

CHAPTER 7

RELATION OF INSPIRATION TO HERMENEUTICS

[Much of this material is adapted from Dr. Gary G. Cohen's notes, Faith Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.]

The word *hermeneutics* means the science of biblical interpretation (cf. Greek terms *διερμηνεύω* *diermeneuo* in Luke 24:27; *ἑρμηνεία* *hermeneia* in 1 Cor 14:26; and *διερμηνευτής* *diermeneutes* in 1 Cor 14:28). Since inspiration assures the truth of the ideas expressed in the words of Scripture, it becomes imperative for us to interpret them in the way that will arrive at those ideas, and not some other, fallacious ideas.

Inspiration of the autographs

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.

“The Old Testament in Hebrew, (which was the native language of the people of God of old,) and the New Testament in Greek, (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations,) being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them.” (WCF 1:7)

Interesting letters by Allan A. MacRae in *Biblical Christianity* (1994), esp. Letters #3-25.
Examples of topics:

- Translating the Word of God

- Modern English Versions
- The Text of the KJV
- Is the KJV the Actual Word of God?
- The KJV and Translation Problems
- “Thou” and “You” in the RSV
- The New Scofield Reference Bible
- The Textus Receptus and English Bible Versions
- Biblical Inerrancy and the Whole Bible

[For a more recent update on the KJV debate, see James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (1995).]

Sound text

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, that he is basing his argument on a sound text. Some texts have a questionable claim to being in the Bible because of their absence in various witnesses to the text—some examples:

John 14:17—“and will be in you” has only a {C} rating over “and is in you”

1 John 5:7-8—added reference to the Trinity

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.

Use of philosophy or science

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 four corners of the earth” means four directions, not that the earth is a flat square.

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.

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.

Use of versions or translations

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.

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. Examples of highly educated scholars with very questionable exegesis would be Rudolf Bultmann and Robert W. Funk.

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:

Agree with biblical teaching elsewhere

“The analogy of faith,” developed as a concept by Augustine, is a legitimate tool of exegesis, as long as each author and passage is allowed to speak for itself.

Passages harmonize

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

- Samuel, Kings, Chronicles
- The four gospels
- Romans, Galatians, James
- Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, Revelation

- Note: biblical harmonization is required by the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Liberal critics reject this procedure. An example:
 - “Finally, we should be careful of the conventional dogmatic view, nourished by the formation of the canon and by church tradition, that the New Testament is a summary of binding Christian doctrine or a kind of doctrinal norm. Anyone who shares this illusion is bound to ignore the significant differences that exist in the New Testament—between the four Gospels (especially between the so-called synoptics and John), Acts and Paul, Paul and James, and so on—and to harmonize the texts so as to make all the New Testament authors say pretty much the same thing. While it is certainly right to look for a common theme in the New Testament, it is quite wrong to minimize the differences and contradictions. Cutting and twisting things in Procrustean fashion is the worst of all possible procedures for interpreting the New Testament.” (Günther Bornkamm, *The New Testament: A Guide to Its Writings* [1971; Eng. transl.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973], 7-8).

No contradictions

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

Contra C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (1995). Atheist Dan Barker lists many “contradictions” in *Godless* (2008; ch. 13). Note the 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 passages predominate

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.

Prose over poetry

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

Particular over general

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).

One clear passage is enough

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.

Progressive revelation

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

Accuracy 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. Further, it is not complete; it does not relate every event it could have.

Silence of the Bible

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.

- 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 but false "logic" (Luke 11:46; Mark 7:11, cf. 1-5).

When considering apostolic example or commands, one must distinguish "essentials" from "accidents" (e.g., foot-washing, women's head covering, and 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).

In these matters of applying principles of Scripture, various degrees of certainty are to be recognized as legitimate (adapted from Count von Zinzendorf):

- 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
- In all things—charity

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*, and more recently such change-about as that of Arthur Pink (dispensationalist → covenant theologian).

Precision of the Bible

Scripture 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. E.g., God is described as having bodily parts (anthropomorphism), or as having human emotions (anthropopathism). Many passages take the perspective of humans on the earth, such as the earth not moving (Ps 96:10; 104:5), and perhaps an earthly perspective on fourth day of creation (sun, moon, stars are seen in sky); note the perspective of the Babel account (Gen 11:5).

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); flying insects have "four feet" (Lev 11:22-23); the mustard seed is "the smallest" seed (Matt 13:32).

Perspicuity of the Bible

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

“All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.” (WCF 1:7)

Modern sensational theories about a “Bible code,” by which secret messages are imbedded in the letters on the page, are opposed by this doctrine.

Understanding a moral 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.

“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)

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.

Place for scholarship

Yet, 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. 2 Pet 3:16, the “unlearned” twist Scripture to their own destruction.

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*, pp. 118-119).

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 B.C.).

Common errors in hermeneutics

[This subject will be thoroughly covered in appropriate courses in the biblical studies departments; here only some trends will be indicated.]

Allegorism

Allegorism is the unwarranted interpretation of literal statements into other meanings through some principle or scheme of allegorical meaning.

Having begun in the Alexandrian schools of Jewish interpretation under Philo and Christian interpretation under Clement, Origen, and others, it spread through the church and became dominant from the time of Augustine through the Reformation.

Allegorism is of necessity extremely subjective, and results in a Bible that can mean many things to many people.

The modern redemptive-historical school in Reformed theology, while emphasizing an important point that the Bible presents a unified theme of God's covenant of grace working out through the history of Israel, easily can fall into unwarranted allegorism. Its practitioners often

seek to “see Christ” in every passage, and produce an allegorical interpretation when the text does not call for it.

Traditionalism

To counteract the threat of the various heresies, the early catholic church sought agreement of doctrine and interpretation in the unity of the bishops of the churches. In time, the Roman Catholic Church declared that its interpretation of Scripture was the only acceptable one.

Jesus had spoken how the traditions of men could make null the commandment of God (Matt 15:1-6).

In Reformed circles, sometimes the writings of Calvin, Hodge, or some other theologian take on almost traditional authority. We must be sure we base our convictions on the Bible itself.

Rationalism

The idea that all truth is subject to our judgment arose in the Enlightenment, and spread throughout the Western world. The old Modernism declared that miracles were impossible, and that the Bible must be interpreted in a non-miraculous manner, teaching simply the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. J. Gresham Machen valiantly fought against this Modernism, showing that the supernatural was the essence of the Bible and of Jesus Christ.

Many of the arguments rationalists used to show “contradictions” and supposedly false historical or scientific statements in the Bible are still in circulation (even though they all have been answered by biblical scholars). Some of these same arguments were used by the faculty members at Fuller Theological Seminary in the early 1960s, when that seminary moved away from its position of the inerrancy of Scripture.

[For details, see Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (1976) and *The Bible in the Balance* (1979); see also George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (1987).]

Subjectivism

There have always been people who have adjusted Scripture to fit with their own scheme of thought. In the twentieth century there are various forms of this error.

One strain of error is an extreme devotionalism, which looks only for a present “blessing” in one’s personal life. Often the context and original intent of the passage are overlooked or ignored.

Another strain of error is existential theology, which sees the Bible as in need of “demythologizing,” in order to eliminate the time-bound ideas of the ancient world, save the “kernel” of truth, and re-mythologize it in terms of today’s prevailing philosophy.

A third strain of error is the modern effort to see the Bible through the lens of a current political, sociological, or economic theory or movement. Common examples today include liberation theology, which develops a meaning of Scripture along Marxist lines; feminist theology, which seeks to eliminate any gender hierarchy; and postmodern theology, which denies universal truth-norms. Another is the prosperity/faith-claim approach, which uses Scripture as a manual to advance personal self-interest. Recently “politically correct” translations have sought to remove or downplay distinctions in sex, race, disability, and even sexual orientation.

[For a discussion of the gender-inclusive debate regarding the NIV, see *CBMW News* 2:3 (June 1997), 1, 3-13]

Subjectivism fails by placing the reader over Scripture, instead of his being subject to Scripture. By so doing, the authority is placed in man, not in God, and the Scripture is necessarily misinterpreted. It would be more honest simply to reject the Bible, than to seek to re-interpret it in a way foreign to its own claims.

Excessive literalism

Some proponents of biblical infallibility go to an opposite extreme and seek to squeeze more meaning from the text than it was intended to convey. Here are a few examples of this kind of error:

Overuse of etymology

A word’s etymology is an analysis of the words or parts of words that make up the word. Often it’s related to the word’s history. 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.

Overuse of English word meanings

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

Cf. “fish,” Genesis “kind,” “fornication,” “adultery” and “kill” in the Ten Commandments

The use of synonyms is common in all literature. Some interpreters overuse the distinction of synonyms in a passage, such as the use of different terms for “love” or for the “soul/spirit/mind” complex.

Overuse of grammar

While the grammar of the Hebrew or Greek text may shed light on the proper interpretation of a text in a way not evident in the translation, normally the amount of information in the original is similar to that found in a good translation. Sometimes interpreters are inclined to make too much out of grammatical distinctions that may just be accidental or preferences of style.

- Different cases
- Different tenses
- Presence or absence of the article (as “Jesus was a god” in the NWT)
- Strict use of prepositions

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

Finding multiple meanings

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”

E.g., Matt 6:13 (not in parallel Luke 11:4), the Lord’s Prayer, “deliver us from the evil (or the evil one)”

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).