

THE WORD WEEK 4 | INTRODUCTION TO HERMENEUTICS¹

INTRODUCTION | Building a Bridge

In this portion of the course you will receive a crash course on hermeneutics and the exegetical process. Though these courses will, at times, feel academic, we must not underestimate their importance. We are talking about *how* we study God’s word. Paul exhorted Timothy to “present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). The word “handling” is a combination of two Greek words: *orthos* and *temnō*. Literally translated, it means “cut it straight.” Some translations render it as “rightly divide.” The idea is that Timothy needed to get the interpretation of God’s word right. He needed to work diligently to make sure he did not misrepresent God, lest he have something to be ashamed of.

We, like Timothy, must make sure we get it right. It is critical for our own spiritual formation. More importantly, rightly handling and interpreting God’s word honors the Lord. Bernard Ramm once wrote,

To determine what God has said is a high and holy task. With fear and trembling each should be ever so careful of that which he has adopted as his method of Biblical interpretation. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our doctrine of salvation, of sanctification, of eschatology, and of Christian living. It is our solemn responsibility to know what God has said with reference to each of these. This can be done only if we have carefully, thoroughly, and systematically formulated that system of Biblical interpretation which will yield most readily the native meaning of the Bible.

We want to be diligent in our study of Scripture because God is worthy of it. Thus, it is worth our time studying *how to study* the Bible to ensure we get it right.

I. DEFINITIONS

- **Hermeneutics:** from the Greek *hermēneia*, which means “translation” or “interpretation” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:10; 14:26), hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, the set of rules and principles one uses when studying a text.

In Acts 14:12, the inhabitants of Lystra believed the apostle Paul was the Greek god *Hermes* (the same root as *hermēneia*) and Barnabas was Zeus because the apostle Paul

¹ The following material is drawn primarily from two sources. The first is TMS Professor Bradley Klassen’s course notes from BI 505: Hermeneutics from Fall 2014. The second is *Grasping God’s Word*, an introductory book on hermeneutics by J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays. For the sake of space I will not always cite them in the footnotes, but they have both been integral to this study.

was the one “leading in speaking.” In Greek mythology Hermes was the spokesman of Zeus, his “interpreter” or “translator.”

- **Hermeneutic:** A hermeneutic (singular) is more abstract and refers to the particular *theory* of interpretation one uses. There are many “hermeneutics” to choose from—Christocentric hermeneutic, canonical hermeneutic, feminist hermeneutic, hermeneutic of liberation—and not all of them are created equal.

Your hermeneutic functions as the lens through which we view Scripture. Thus, it is critical to use the right one. The primary reason there are so many varying interpretations of Scripture is not because the text itself is unclear—God is more than capable of communicating to us through human language—but because so many different hermeneutics exist.

- **Exegesis:** the application of hermeneutical rules and principles. Exegesis is both a science and an art:
 - It is a *science* in that it requires objective principles that must be identified and defined.
 - It is an *art* in that it involves the skillful application of those hermeneutical principles. Even if an interpreter has the right principles, he can apply them incorrectly or inconsistently. Will need to be constantly worked at and improved.

II. THE NEED

Because we are neither omniscient nor inspired, we must rely on principles that will guide us in interpretation. This, empowered by the Holy Spirit’s ministry of illumination (1 Cor 2:10), will enable us to arrive at a true and proper meaning of the text.

In reality, everyone has rules and principles they use when interpreting a text—whether a book of the bible, a letter, a newspaper, or a grocery list. Many, however, are unaware of the hermeneutic they are using and never stop to ask whether it is appropriate for the document they are studying.

When approaching Scripture, hermeneutics are necessary because there are several barriers separating us from the author and setting of a biblical book that must be overcome:

- **Language:** the bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Consider the following statements:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

The first is Genesis 1:1, and the second is John 3:16. Because the average reader of Scripture has little to no familiarity with these languages, they become a barrier to understanding. This barrier extends not just to the words (lexica) but to the grammar (syntax) as well; that is, *meaning is not just determined by the words themselves but how they are connected*.

Thankfully, many English translations are excellent and accurately reflect the original text; a familiarity with the original languages is not necessary. A close study of the words and their connections, however, is required.

- **Culture:** God has chosen to reveal Himself to us through the language, culture, and customs of man. Thus, in order to understand His revelation, we must understand the cultures, customs, and practices that have been recorded in Scripture. In other words, we need to understand the *social* and *cultural context* in which a biblical book was written.
- **Geography:** the geography of the bible is the *stage* on which God's revelation unfolds. Locations, landmarks, flora and fauna all come into play when interpreting a text. The more familiar you are with these things, the better able you'll be to arrive at the author's intended meaning. Barry Beitzel writes:

Just as those who have seen Athens understand Greek history better, and just as those who have seen Troy understand the words of the poet Virgil, thus one will comprehend the Holy Scriptures with a clearer understanding who has seen the land of Judah with his own eyes and has come to know the references to the ancient towns and places and their names.²

The story of the Samaritan women in John 4 is a good example of how important geography can be to Biblical interpretation. Without an understanding of the location of Samaria with respect to Judea and Galilee, and the normal passageway from one to the other while avoiding Samaria, one would miss the full impact of Jesus' movement and ministry in Samaria.

John 4:4 states that Jesus "*had* to pass through Samaria" on his way from Judea to Galilee, yet Jews refrained at all costs from passing through or residing in Samaria. Instead, they would take the longer route on the east side of the Jordan River. So why the necessity? Was Jesus in a hurry? Obviously not. John later states that Jesus stays two extra days in Samaria (4:40, 43). Rather, by reading this account in light of geographical and cultural factors, we see even more vividly his compassion of Jesus for the salvation of Samaritans (4:39-42). He "*had*" to go through Samaria to bring the gospel there.

² Barry Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Moody Press, 1985), xv.

- **History:** there is an immense historical gap between us and the authors of Scripture. The bible is *theology in history*, meaning God’s redemptive plan unfolds in time and through human events. There are significant historical events that inform Scripture, and familiarity with these events and themes is critical to arrive at the right interpretation. We must put aside our modern assumptions and attempt to transport ourselves back into the historical context in which a book was written.

Duval and Hays write, “These differences form a barrier—a *river* that separates us from the text and often prohibits us from grasping the meaning of the text for ourselves.”³

III. THE PURPOSE

The process of exegesis—applying our interpretive principles, or hermeneutic, to the text—is a process of building spanning this river so we can understand what the author’s intended meaning is. Exegesis bridges the gap between the modern interpreter and the original author writing a biblical book by overcoming the four barriers mentioned above. These rules and principles provide boundaries in which interpretation must take place and protect the interpreter from veering away from the intended meaning of the text, striving for objectivity in interpretation.

IV. THE GOAL

The goal of exegesis is to arrive at the author’s intended meaning of the text—the **authorial intent**. That is, we are answering the question “*What did the author mean?*” as opposed to answering the question “*What does the text mean to me?*” The second question has as many answers as there are interpreters, and for each interpreter an infinite number of answers given their present mood and circumstances. D. A. Carson, in his article “Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends,” describes it well:

As this new hermeneutic is normally expounded, both the interpreter *and the text* are swallowed up in a sea of historical relativity. In interpreting the text, the interpreter finds that the text interprets him.... The ‘hermeneutical circle’ thus set up has no necessary *terminus*: it is not the objective meaning of the text that is the goal, since the text is considered to be no more ‘objective’ than the interpreter. The goal is the moment of encounter between the text and interpreter in which the ‘meaning’ *occurs* or *takes place*: that is, it is the encounter between text and interpreter in which the interpreter hears and responds to some claim upon his person. Obviously, that might be a different thing for a different person, or different things for the same person at different times, or different things for different generations of students of Scripture.⁴

³ J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hand’s-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 24.

⁴ D. A. Carson, “Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends,” *Themelios* 5 [1980]: 14-15.

This “hermeneutic” is not a process but an *experience*, and it describes the way many people approach Scripture. In this situation a text can mean virtually anything, and if a text can mean anything to anyone at any time, then it means nothing at all. Removing objectivity from the interpretive process strips the text of any meaning whatsoever. Carson continues:

It must be clearly understood that the term ‘hermeneutics’. . . is undergoing a considerable semantic shift. We are now no longer interested in the principles whereby an interpreter attempts to understand the meaning of a text within its original context. Rather, hermeneutics becomes the discipline by which we examine how a thought or event in one cultural and religious context becomes understandable in another cultural and religious context. . . It follows, then, that the new hermeneutic pursues ‘what is true for me’ at the expense of ‘what is true.’ Theology proper becomes impossible.⁵

Rather than meaning residing in the interpreter, the nature of Scripture demands that meaning reside in the author’s intention. Peter writes that the authors of Scripture “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The meaning of the text resides in the inspired author’s intent (the author is the authority). Meaning, then, is *fixed* and *objective*. The interpreter’s task is to discern that meaning.

The principle of authorial intent leads to the principle of *single meaning*. That is, there is only one meaning found in each passage—the author’s intended meaning. Meaning does not change from interpreter to interpreter, culture to culture, or generation to generation. It is timeless, stable and fixed, because God’s word is timeless, stable and fixed.

Important to this discussion is the question of application. Application is *not* part of the exegetical process (the application of hermeneutical rules and principles); it comes after exegesis has been completed. Application is the work of relating the single, authorial-intended meaning—derived through exegesis—to the life of the reader. Duval and Hays write:

While the specifics of a particular passage may apply only to the particular situation of the biblical audience, the theological principles revealed in that text are applicable to all of God’s people at all times. The theological principle, therefore, has meaning and application both to the ancient biblical audience and to Christians today.⁶

There is only one meaning to a text of Scripture, but there can be many applications made from that one meaning to everyday life.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Duval and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 26.

V. THE FOUNDATION

The foundation for a proper hermeneutic is the nature of the bible and the nature of the reader as revealed in Scripture. The bible presents itself as:

- **Perfect**
 - Psalm 19:7, 8 – The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. . . the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
- **True**
 - Psalm 19:9 – the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.
 - John 17:17 – Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.
- **Immutable**
 - Psalm 119:89 – Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.
- **Eternal**
 - Psalm 119:160 – The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.
 - 1 Peter 1:25 – . . . the word of the Lord remains forever.

If Scripture is true, perfect, immutable, and eternal, then we would expect its meaning will be true, immutable, and eternal as well.

The bible also presents man as sinful by nature (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12) and blinded by the noetic effects of sin from comprehending and believing the truth of God’s word (1 Corinthians 1:22; 1 Peter 2:8; Romans 1:21). Even believers wrestle with their flesh and the sin principle that resides there. Thus, we must remove ourselves from the interpretive process as much as possible and seek the meaning the inspired author intended to convey.

VI. THE HERMENEUTIC

The proper hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture is a literal, grammatico-historical hermeneutic:

- **Literal:** seek the plain meaning of the text. We should interpret the words and grammar of a passage as they would have been normally understood at the time the text was written. This is opposed to seeking a “meaning behind the meaning,” an allegorical or figurative meaning. This does not mean we ignore figures of speech or literary genre; rather, they are identified and interpreted accordingly.
- **Grammatical:** the interpreter must study the grammar of the passage—its words and their connections—to ascertain what the author was intending to communicate. This process will include:

- *Genre Study* – Studying the genre of a text and its particularities. Is it prose or poetry? Narrative or epistle? What figures of speech are common to this genre? These questions will determine how we interpret the text.
 - *Lexical Study* – Studying the lexica, the words themselves. Why did the author choose the words that he did? What do they mean and what is their significance?
 - *Syntactical Study* – Studying the connections between words and sentences. Things like word order and sentence structure are key in conveying meaning and emphasis.
- **Historical:** interpretation must establish the historical setting—its audience, circumstances, and cultural background—in which the text was written, while also taking into account antecedent (prior) revelation.

In essence, these three principles put the original author front and center—his language, his culture, his historical context, his world. In this way, his intention comes to the fore. These three guidelines will provide boundaries that ensure we arrive at the proper meaning of the passage. By anchoring us to the original intention of the author, they protect us from veering into subjective interpretations that reflect more about us than about God.

THE GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL METHOD		
1.	The Principles of Grammar	Genre Study
		Lexical Study
		Syntactical Study
2.	The Facts of History	

From the preceding discussion we can distill a few hermeneutical principles that will guide our study:

- Depend on Divine Assistance
- Seek the Author’s Intent
- Interpret the Text Literally
- Pursue a Single Meaning for Each Text
- Interpret in Light of Antecedent (Prior) Revelation
- Evaluate Exegetical Results
 - The Rule of Faith: Scripture interprets Scripture
 - The Catholicity Principle: if it’s new, it’s not true

VII. THE PROCESS

Duval and Hays describe five steps in the exegetical process that allows the modern interpreter to span the river separating them from the original audience and capture the intended meaning:

- 1) Grasping the Text in Their Town: What did the text mean to the biblical audience?
- 2) Measuring the Width of the River: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
- 3) Crossing the Principizing Bridge: What is the theological principle in this text?
- 4) Consulting the Biblical Map: How does our theological principle (meaning) fit with the rest of the Bible?
- 5) Grasping the Text in Our Town: How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles?

This exegetical journey will enable us to discern the meaning of the text and how it applies to our lives today. Using the above principles in our study of Scripture and noting the grammatical and contextual details will allow us to make this journey safely and accurately.