

INTRODUCTION TO HERMENEUTICS

The Science of Interpretation

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It is a search to find the meaning of an author's words and phrases and to explain them to others. Often there is a gap between the sender and the receiver of a message, and hermeneutics seeks to bridge this gap. In the Bible, the Sender is God and His writers; the receiver is mankind. One problem we face in Biblical interpretation is that God used over forty different authors- kings and shepherds, prophets and fishermen- over a period of 1600 years, using three different languages. So there are *many* gaps that can affect our interpretation of the sacred Scriptures.

BRIDGING THE GAPS BETWEEN THE WRITER AND THE READERS

Bridging the understanding gap is the means with which we can reach our goal: to know what God meant by what He said.

I. THE LANGUAGE GAP. The way to bridge this gap is to study linguistics.

1. Vocabulary: It is necessary to understand the words of which the sentence is composed.
 - a. The etymological study of the word. Understanding a word by examining its origin, formation and history. Study Etymology by using a Strong's Concordance, a Vine's Dictionary, or a lexicon.
 - When you study the name Satan from the Hebrew (Strong's # 7854), it comes from the root word #7853, which means to 'attack', by implication to 'accuse.'
 - Words develop and sometimes also change their meaning over time: An example: "He is gay"

Ex: "He is very gay" 40 years ago meant that he was happy- today, he is a homosexual!

- Different translations of the Scriptures can create difficulties in understanding God's word:
 - old words such as 'fetch a compass,' 2 Sam.5:23 KJV or 'shambles,' 1 Cor.10:25 KJV
 - too complicated wording (often solved by reading the NIV or another simple translation)
 - sometimes the wording is too simple! (often a problem of the NIV & simpler translations)
 - Spiritual terms such as propitiation, atonement, and grace often need explanation.
- b. The comparative study of the word. Understanding a word by studying all of the times it is mentioned in the Bible. This can be studied by using a concordance, a lexicon or by doing a word search on a computer Bible program.
 - An example is the word 'angel.' Its Strong's # is 32, from the Greek it is 'aggelos' which means "a messenger." This can refer to an angel (Acts 10:3), or a human messenger (Mk.1:2) or perhaps even both (Rev.2:1, 2:8, 2:12).

c. The study of a word in comparative languages. Understanding a word by investigating its equivalent in related languages.

- An example is the word for 'power' in Acts 1:8. It is 'dynamis,' and is the Greek word from which 'dynamite' was made in English.
- Another example are the words for 'spirit' in Greek and Hebrew. In both languages this word means 'spirit,' 'wind,' and 'breath.'

Ex: Our spirit = heart = kidneys = spleen in different languages

2. Grammar: It is essential to understand the part each word plays in the sentence. The study of vocabulary supplies the parts, while the study of grammar provides the ruler for putting the parts together into a whole.

Ex: Years ago a wife traveling in Europe telegraphed her husband, asking if she could buy a \$10,000 necklace? His telegram reply said, NO PRICE TOO GREAT. She bought it, and on returning to the USA she found out that the telegram her husband had tried to send said: "No, price too great"

- An example is how Jesus proved the resurrection from when God declared, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." The words 'I am' are present tense (not the past tense, "I was the God of Abraham), so that proved the men are still alive!

3. Genre: The genre (kind or style) of the passage or book sets the mood from which the rest of the passage or book is seen.

a. Literary style. Determine whether a book is historical, poetic, apocalyptic or prophetic.

- An example of poetic writing is Eccles.12:1-7, concerning old age & death.

b. Literary expression. Within any literary style, determine whether the passage is expressed in parables, allegories, psalms and riddles.

- An example is how Jesus told His disciples to "Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees," but they did not understand Him at first, Mat.16:6-12.

c. Figures of speech. Within any literary style or expression, determine whether the author expressed himself in words using metaphors, similes and idioms.

- Examples can be the Middle Eastern expressions, "gird up the loins of your mind," or "a deceitful bow," or "he fell asleep." Even Jesus' disciples didn't see this as a figure of speech when Christ said that "Lazarus sleeps," in Jn.11:11-14.
- We must realize that not everything can be accepted as simple truth. Micaiah prophesied the same words as the false prophets "Go up and have victory," yet he was speaking cynically, as the king could understand, 1 Kings 22:15-16.
- Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes when he was old, backslidden and depressed. The book sometimes shows us the thinking of a backslidden king and preacher. Don't follow all of his advice in the book! Examples are Eccles 5:8-9 and 8:15.

II. THE CULTURAL GAP. The cultural gap may be bridged by studying the cultures in which the writers of Scripture lived.

1. Material Culture: Studying the material features & expressions of the society being considered.

- Lifestyle, dress, technology, etc. that is different from our own. For example, consider “some trust in chariots,” from Ps.20:7. A chariot was like a modern day ‘tank,’ or armored vehicle.

2. Social Culture: Exploring the way things are done and the manner in which the people of the society relate to one another.

- Culture, manners and customs that are different from our own. Examples in the book of Ruth are: “Extend your covering,” Ruth 3:9, and “Take the shoe,” Ruth 4:7-9.

III. THE GEOGRAPHICAL GAP. The geographical gap may be bridged by a study of the geographical setting in which the events and writing of the Bible occurred.

1. Political Geography: Seeking facts on political geography by the aid of archeological researches concerning the peoples, cities and nations mentioned by the Biblical authors.

- Understanding the changing world empires helps us to interpret Dan.2:31-45.

Ex: Jesus was accused of being a Samaritan in John 9:48. Why? Because he was being accused of being an illegitimate child of a Samaritan, Jn.9:41. This was because Mary had quickly left Bethlehem & headed south (through Samaria) to visit her cousin, Elisabeth, Lk.1:38-39. Nine months later Mary had a baby!

2. Geological Geography: Understanding references to climate, land formations, seas and rivers, by the aid of archeological evidences, maps, written descriptions, photography and modern travel.

- Geography — cities, places, Israel's journey, Paul's travels; studying these make the stories more clear.
- Climate, seasons, agriculture (help explain scriptures like Song of Sol.4:16 and James 5:7).

Ex: Jeremiah complained that the Lord was like a ‘wadi’ to him, a river that flows sometimes & other times is dry!

3. Botanical and Zoological Geography: Understanding characteristics and behavioral patterns of plant life and animal life mentioned by Bible authors.

- Examples: the clean & unclean animals (Lev.11:3) and fish (Lev.11:9). The hyssop & the cedar (1 Kings 4:33).
- Study about the fox (and about King Herod) to find out how they were similar, Lk.13:32.

IV. THE HISTORICAL GAP. The way to bridge the historical gap is to become familiar with the historical setting for the events of the Bible and in which the writers lived.

1. Political Background: Understanding the significance and influence on the people's lives of the political order of which they are a part.

- Consider the circumstances in which a Bible book is written: What nation did they live in? What was the political condition of the nation at that time?
- Examples are how Isaiah wrote during the Assyrian invasions, while Jeremiah and Habakkuk wrote during the time of Babylon's invasion. Esther was written during the time of the Persian Empire. The New Testament was written in the Roman Empire.

Ex: How did the citizenship of Peter and Paul make a difference in how they were killed?

Ex: Who were the Herodians? (Mt.22:16). Were they friends of the Pharisees? What did they agree on? (Mk.3:6, Mt.22:15-18).

2. Economic Background: Understanding the significance and influence on the people's lives of the economic situation.

- For example, understanding their economy shows us how Rev.6:6 speaks of famine.
- Also, why were tax collectors hated so much in the time of Jesus?

3. Religious Background: Understanding the significance and influence on the people's lives of the religious background.

- For example, from Jn.7:2 & 37-39, why was this feast important to the message Jesus gave?
- For example, we read in Acts 19:26-34 about Diana. Who was she? Why is this important as we study about church history?
- Jewish feasts, offerings, the tabernacle and priestly garments all have present day applications.

4. The Chronological Background: It is important to know when people lived and when key events took place.

- Dispensations / Covenants: It is important to understand their development, and whether something applies to a former time (like Moses' rituals during the Age of the Law) or whether it applies to the Age of Grace.
- Different Calendar systems used in Bible times — Each empire, and king, had their own calendar; while the Jews had two yearly calendars (agricultural & religious). Also there are differences of months (using the lunar cycle in the Bible), differences of days (The day for the Jews started at 6:00 PM, while it started for the Romans at 12:00 midnight), and years (different cultures measured a year by different ways).

EX: some Bible teachers use a 'prophetic' year to measure the 470 years of the Book of Daniel

V. THE PROPHETIC GAP. Natural events, objects, and declarations can have a spiritual or prophetic meaning

1. Names — every name has a meaning which can be prophetic, 1 Sam.25:25. Examples are Nabal, Judah, Saul, & Bethlehem.
2. Places — many places represent an important spiritual truth, such as the Mount of Olives, Bethlehem, Egypt, and the Jordan River.
3. Were the author's thoughts were intended to be literal or figurative, natural or spiritual, or both.
 - In John 2:19-20 Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Pharisees mocked this and did not understand the prophecy, Mat.27:39-40.

Ex: Jesus said we must eat His flesh & drink His blood. Should we be cannibals?

Ex: Jesus said if we sin we should pull out our eye cut off our hand. Was that literal?

4. Numbers - Every number in Scripture has a divine meaning and has significance.
5. Prophetically interpreting whether a promise is to natural Israel, or to the Church, or to both.
6. Types — every person in Scripture is a type of people we see in the Church today. For example, Paul represents stability, but Absalom is a flatterer and usurper. Peter is impulsive but loyal. All the prophets are types of Christ and reveal some aspect of Christ.

HERMENEUTICS AND OTHER BIBLICAL SCIENCES

1. Hermeneutics is not to be viewed as a separate science, but rather as a link in a chain of related sciences. The major Bible sciences are the following:
 - a. Canonology – The word "canon" simply means a "a rod, rule, or measuring stick." This science has to do with determining which sacred books measure up to the standards of divine inspiration. (2 Tim. 3:16) Which books should be in the Bible?
 - b. Historical Criticism – The word "criticism" is used here to speak of discernment. This science deals with the authorship, date, historical circumstances, authenticity of contents, and literary unity of the books.
 - c. Textual Criticism – The word "textual" refers to the actual wording of a book. This science attempts to determine as accurately as possible the original wording of the inspired text.
 - d. Hermeneutics – This science is concerned with determining the principles by which the books may be interpreted.
 - e. Exegesis – The word "exegesis" comes from a Greek word '*exhegesisthai*' meaning "to guide or lead out". This science involves the application of the rules of hermeneutics. While hermeneutics provides us with the tools, exegesis refers to the actual use of these tools;

hermeneutics supplies the principles of interpretation, while exegesis is the process of interpretation.

f. Biblical Theology – The word ‘theology’ comes from the Greek words, ‘*theos*’ (God) and ‘*logos*’ (word), and means literally, “the study and discourse of God.” The science of Biblical theology involves the gathering, classifying, and summarizing of Biblical doctrines.

2. A definite progression can be seen in these six related Bible sciences.
 - a. The study of the canon determines the inspired books.
 - b. The study of historical criticism gives us the framework of the books.
 - c. The study of textual criticism determines the wording of the books.
 - d. Hermeneutics gives us the rules for the interpretation of the books.
 - e. Exegesis is the application of these rules to the books.
 - f. Biblical theology is the result.

Proper application of God’s Word is dependent upon proper interpretation of it.