

Digging for Gold – a Bible Study Course
Exegesis and Hermeneutics

Introduction

Hermeneutics is the general term for (*lit*) interpretation, covering both *what it meant there and then (exegesis)* and *what it means here and now*. There may also a further stage – *application* - that seeks to make the Word specific and relevant to a particular group and is especially the task of *expository preaching*.

Correct interpretation guards against doctrinal error, dubious and eccentric views, presuppositions and prejudices and from the danger of familiarity with the text. We are all influenced by our worldview and experiences, which can hinder us ‘seeing’ clearly what the Bible says and means. Reading what we want into the text is known as *eisegesis*.

Hermeneutics is a science in that it encourages a systematic and analytical approach to Scripture, asking such questions as:

1. What does the text actually say?

This work has usually been done for us by the translators, but there are at times significant differences between them and some texts are by no means unambiguous; in these cases the translators themselves have to become ‘interpreters’.

Some examples: Gen. 1:2 - ‘Spirit of God’ (NIV etc), ‘a mighty wind’ (NEB); Psalm 8:5 - Does Hebrew *elohim* mean angels or God? ; Acts 19:2 ‘...since you believed?’ (AV) or ‘...when you believed?’ (NIV). 1 Tim. 3:1 - is Gk *episkopoi* bishop (AV), overseer (NIV) or pastor (LB)? Rev. 4:11 - ‘by your will’ better than AV ‘for thy pleasure’. Rom. 10:4 – where ‘end of law’ can mean ‘finish’ or ‘goal’.

It is important to know what kind of a translation is being used. They are usually grouped as **literal** (AV, RV, NASB, RSV, ESV), **dynamic equivalent** (NIV, GNB, JB, NEB) and **free paraphrase** (Phillips, LB). The NIV is commonly regarded as a clear and accurate translation but it does tend to lack ‘strength’ (e.g. Matt. 18:3 where ‘change’ should be the passive ‘become converted’).

A further problem concerns passages that may not have been in the original autographs, especially John 7:53-8:11, Mark 16:9-20, 1 John 5:7 (the last is definitely a later addition). Theology should not be based on such passages alone.

2. What background information will help our understanding?

The biblical writings are far removed from us in both time and distance. It is important to have an awareness of –

History, including the national and international politics of the time (e.g. the NT is set against the background of the Roman Empire and the occupation of Palestine).

Geography. Use the maps at the back of your Bible.

Natural science. This can provide key understanding to texts - e.g. the mulberry tree (Luke 17:6) could have 600 year old roots.

Religion. Obviously the beliefs and ceremonies of the OT are crucial for an understanding of the Gospel, but other Jewish practices are also helpful – e.g. the ‘keys’ of the kingdom

passage (Matt. 16:19, 18:18) needs to be understood by comparison with the ceremony of giving the keys of knowledge (i.e. authority) to scribes (cf Isa. 22:22); it was necessary for Jews to hold in their hands whatever was being blessed (Matt. 14:19, Luke 22:17-19).

Culture. There are, of course, interesting lessons to be learnt from knowing the culture of the day (e.g. marriage customs – the bridegroom going to fetch the bride). But sometimes it is not so obvious whether an issue is just cultural - e.g. Does the command about women's headcovering (1 Cor. 11) reflect a social problem that was only relevant to Corinth, or does it have universal and permanent application? If the situation is the same now as then the message is also the same (relevant, for example, when discussing divorce and remarriage).

John Stott calls all this 'the historical principle' without which we are unlikely to understand the original sense of Scripture.

3. What did the writer intend and the original recipients understand?

'A text can never mean what it could not have meant' (Steve Chilcraft). Evangelicals have often been too quick to take everything literally or spiritualize Scriptures rather than follow the natural sense that could have originally been accepted. Take texts at face value – their obvious meaning – before seeking a larger meaning.

- Figures of speech should not be taken literally – e.g. 'finger of God', 'floodgates of heaven'. Allow for poetic licence and hyperbole ('if your eye offends you'). How do you understand phrases such as 'Lamb of God', 'moon into blood', 'This is my body'?
- Allegorizing is the opposite extreme - spiritualizing even the smallest details, e.g. in the parable of the Good Samaritan; and extreme OT typology.
- Care is needed with predictive prophecy. Look for primary fulfilment before applying prophecies to the present day or to eschatology. Where Scripture itself gives a secondary interpretation (e.g. a virgin with child) we readily accept it, but we should be less dogmatic about other prophecies. Beware especially of those who claim special and private revelation about the future.

4. What is the immediate context?

Aim to read and study whole chapters and books rather than short passages, and examine the context of every text.

- *It is important to know to whom statements were made, and why:*
Why were the Corinthians told to do everything 'decently and in order'? And can we ascertain what questions lay behind the various 'Now about...' passages in 1 Corinthians? Does Jesus 'stand at the door and knock' at *unbelievers'* hearts?

- *Read single verses/statements in the light of surrounding teaching:*
'All Israel will be saved' (Rom. 11:26) must be qualified by Paul's teaching about justification by faith alone (not race). What, in context, does 'Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers' mean? (2 Cor. 6:14)

5. What other Scriptures shed light on the subject (distant context)?

Scripture must be compared with Scripture, so that we understand the ‘whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27 AV) and understand how particular passages relate to the whole. This is especially important when handling difficult or obscure texts.

- Ask whether a reference is an isolated one or whether it represents a main thrust of teaching. e.g. Is tongues consistently mentioned as a sign of being baptised in the Spirit?
- Be prepared to look at passages that seem to contradict others; aim for balance and harmonization on, for example, prosperity teaching and ‘healing for all’.
- Note especially that the NT sheds light on the OT, and the epistles explain the gospels (especially the purpose of Christ’s death). The book of Hebrews illustrates this principle well. ‘Interpret the earlier in the light of the later and fuller’ (Bruce Milne).
- Interpret the obscure by the plain. If you find Revelation difficult then look first at other passages that give more straightforward teaching about Last Things (e.g. Thessalonians).

6. How should it be applied today?

The questions already considered above will often lead us to an understanding of the present day application. The following guidelines should help to check our interpretation:

Look for principles rather than details, and for plain sense rather hidden meaning.

Ask whether the matter is cultural (limited application) or moral and spiritual (universal application). Our own culture should not determine our understanding - rather, Scripture determines our response to our culture.

Make a distinction between things that are mandatory (commanded) and those that are valid but optional. This is especially important with narrative passages.

If you have a strong understanding on one line of teaching do not let it blind you to interpretations that are different from your own, or to other truths.

On a personal level be prepared to accept interpretations that will correct and challenge you (Heb. 4:12) as well as those that contain promises and blessing.

Conclusion

The subject of Scripture is Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27), so look *for* Him as you read and study. The Helper in understanding Scripture is the Holy Spirit (John 16:13), so look *to* Him for illumination.