

CHAPTER 2

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF HERMENEUTICS

Inspiration of the autographs

[For an excellent survey of the doctrine of inspiration and its relation to hermeneutics, see Berkhof, *PBI*, ch. 4, “The Proper Conception of the Bible, The Object of Hermeneutica Sacra.”]

The Scriptures were given by divine inspiration, and therefore are inerrant in their original form—the autographs. Several inferences follow from this truth:

Original language

The original language text must be the basis of all authoritative exegesis and the final arbiter in all disputes. This position cannot be usurped by the Latin Vulgate, or any English version.

Note the following consequences:

- Importance of original language study for theological education
- Importance of original language study for teachers of Bible and doctrine
- Danger of criticizing one version by another
 - False approach of Roman Catholic Church concerning Vulgate
 - Similar false approach of those who support the King James as final arbiter

Textual criticism first

Exegesis must be based on sound texts; the work of textual criticism must come first. One must be careful in preaching or in teaching the Scripture, to be sure he is

basing his argument on a sound text (see notes, ch. 10). In these NT passages the textual evidence is absent or not clear.

- Mark 16:9-20
- John 5:3-4
- John 7:53 – 8:11
- John 14:17
- 1 John 5:7-8

There is a believing, Christian use for textual criticism of the Bible.

The abundance of textual evidence gives us in most places a virtually certain text. The amount of variation is remarkably small. Even the worst texts teach the same doctrines as the best texts.

Relation to science, history, and philosophy

Exegesis need not necessarily conform to modern philosophical or scientific presuppositions.

We need a balance here. Obviously, exegesis will take into account “scientific” knowledge. Thus, we understand Jesus’ calling the local ruler Herod Antipas “that fox Herod” to be a figure of speech, since we know he was not a literal fox. The understanding of figures of speech in the Bible would have prevented such embarrassing stands taken by theologians in favor of a flat earth or a geocentric universe. On the other hand, modern opinions against supernatural events, such as the creation, the flood, the miracles of Scripture, the existence of spiritual personalities, should not bias our interpretation. Many have treated these passages rationalistically, or metaphorically, when the literal meaning is clearly intended and historically has been understood and assumed.

For an excellent discussion of the controversy between Galileo and the Roman Inquisition concerning astronomy and a defense of Galileo’s method of interpretation of the Bible, see H. J. Lee, “‘Men of Galilee, Why Stand Gazing Up Into Heaven’: Revisiting Galileo, Astronomy, and the Authority of the Bible,” *JETS* 53:1 (March 2010), 103-116.

One area of particular concern is the creation account of Gen 1-2 (and other passages). We must balance what is certain from science with what is certain from biblical exegesis. Too often scholars put undue weight on either their scientific conclusions (which may not be proved) or their biblical exegesis (which may go beyond the text). True science and true exegesis will ultimately agree, although we may not have sufficient information now to show the harmony.

Translations of the Bible

Much truth can be gained using versions. Since inspiration means that the words adequately express the ideas God intended, it follows that translations that are reasonably accurate will convey those same ideas. The Bible itself records the good use of translations, such as the Aramaic Targums being used in Neh 8, and the frequent quotations of the Greek Septuagint OT translation in the NT.

Much good study can be done with the English Bible alone (or any other vernacular version). One should compare Scripture with Scripture, and be familiar with the Bible as a whole. Knowledge of the original languages of the Bible does not automatically confer good exegetical ability.

Unity of the Bible

All of Scripture presents one unified system of truth (as indicated in 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21). This fact leads to the following corollaries:

Analogy of faith

“The analogy of faith,” a phrase used in Rom 12:6, was developed as a concept by Augustine. It is a legitimate tool of exegesis, as long as each author and passage is allowed to speak for itself. This means that the interpretation of any particular passage should be agreeable to the interpretation of the Bible as a whole.

Harmonization

All passages which deal with the same topic should be interpreted to harmonize with each other.

- Samuel/Kings and Chronicles

Many of the chronological difficulties in comparing the two accounts have been satisfactorily answered by Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (1965). Other differences are accounted for by different theological outlooks or points—as “Satan” vs. “the Lord” leading David to sin (2 Sam 24:1; cf. 1 Chr 21:1).

- The four Gospels

There are many examples in the gospels of accounts which appear on the surface to be contradictory, but which with very little effort can be made to harmonize in various ways. We do not have sufficiently certain and complete data to assert that any account is actually in error, if we interpret them in a reasonable manner.

An example might be the healing of the centurion's servant by Jesus (Matt 8:5-13 = Luke 7:1-10). Matthew says that the centurion came to Jesus and spoke to him, while Luke says he sent his friends to speak for him. Assuming both accounts are true, we conclude that probably Luke is more precise, indicating that the centurion spoke through his friends, and that Matthew is more general, in that the friends are not important to the account, since they simply relayed what the centurion instructed them to say, so that Jesus was in effect conversing with the centurion himself.

- Romans, Galatians, James

Are we justified by works, or by faith, or by both? And how was Abraham justified?

- Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, Revelation

What are the events surrounding the second coming of Christ? Will there be a future "great tribulation"?

Working with seeming discrepancies

Scripture never contradicts Scripture. Where there are seeming discrepancies the interpreter should seek to find a solution, or simply admit he is insufficiently informed.

Note comment of famous OT scholar and Princeton professor Robert Dick Wilson after studying the OT and its surrounding cultures for 45 years: "No one knows enough to say that there is an error in the OT."

Clear and obscure passages

Clear passages take precedence over obscure ones.

Since all of Scripture is unified, and the teaching of the clear passages can be more certainly determined, it follows that the meaning of obscure passages, which is more uncertain and capable of different interpretations, should be made to conform to that of the more clear passages.

1) Often prose passages take precedence over figurative or poetic ones.

cf. Acts 2:25-31 to Ps 16:8-11

cf. parables and their interpretations

2) A general statement in Scripture may be modified by a more particular passage.

Explicit statements define or condition implicit statements.

This is common with conditional elements or particular exceptions (e.g., Luke 16:18; cf. Matt 5:32; 19:9).

3) One clear passage on any subject, when based on a sound text and rightly interpreted, establishes that truth. Such a passage is called a “proof text.” However, no key biblical truth rests on one text only.

4) The revelation of the Bible was given in a progressive manner (“progressive revelation”). Later revelation used the prior revelation as a base of understanding, as it added more information.

We do not expect later revelation to change the meaning of earlier revelation.

On the other hand, later revelation interprets and applies earlier revelation in ways not initially seen, yet in ways agreeable to the earlier revelation.

Examples:

- Nature of the church
- Good and evil spirits
- Work of the Messiah
- Intermediate state and eschatology
- Interpretation of the moral law

Silences of the Bible

The Bible is complete in that its revelation is concluded, but is not complete in the sense that it does not relate every event it could have.

Bible silences

Scripture is silent on certain matters (Deut 29:29; Matt 24:36; John 21:25; cf. the apocryphal stories of Jesus’ childhood).

To seek definite knowledge of such details is to seek revelation instead of illumination and is presumptuous. We should not be ashamed to claim ignorance on these matters. Some questions upon which the Scriptures are silent are “unprofitable,” “vain,” and “foolish” (Titus 3:9).

Rules of conduct

Although Scripture is silent concerning many details, yet it is not silent concerning principles of conduct. Here are some of these important principles:

- Acts 4:19, Obey God over men
- Rom 13, Authority of government
- Rom 14, Responsibilities of strong and weak
- 1 Cor 6, Going to law
- 1 Cor 13, Love

Where Scripture is silent, “weak brethren” are not to command “strong brethren” to obey commands, regulations, rites, etc., which they feel are logical deductions from explicit biblical commands (cf. Rom 14). This was the error of the Pharisees, and the Lord condemned them as well as their pious “logic” (Luke 11:46; Mark 7:11, cf. 1-5).

When considering apostolic example or commands, one must distinguish “essentials” from “accidents” (e.g., the “kiss of charity”; see also A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, ch. 42:21:1, p. 614, dealing with modes of baptism and of the Lord’s Supper).

Degrees of Certainty

In these matters of applying principles of Scripture, as well as doctrines of Scripture, various degrees of certainty are to be recognized as legitimate:

- On fundamentals—no tolerance (cf. treatment of heretics in Titus 3:10-11)
- On convictions—some tolerance (cf. Rom 14:2-5; each to be fully convinced in his own mind)
- On preference—much tolerance
- On open items—all tolerance

Remember that people grow and change in these areas; so Christian toleration is called for. Note examples of Augustine’s *Retractions*, Patrick Fairbairn’s *Fairbairn versus Fairbairn* (a premillennial pastor, later an amillennial professor) and more recently such change-about as that of Arthur Pink (dispensationalist → covenant theologian).

Accuracy and Precision of the Bible

Since the Bible is inspired, it is truthful and accurate to the degree of precision intended by the authors. While some deny the truthfulness of the Bible, others go to the other extreme and force upon it standards of precision in detail or expression which it was not intended to bear. The Bible was written on the popular level, and it should be interpreted with its degree of precision being at the popular level.

Accommodation

The Bible contains accommodation to human beings. However, this accommodation never contains or transmits error. This accommodation is necessary in the use of human language itself. It is expanded by the use of the common speech in both testaments (cf. Koiné Greek).

As the Bible was given on the popular level, the fair interpreter will interpret it on that level. If he does, his interpretation will not contain error.

Anthropocentrism

Biblical descriptions of God and events are often anthropocentric. For example, God is described as having bodily parts (anthropomorphism) or human emotions (anthropopathism); note the perspective of the Babel account (Gen 11:5). As another example, Ps 104 and Gen 1-2 should be interpreted as taking place from the standpoint of people on the earth, avoiding the error made by many in the time of Galileo. Some passages in the OT speak of the souls of the dead as having no impact, the view from the earth.

Language of appearance

The Bible often uses the language of appearance. For example, bats are classified under the category of birds (Lev 11:13, 19). Insects, which have six legs, are described as “walking on all fours” (Lev 11:20-23).

Numbers

Numbers often are approximate. Compare Num 1-3 (round number subtracted from a precise number in Num 3:43-46). Thus the 200,000,000 troops (Rev 9:16) probably is a round number. Apparently approximate numbers are used to describe the

golden sea of Solomon's temple, with a diameter of 10 cubits and a circumference of 30 cubits (1 Kgs 7:23; $10 * 3.14 = 31.4$ cubits).

Perspicuity of the Bible

The Scriptures are perspicuous—i.e., they are written to be understood.

“If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” (John 7:17; cf. WCF 1:7)

Understanding a moral as well as an intellectual issue

Except for infants and those incapable of rational understanding, everyone can understand the plan of salvation, the great truths of the faith, and the way of holy living. We are held morally responsible for unbelief (Heb 3:12, “a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away . . .”). It is not a merely intellectual matter.

Availability of understanding

The Scriptures contain a profitable message for everyone (2 Tim 3:16-17). Therefore, one need not arrive at a consciously articulated epistemology before exegeting the Bible. Christian philosophers have an important place in the church's thinking; yet we should beware of any who claim to have a new “key” to understand the Bible or the world, which God's people have not possessed before.

Availability of language

Some interpreters go beyond reasonable interpretation that is generally available and go to an extreme; they seek to squeeze more meaning from the text than it was intended to convey. The language used in the Bible was and is available to all intelligent readers. Here are a few examples of this kind of error:

Overuse of etymology

A word may include within its scope the etymological idea. Sometimes a word's etymology provides helpful illustrative material.

However, the meaning of a biblical word is not to be derived from its etymology. Meaning is based on usage, and often a word's meaning is far removed from its etymology. An example is the common mistranslation of the term “deepest darkness” in Ps 23 as its etymology, “shadow of death.”

Overuse of English

The meaning of a biblical word is not to be derived from its English translation.

Cf. “fish,” Genesis “kind,” “fornication,” “power” (from “dynamite”?)

Overuse of grammar

- Use of synonyms
- Different cases
- Different tenses
- Presence or absence of the article
- Strict use of prepositions

Remember the saying, “A little Greek is a dangerous thing.”

Singleness of meaning

It is not proper exegesis to find multiple meanings when the text contains ambiguous vocabulary or syntax. The author intended to convey one thought—we should try to determine what that thought is. It is better to state our preference, along with possible alternatives, than to say that all were intended.

e.g., Gal 2:16, “the faith of Jesus”

As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, the Scripture’s meaning “is not manifold, but one” (1:9).

On the other hand, we should recognize the prophecies which may have their fulfillment in multiple events (e.g., Deut 28; Luke 21:24), or which may be fulfilled over an interval of time (e.g., Isa 61:1-2; cf. Luke 4:16-20). Likewise, some passages describe events or people which are typological of other events or people (e.g., Ps 69).

Place for scholarship

All passages are not alike plain. There are all degrees of difficulty within the Scripture, and some of the “simplest” passages are the hardest to understand. For this

reason biblical scholarship and careful exegesis are necessary. Cf. Prov 26:4-5; 1 John 3:6, 9; 2 Pet 3:16, the “unlearned” twist Scripture to their own destruction.

Respect for scholarship of others

In light of the perspicuity of Scripture and in light of the Holy Spirit’s illumination of pious people of past generations, the views of commentators and others of former days are not to be despised. Cf. the “checking principle” of Bernard Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 118-19).

Therefore, sentiments like these are out of place: “I’m not interested in what Calvin or A. A. Hodge thought; they were only men. I’m interested only in what the Bible says!” Or, “I don’t use commentaries; I use the Bible!” Christian humility and modesty require us to respect the scholarly work of others, and, while being true to our own work and abilities under God, respectfully to consider their positions and arguments. It’s possible they thought of something we have overlooked!

Historical context of the Bible

Scriptural revelation was given by God in a historical process, and must be interpreted in light of this fact.

The meaning of any passage must be in harmony with the historical circumstances which surround its writing or those which bear on its subject (e.g., the context of Isa 40-55 is not the time of its writing, but it is prophetically the time of the later return from captivity in Babylon).

An example of ignoring this important principle is the commentary of Habakkuk recently discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls; this commentary ignores the historical situation of Israel in the days of Habakkuk, and says Habakkuk is talking about the trials of the Jews during the time of the commentary (first century BC).

(See Appendix 1 for a suggested procedure for biblical interpretation.)