

# Interpreting the Bible

The theory of biblical interpretation—its goals, methods, principles, and evaluative criteria—is called hermeneutics. This term may sound esoteric and impractical, but, in fact, hermeneutical theory has far-reaching consequences for believers and the church.

Every person who approaches the Bible is operating with some hermeneutical theory. The results of a person's encounter with the Bible will be heavily influenced by the interpretative understandings that person brings to the text. Humans develop their interpretive skills as they learn their first language. Early in acquiring their first language, children learn what it is to misunderstand and to be misunderstood. They learn that interpretations can be right or wrong.

This early insight is the basis of a longstanding assumption in biblical hermeneutics: that a text has at least one meaning and that someone's interpretation of the meaning is right or wrong. That assumption has been challenged in recent years by postmodernists. Persons in small-group Bible studies may not have read any of the postmodernists, but small-group members reflect postmodernist assumptions when they consider every interpretation as good as another. In these subtle ways our hermeneutical theory is modified by the cultural milieu we imbibe without being aware of what has happened. For that reason having an overview of biblical hermeneutics can help Bible students become aware of the hermeneutical principles and assumptions they bring to the Bible every time they read it.

The way we interpret the Bible shares much in common with the way we interpret other texts. But the difference between biblical texts and documents from law, literature, and the sciences is that despite the 66 biblical books having been written by many people over a period of 1,500 years, the Bible claims God as its ultimate author. This fact raises the stakes on reading it and accurately understanding what it says. It is one thing to misinterpret Shakespeare but quite another to misread God. Nevertheless, there has been and continues to be much disagreement over what the Bible means at various points. This encourages us to look at the different interpretative approaches that give rise to a diversity of interpretations, many of which are incompatible with one another.

## **Jesus' Interpretation of Scripture**

An assumption held in common by both Jesus and the religious leaders of His time was that the Hebrew Scriptures were the Word of God. Also held in common were a number of methods of interpreting Scripture: literal, midrash, peshet, and typological. Yet Jesus and the religious leaders interpreted Scripture very differently.

One of the first activities of the risen Christ was interpreting Scripture. As He walked with Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures"

(Luke 24:27). Jesus' interpretation of who He was and His mission in light of the Hebrew Scriptures is the foundation of the church and historically is the factor that created separation between the church and the synagogue.

Jesus' interpretative activity forges a connection between the Hebrew Scriptures and what later came to be called the New Testament. Not only does Jesus' teaching bring the two testaments together, but it provides the key for seeing how they fit together, how they are mutually dependent.

## **Interpretation in the Early Church**

What seems so clear in Luke 24 was not seen clearly by some in the second century. Alongside the Hebrew Scriptures a body of Christian writings was being collected (see 2 Pet. 3:16). By A.D. 140 the relationship between the Hebrew Scriptures and this body of Christian writing began to be questioned. Marcion (c. 85–160), a wealthy shipbuilder from Pontus, came to Rome and sought to use his influence to remove the Hebrew Scriptures from the church. He believed the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures was incompatible with the God revealed in Jesus. Marcion proposed that only some of Paul's letters and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke should be viewed as Scripture.

Marcion forced the church to decide whether to keep the Hebrew Scriptures and how to interpret them in light of Jesus. While Marcion wanted to make the canon considerably smaller, another group, the Montanists, wanted to add Montanist writings to it.

Between these two extremes was a third group that wanted to keep the Hebrew Scriptures alongside Christian writings that had apostolic authority. It was not required that an apostle be an author of a canonical writing but that it be written under the authority of an apostle. Some documents that carried apostles' names were rejected because they were incompatible with apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ.

This apostolic understanding of Jesus Christ came to be an important element in biblical interpretation in the early church. Written documents are often subject to multiple interpretations. They are somewhat like a series of dots on a piece of paper. Numerous pictures can be made by connecting the dots in a variety of ways. A vital question for the early church was how the dots were to be connected.

The Gnostics were taking the Scriptures and reinterpreting them according to their own opinions. Irenaeus (second century A.D.) likened what they were doing to a person taking the beautiful image of a king created by an artist from precious jewels and rearranging the gems into the image of a fox or a dog (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 8:1 [A.D. 180], in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, I:326).

In the face of these distortions of Scripture, Irenaeus formalized an interpretive framework that had been implicit in the church for a number of decades. This framework came to be called the rule of faith. The rule of faith was not something additional to Scripture. It was derived from Scripture and became a template against which to test interpretations.

The rule of faith has taken numerous forms in the history of the church. The Apostles' Creed approximates the rule of faith. Later creeds and confessions of faith have historically functioned in ways similar to the rule of faith. The rule of faith has served both positive and negative functions in the history of biblical interpretation. Positively, it has kept interpretation from going far afield and becoming something that suited only the tastes of the interpreter. Negatively, at times, it has kept the church looking at the biblical text with fresh eyes.

Although the rule of faith was recognized in Alexandria, it did not keep Clement (c. 150–215) and Origen (c. 185–254) from creativity in biblical interpretation. The allegorical method of interpretation flourished there long before the time of Clement and Origen. It was used in Alexandria to interpret both the Greek classics and the Hebrew Scriptures. Clement and Origen used allegory as a way to deal with difficult passages in the Old Testament and to interpret the life and teachings of Jesus. One of the most famous of Origen's allegories is his interpretation of the good Samaritan. Every element in the parable symbolizes something other than itself. Although this interpretation is creative, the question is whether it is what Jesus intended to convey when He told the parable.

Allegory as practiced in Alexandria came under criticism from biblical interpreters in Antioch. The Antiochenes were concerned that allegorical interpretation detracted from the literal truth expressed in Scripture. They believed the spiritual import of Scripture was derived from an accurate, literal reading of the text rather than from interpretations that mapped unrelated spiritual meanings onto the primary sense of Scripture.

Perhaps the most influential biblical interpreter for the next millennium was Augustine (354–430). His first encounter with the Bible was anything but promising. Compared to Cicero, Augustine found the Bible lacking in dignity. Some of Augustine's first reactions to the Bible may have stemmed from the primitive Latin translation he read.

Augustine's early training led him to believe the goal of interpretation was fidelity to the intent of the author as expressed in the text. This being said, there is some irony in the fact that Augustine's conversion was made easier after he heard Ambrose apply the allegorical method in his preaching. As Augustine interpreted Scripture, he did not neglect the literal sense but went beyond it in passages that were ambiguous at the literal level.

Augustine set forth a number of principles that have become part of sound biblical interpretation to the present. He recognized that an interpreter must know the text, preferably in the original languages, and have a broad knowledge of numerous subjects that are a part of biblical content. Augustine recognized that the Bible contains obscure and difficult passages. He taught that the interpreter should begin with clear passages and interpret obscure passages in light of the clear ones.

For Augustine the goal of biblical interpretation is spiritual—nothing less than the transformation of the persons who read and study the Bible. This goal cannot be achieved through a mechanical process. Knowing language and history well are necessary for understanding the Scriptures, but they are not sufficient. The spiritual dimension of the interpreter is integral to

the process of understanding Scripture, but neither is it sufficient. Augustine recognized that biblical interpretation was a task that engaged both the intellect and the heart.

Augustine made a distinction between knowledge of language (*linguarum notitia*) and knowledge of things (*rerum notitia*). In *On the Teacher* Augustine maintained that language (signs) does not provide knowledge but prompts the reader to remember what they already know. In spiritual matters Christ is the teacher and the source of this knowledge. Augustine distinguished between literal signs and figurative signs. The language of Genesis that gives the account of Abraham taking Isaac to Mount Moriah uses literal signs. This same language can be read figuratively as pointing to the death of Christ.

## Interpretation During the Middle Ages

Augustine's model of biblical interpretation influenced Gregory the Great (540–604), a pivotal figure in the medieval era. Gregory began with a literal reading of the text. With this reading as a foundation, Gregory derived the doctrinal (allegorical) and the moral (tropological) import of the passage. This threefold interpretation later added a fourth level, the anagogical, which pointed to the future.

The fourfold approach to biblical interpretation was summarized in a rhyme:

*Littera gesta docet* (The letter teaches facts.)  
*Quid credas allegoria* (allegory, what one should believe)  
*Moralia quid agas* (tropology, what one should do)  
*Quo tendas anagogia* (anagogy, where one should aspire)

We see this fourfold method of interpretation at work in Thomas Aquinas's (1225–74) exegesis of Exodus 20:8–11. In his literal interpretation Thomas made a distinction between the moral import and the ceremonial import of this commandment. Christians are to give time to the things of God. The ceremonial part of the command specifies that time as the seventh day. The allegorical interpretation signifies Christ's seventh-day rest in the grave. The tropological reading calls for Christians to desist from sin and rest in God. The anagogical reading points forward to the eternal rest and enjoyment of God in heaven.

A way of reading Scripture that originated in the medieval era resonated strongly with Augustine's emphasis on the spiritual dimension of Bible study. *Lectio divina* had these steps.

1. Spiritual preparation denotes that Scripture should be approached in an attitude of prayer. The text should be read with a quiet receptivity, listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through the text. Listening is closely related to readiness to act on what is revealed in the passage.
2. Reading Scripture requires close attention to the many details that compose Scripture. The text is to be approached with the expectation that each detail has been put there for a reason and that it is for our spiritual good to attend to these details.
3. Giving careful attention to biblical imagery is important in seeing beyond the words to the realities they convey.

Increased knowledge of the original languages of the Bible was a catalyst for a new era of biblical interpretation and knowledge. Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) is a significant transitional figure. His careful work in developing a series of editions of the Greek New Testament gave him an attention to detail that shifted the emphasis in interpretation from many levels of meaning to a passion for discovering what the author intended in the text. What Erasmus saw in the approach to interpretation of the past troubled him. Creativity of interpretation had the effect of leading readers away from the author's intent. It was almost as if they were playing a game.

## **Interpretation During the Reformation**

In this milieu and in the context of his own spiritual crisis, Martin Luther (1483–1546) moved gradually from the largely allegorical interpretation of Scripture to an approach that sought the historical sense of a passage. Luther caricatured allegorical interpretation as a wax nose that could be shaped by the interpreter rather than having a definitive form of which the interpreter had to take account. Yet even in criticizing allegory, Luther continued to practice it.

Luther's controversy and eventual break with Rome gave focus to another important question in biblical interpretation: In the midst of competing interpretations of Scripture, what is the source of authority? With the crisis occasioned by Gnosticism, the rule of faith was the touchstone for discerning the correct interpretation of Scripture. Now in the crisis with Rome, Luther answered, "*Sola Scriptura!*" Not reason. Not church tradition. Scripture alone.

This does not mean Luther and other Reformers did not value church tradition. They had been shaped by it and continued to be influenced by it. However, they became aware that church tradition had itself been shaped by influences other than Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* was a call to recognize and act on first things first.

John Calvin (1509–64), the leading Bible interpreter of the 16th century, saw that the first purpose of an interpreter is to hear and understand what the author was saying rather than to say what the author should have said. Calvin interpreted Scripture in light of Scripture and stressed the importance of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the text, as an integral part of the interpretative process.

## **Interpretation in the Age of Reason**

An assumption held in common by the majority of exegetes from the 2nd century through the 18th century came to be increasingly abandoned in the 18th century and beyond. The assumption is that God is the ultimate author of Scripture. In the absence of this assumption, both the nature of Scripture and the goal of interpretation began to change.

A number of factors contributed to the change in the way Scripture was seen and interpreted. Both the church fathers and medieval interpreters were guided by the authority of tradition. As noted earlier, the Reformers did not eliminate tradition but criticized it in order to emphasize that Scripture alone is the touchstone of what the church teaches and practices.

In other fields of learning, traditional authorities gradually came into question. Human reason and experience came to be viewed as the sources of knowledge. The explanatory power of Newtonian physics reinforced the belief that revelation was not needed to understand God and the world. The logical progression of this line of thinking was Laplace's assertion that he no longer needed God as a hypothesis to explain anything in the world.

In the 19th century the writings of Charles Darwin (1809–82) strongly reinforced the naturalistic worldview that began to displace the theistic worldview that had been dominant in the West for a thousand years. The Bible was now seen as just a human book, to be studied with the same methods used to study any other human document. The goal of interpretation now was to understand what the human authors were saying and to reconstruct the process by which they came to write the documents.

It is not that all of a sudden new discoveries were made about Scripture. The earliest interpreters of Scripture were aware of different accounts of the same events. Within their frame of reference, these differences were not that significant and in themselves did not call into question Scripture's self-attestation as the Word of God. These same observations made from the perspective of naturalism, however, were seen as confirmation that Scripture was just a human document.

## **Interpretation Today**

From the late 19th century to the present, the academic study of Scripture has seen a proliferation of methods used to understand Scripture. Some sought to reconstruct the history of the document under study, including the history and motives of the community from which the document was composed. Another broad approach was less concerned with the historical, cultural, and religious background of the document and gave attention to its literary form. For many scholars who took this approach, the history behind the document and the historicity of the events of the narrative were of minimal interest.

While historical-critical biblical interpreters differ from traditional interpreters on the issue of the nature of Scripture, they hold in common the belief that the goal of interpretation is to understand what the author(s) intended to say. The fact that someone can never establish this with certainty does not mean the goal is not valid and important. In recent years this assumption has been called into question by postmodernists. It is interesting that philosophers as different as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and W.V. Quine (1908–2000) have come to this conclusion. Both Derrida and Quine acknowledge that meaning is a useful pragmatic concept. Yet they, for different reasons, hold that the meaning in semantics or hermeneutics lacks explanatory power. Our commonsense understanding of meaning leads us to give it the kind of reality that physical objects have, but meaning as a kind of entity does not exist.

The implication of this position for biblical interpretation is not only that we are unsure when we have the correct interpretation of a text but also that there is no correct interpretation of the text. There is no authorial intent to be wrong or right about. As different as the starting points for Derrida and Quine are, what they share in common is an attempt to account for language within a naturalistic worldview. The conclusions they come to from

very different directions may indicate the bankruptcy of naturalism as a research program for understanding human language and developing hermeneutical theory that takes account of the complexity and richness of human language.

Adapted from Steve Bond, "Bible Hermeneutics," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [online, cited 1 September 2010]. Available from the Internet: [www.mystudybible.com](http://www.mystudybible.com).

All Scripture quotations are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Holman CSB®, and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.