.

First, read with the assumption that Scripture is coherent. If it’s inspired by God and inerrant, then there are no defects. Thus, if something doesn’t make sense or seems

contradictory, it is due to faulty understanding or lack of context, not biblical error, and probably requires more research.

Second, read any text with an awareness of where it fits within the broader biblical story. Ortlund compares reading a passage out of context to suddenly picking up a novel in the middle.

Third, Ortlund advises reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus. Jesus said that the Old Testament all points to Him (Luke 24:27, Luke 24:44; John 5:39, John 5:46). The Gospels are obviously about Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament points back to Him. Thus, the entire Bible points to Jesus and should be understood through the coming, arrival, redemption, and restoration of Christ.

Finally, Ortlund urges readers to approach the Bible prayerfully, asking God for wisdom.