

HERMENEUTICS

The Science of Bible Interpretation

Part I



I was a Christian for approximately 20 years before I ever heard the word “hermeneutics” and had no idea what it meant nor the importance of it.

A basic definition of “hermeneutics” is the “science of Bible interpretation.” The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the term as “the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible).” Another definition states that “Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation” and it is “a science because there are laws that guide it.” (This reference is from the website www.austinbiblechurch.com; a web address for a PDF file is listed under Part III as a resource. The critical matter to note is that accurate interpretation of scripture requires a disciplined approach using certain rules or methods which enable the Bible student to understand the scriptures and deduce truthful applications that can be determined from the text despite, and perhaps contrary to, preconceptions.

As a young Christian I was blessed to have had the disciplines of daily quiet time, scripture memory and meditation well ingrained in me, but was never really taught how study the Bible in a disciplined manner. I was encouraged to look up cross references and picked up a Vines Expository Dictionary which did help in my understanding, especially of certain words translated from Greek to English in the New Testament that were misunderstood and wrongly applied by some in the churches I attended.

Exposure to commentators like Matthew Henry and John MacArthur and their commentaries are excellent resources, but that still did not enable me to approach bible study in a disciplined manner. And it wasn't until I started teaching the bible, verse for verse, and word for word through a book, like I Peter, Galatians, and Colossians that I began to realize there was much more work to do.

It became apparent very quickly that there were words in the text that created some significant theological challenge to my understanding. This awareness came with the exceedingly uncomfortable conclusion I had been in error in some of my prior interpretations and beliefs. And likewise, that I had communicated error to some I had ministered to, in person, small groups and in Sunday school classes. I had unwittingly violated **II Timothy 2:15** and was very humbled to realize I had not taught my fellow Christians with the degree of accuracy that God expects from teachers, but far worse, I had misrepresented God.

It's valuable to consider that because God gave us His word in human language, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, which have been translated into English, it should be interpreted understanding this. Languages contain rules of grammar, whether we like it or not, and contain things like metaphors, verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. The Bible was also scripted in different literary forms like historical narrative, poetry, straight forward didactic instruction (teaching) and apocalyptic type language most often associated with prophecy. Thus, understanding the language of a book can be important as it will determine in some cases whether the text should be interpreted “literally” or “literarily.”

Perhaps an example or two would be helpful. The word “Thousand” or “Thousands” is used in the singular and plural in phrases like “**Thousands of Ten Thousands**” (**Genesis 24:60**) in regard to a blessing spoken to Rebekah; to “**thousands**” (**Exodus 20:6**) in reference to God’s blessing to the descendants of those who are obedient to Him; in reference to time as Peter writes “...**with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day**”.

Other examples appear in the poetry books, like **Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon** which contain numerous metaphors and similes to express the writers’ thoughts. For example, **Psalms 50:10** speaks to the Lord’s ownership of His creation as “**For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills.**” Or note **Songs of Solomon** (verses **4:1; 6:5**) where the writer states “...**Your hair is like a flock of goats that have descended from Gilead**” describing the hair of the woman he loved.

With these references in mind, consider that some have suggested that the Bible should be interpreted “literally” in every instance. However, if someone were to take the foregoing scripture references literally, significant theological issues would instantly emerge revealing the necessity of additional or more effective study methods.

Similar to the above, understanding figurative language becomes much more difficult when interpreting prophetic books like Daniel and Revelation. These books contain apocalyptic language containing numerous symbolic terms which in some cases require additional study or research to determine the exact meaning of the words and intent of the author.

Anyone who prayerfully reads and meditatively considers the truths of scripture as available in a good translation from the original languages (i.e., KJV, NKJV, ESV, NASB, LSB), will glean enough truth to understand the most essential doctrines (i.e., the gospel) and commands in scripture sufficiently to please God if obedient to what they understand.

And with reference to English translations or versions of the Bible, I would not encourage the use of paraphrase versions like the Living Bible or the Message for study purposes. These are somewhat more like commentaries than actual translations, representing the author(s) interpretation of the text. And while it’s possible to glean some beneficial truth from these resources, I do not recommend them for use in study.

In Parts II and III of this series, several suggested rules of hermeneutics will be provided. These rules are profitable for all Bible students but are essential for those who endeavor to teach and preach scripture; specifically Elders who must be able to teach (**I Timothy 3:2**).

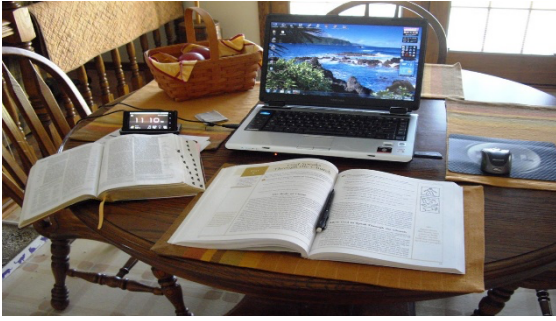
In closing, consider that we have far more biblically based resources available to us today than the first century church and more than most Christians have had until relatively recently. And even with such an abundance available to us, both in books and online, Godliness is more of a matter of the mind, heart and will in fighting the battle of our sin than insufficient biblical information. And while increasingly accurate knowledge is of great value, we all still struggle to obey what we can easily know from scripture, and we know more than we would want to give an account for anyway. I share this so as not to give the impression that all Bible readers and students must be hermeneutical experts in order to obey and please God, but the rules and methods will profit anyone who applies them.

Continued Part II

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Part II



Below is a listing of some basic rules of hermeneutics. Using these rules is a learning endeavor and is truly a work as Paul notes in **II Timothy 2:15**, but is profitable for any Bible student and, in my opinion, incumbent upon anyone taking on the responsibility of preaching or teaching.

These are not listed in any specific order. Some examples have been provided for clarity purposes.

There are many scholars far more eloquent and qualified than myself to expound upon these matters, but I am learning to use these rules and pray they are of value to you.

Pray before and throughout your study for the Holy Spirit's aid to guide you to an accurate understanding of the truth. Pray afterward as you review your conclusions for the Holy Spirit to reveal any erroneous conclusions you may have made. This is not a rule of hermeneutics, but necessary for any study of scripture. We need to communicate with the author to aid in understanding what He meant by what He caused to be written.

- Endeavor to understand something of the historical and cultural background at the time the book was written. For example, the issues of meat sacrificed to idols and the length of women's hair or head coverings as addressed in I Corinthians. Understanding the culture of the time concerning issues like these is helpful.

A good study bible often provides notes relative to the author and time of the writing, background, historical and theological themes and interpretive challenges. The MacArthur Study Bible is an excellent resource in this regard. Provision of such information aids in the hermeneutic principles immediately noted below:

- o Who wrote it? Who was it written to? When was it written?
- What did the words mean at the time they were written?
- What did it mean to the first recipients?
- Resist the temptation to read into the text (what theologians refer to as "eisegesis") something that isn't there, or interpret the text based on personal opinions or things previously heard from others. Almost everyone who has ever read and studied the Bible does this and thus caution is warranted.
- The meaning of words and their repetitive use in multiple passages of scripture. A deeper understanding can often be gleaned from doing word studies alone.

A good concordance like Strongs, with its numbering system, is helpful in seeing how a Greek or Hebrew word is translated into English and used or perhaps translated differently elsewhere in scripture. This can be particularly important where some Greek or Hebrew words are translated into English in different ways in different contexts and based on the version of the English bible being read.

In this regard, resources like the Vines Expository Dictionary or other Greek-English Lexicons, and the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament are helpful in researching the meaning of words from the original languages as translated into English. As an example, John MacArthur notes in his book entitled “Preaching,” that the word “Lion” is used as a metaphor in reference to Babylon (**Jeremiah 4**), Satan (**I Peter 5:8**), and Christ (**Revelation 5:5**). Understanding the context, grammar and type of literature involved can have significant implications for accurate interpretation.

Another example is the Greek word “glossa” translated as “**tongue**” or “**tongues.**” This Greek word is used in reference to the physical organ of the body, to tongues as of fire which appeared at Pentecost (**Acts 2**) or in reference to the spiritual or supernatural gift of languages (Reference **I Corinthians 12-14**). There is another word I think of as a synonym, “dialektos” from which we get our English word “dialect;” “Dialektos” is translated in English as “**language**” or “**dialect**” in the NT (reference **Acts 1:19**).

It's valuable to note that the Greek words “glossa” and “dialektos” are both used in **Acts 2** on the day of Pentecost and reveal specifically that these terms are a reference to a human language or dialect as enabled by the Holy Spirit for primarily evangelistic reasons. In addition, wherever these words appear in the New Testament, they are always used in the context of human language or dialect and never as unintelligible utterances some claim as the supernatural gift of tongues they possess.

This distinction was particularly important to me as a young Christian as I was repeatedly in contact with people who claimed to speak in tongues, but their behavior was inconsistent with the biblical definition and use of the word in scripture.

- Context – of the verse and/or word being studied as encompassed by the preceding and following verses, previous and following paragraphs, chapters and in some cases the book.
 - o Chapter (preceding and following); sometimes our English Bibles put chapter breaks where the flow of thought doesn't naturally break; watch for words like “therefore” at the beginning of a chapter as such wording points to some portion of the previous text.
 - o Another example of context is from the Psalms and Prophetic books. It is beneficial to associate certain Psalms or prophecies (i.e., Isaiah and Jeremiah) with their historical context noted in the Old Testament history books like I & II Samuel, I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

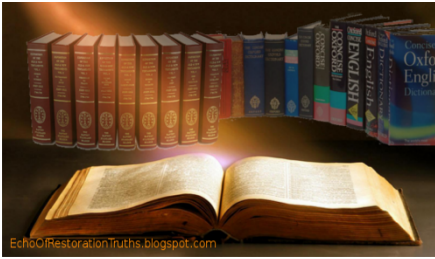
It is suggested that at some point, the Bible be read with a chronological reading plan, or the plan kept as a study resource. Such a plan can be accessed at https://www.blueletterbible.org/assets-v3/pdf/dbrp/1Yr_ChronologicalPlan.pdf. This is helpful toward understanding the context as events, prophecies, and the narrative recorded are interrelated.

Continued in Part III

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Hermeneutic Principles continued.

- Distinguish literal from figurative language (i.e., poetry versus historical narrative)
- Scripture – not experience – determines doctrine; what some refer to as the “Regulation Principle.”

- Use scripture to interpret scripture, also known as the synthesis principle. This is where cross referencing is valuable and word studies that extend beyond the immediate context to other texts where that same word is used. In addition, there are repetitive themes and doctrines taught throughout the Bible. John MacArthur notes: "if you think that a passage is teaching a doctrine taught nowhere else in the Bible and appears contradictory to other things taught in the Bible...you've misinterpreted it. Right? Because scripture will be consistent with itself. Why? One perfect author wrote it all. Who's that...God." Some may refer to this principle using the word "Unity" inferring that an interpretation must be consistent with the rest of scripture, or "Precedent" comparing Scripture with Scripture, examining "Quotations" in light of the current and original contexts (e.g. NT text quoting the OT) - "we must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent". Reference also John MacArthur's sermon on "How to Study the Bible;" see link under Additional Resources below.
- Let the clear interpret the unclear. The New Testament (Jesus and the Apostles) provide the best insight and clarification (commentary) relative to Old Testament writings they quote and often in reference to passages with interpretive challenges like prophecy.
- Grammar is important. In the Greek (New Testament), the Tense, Voice and Mood of verbs can be very influential in adding depth to the meaning. For example, in **Romans 12:2** when Paul writes “**...And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...**” The tense of the verb phrase “**be transformed**” is in the present tense referring to action, or a simple statement of fact that is occurring in the present. It's in the passive voice, which refers to an action done to you or received from another source. And the Mood is imperative which means Paul is writing a command. Thus, Paul is commanding the Christian to allow something to happen to them (be transformed) which can only happen by the renewing of the mind.

The importance of verbs likewise shines light on God's work in salvation versus man's involvement. For example, in **Ephesians 2:5**, Paul writes that “**even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ...**” This verse is referring to a supernatural event where God is active, and man is the recipient of His actions; God “**made us alive together with Christ**” whereas man was completely passive in that event. The same can be seen in **Colossians 1:13** and **2:13** where again God is the One who is active, and man is passive. The verbs alone indicate that man, in his unredeemed spiritual condition, and by his nature, is incapable of making any choice or taking any action resulting in spiritual life (salvation) and God alone is active

in the redemptive process. There are many other such examples, especially relative to salvation.

Ultimately, the challenge for the Bible student, especially for those who have a teaching / preaching gift and endeavor to use it, is to pull out of the text what is there and expose it, to fully interpret and unfold the meaning of the text. This is what some theologians refer to as exegetical, expository teaching or preaching.

A biblical example of this is found in **Luke 24:27** while Jesus is walking on the road to Emmaus with two of the disciples. The verse reads, “**Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.**” It’s interesting to note that the word translated as “**explained**” in this text is from the Greek verb “*diermēneuō*” from which we get our English word “hermeneutics.” Jesus was pulling from and exposing the disciples to what had been written about Him in the scriptures (Old Testament) that were available to them.

In closing, I have never been to seminary, Bible college or pretend to understand all there is to know about Greek, Hebrew, and the finer intricacies of Bible study. That said, God, through the provision of available resources like the blueletterbible.org website, and others listed below, has enabled me to glean much deeper understanding of what the Holy Spirit meant, by what He inspired to be written.

Below is a reference to a few books I would recommend along with some web links to resources that are profitable for study or in detailing hermeneutical disciplines. In addition, consider listening to the sermon by John MacArthur, “How to Study the Bible;” see link under resources.

Additional Resources – Books and Websites

Books

- **Vines Expository Dictionary** (this is also available online through blueletterbible.org)
- **The Englishman’s Greek Concordance of the New Testament, by George V. Wigram**
- **Theological Word Book of the Old Testament (TWOT)**, by Harris, Archer and Waltke, Volumes I and II; Moody Press. Available from Christianbook.com.
- **Preaching** (How to Preach Biblically) by John MacArthur and the Master’s Seminary Faculty. Chapter 10 of the book lists hundreds of references to valuable resources.

Websites

www.Blueletterbible.org

<https://austinbiblechurch.com/sites/default/files/documents/A%20Basic%20Overview%20of%20Hermeneutical%20Principles.pdf>

<https://www.logos.com/grow/biblical-hermeneutics-guide/>

Chronological 1 year Reading Plan

https://www.blueletterbible.org/assets-v3/pdf/dbrp/1Yr_ChronologicalPlan.pdf

Sermon (John MacArthur) – How to Study the Bible

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qvn9YCaXBhs>