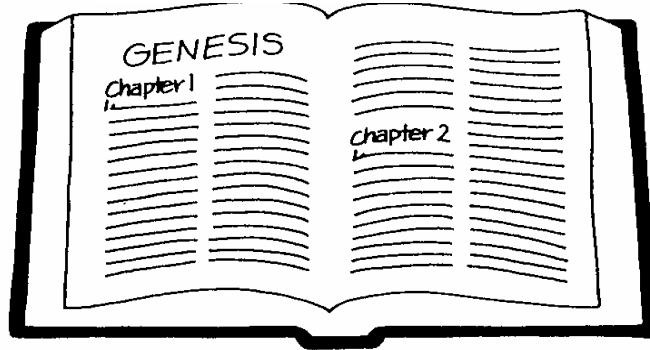


How to Interpret the Bible

Correspondence Course #2



Introduction

Lesson 1 of this study examined both the internal and external evidences for the authenticity of the Bible. Lesson 2 will examine how to approach the book. This will be the most important lesson for you to grasp. There are hundreds of denominational bodies of religious organizations all claiming to be giving God glory. Laying claims to giving God glory and actually doing so are often two different events. Giving God true glory only occurs as one obeys the words of Jesus (John 15:7-10). Honest individual will search, study, understand and make the application in their lives (Luke 8:15).

Interpretation of God's word is of utmost importance to one professing to be a Christian. After all, it will be His very words that judge us at the end of times (John 12:48). The word hermeneutic (interpretation) is found seven times in the New Testament. Three verbs and four nouns are used in the New Testament and translated 'interpretation.' In fact, our English word 'hermeneutic' is derived from the Greek verb '*hermeneuo*' which means to interpret. The word Hermeneutic is "the science of interpretation, esp. of the scriptures. The branch of theology that deals with principles of Biblical exegesis."¹

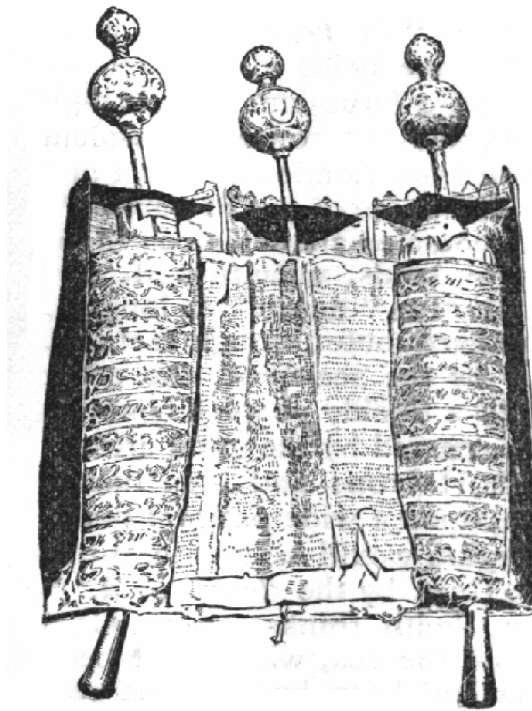
The word Hermeneutics is "derived from a Greek word connected with the name of the god Hermes, the reputed messenger and interpreter of the gods. It would be wrong to infer from this that the word denotes the interpretation or exegesis of Sacred Scripture. Usage has restricted the meaning of hermeneutics to the science of Biblical exegesis, that is, to the collection of rules that govern

¹ Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary; 1996 Random House Value Publishing, Inc.

the right interpretation of Sacred Scripture. Exegesis is therefore related to hermeneutics, as language is to grammar, or as reasoning is to logic."²

A Brief History of Hermeneutics

The study of Hermeneutics is nothing new. Perception, reason, interpretation, and understanding have always been a part of God's word. From the beginning of creation God gave laws that he expected to not only be perceived or interpreted but followed (cf. Genesis 2:16-17). Moses appealed to Israel's ability to reason in Deuteronomy 32:29. When Ezra, the scribe, read the Law before the people they perceived (understood by interpretation) the law (Nehemiah 8:7-8). Jesus interpreted the OT scriptures that pointed to his coming after He was tempted by the devil (Luke 4:17-21). Philip, preaching to the Ethiopian Eunuch, interpreted scriptures (Acts 8:30-40). Hermeneutics or interpretation is, therefore, a Biblical practice. The theological practice of hermeneutics came later. "The history of every science shows that practice precedes theory. Language, for instance, had been in use for many generations before systematic grammars were written, health had been the object of care for centuries before the growth of the science of medicine."³



Consider this brief theological history of Hermeneutics:

- "Not long after the days of Christ, R. Hillel set forth seven hermeneutic rules (middoth), among which are found the inference from the greater to

² www.newadvent.org (Catholic Encyclopedia).

³ Ibid.

the less, from the general to the particular, from the context, and from parallel passages."⁴

- Second century AD, R. Yishma increased Hillel's hermeneutic to 13 rules. His focus was on harmonizing what he felt to be contradictory passages.
- "The Fathers of the third and fourth centuries suggested many rules of interpretation without collecting them into any distinct work. Besides Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, Origen proposed and defended against Jews and heretics his rules of exegesis in his work "De principiis."⁵
- "About A. D. 390 the Donatist Tychonius published a work entitled "Septem regulae ad inquirendum et inveniendum sensum S. Scripturae", which was both incomplete and infected with error; it was on this account that St. Augustine (d. 430) wrote his work "De doctrinâ Christianâ libri quatuor" in which he treated the rules of interpretation more satisfactorily than had ever been done before his time."⁶
- In opposition to Origen (d. 254 De prin. Iv), the Antiochean school produced hermeneutic works by Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 429) and Chrysostom (d. 407).
- Isidore of Pelusium (d. about 440-450) left letters explaining the hermeneutic principles of the School of Antioch.
- Many other hermeneutic works were written during the Middle Ages. If the reader is interested, he or she may search the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia or the Catholic Encyclopedia on the web (www.newadvent.org).
- The reformation period saw a new hermeneutic develop. Men such as Luther and Calvin took the "literal-historical" approach to interpretation.
 - 1.** Luther once said "When I was a monk, I was an expert at allegorizing Scripture, but now my best skill is only to give the literal, simple sense of Scripture, from which comes power, life, comfort, and instruction."⁷
 - 2.** John Calvin once said, "It is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say."⁸ The Catholic Church spoke out in opposition when reformers advocated a hermeneutic that defined scripture as letting it speak for themselves: On April 8, 1546, session 4 of "*The Council of Trent* (Sess. IV, De edit. et usu ss. II.) forbids that, in 'matters of faith and morals belonging to the building-up of Christian doctrine', the Bible be explained against the sense held by the Church, or against the unanimous consent of the Fathers."⁹
 - 3.** The 4th session also decreed "No one shall presume to interpret the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fuller, D. P. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 pg. 865. Fuller quotes from Tischreden, 5285, Oct. 1540.

⁸ Ibid. D.P. Fuller quoting from Calvin's commentary over the book of Romans.

⁹ Ibid.

said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which the holy mother Church hath held and doth hold."¹⁰

- Soon after the above decree by the Catholic Church the reformers developed the slogan or "The Bible is its own interpreter." The Catholic Church continued to rely heavily on the authority of the church. Their dependence on church authority began with Augustine, who is considered the Father of Roman Catholicism. To him, the church stood as a symbol of all external authority.
- The Catholic Church solidified its dependence of church authority through the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas "undertook to accomplish that of which the Roman Church had long dreamed, the formation of a complete system of dogma."¹¹ Aquinas is credited with the teaching concerning the infallibility of the Roman pontiff. Due to mass confusion over scriptures he felt that there was to be "a final infallible voice in determining points of doctrine."¹²
- Later, "the Council of Trent formulated the doctrines of the Roman Church into one body, called 'the Canons and Degrees of the Council of Trent.'"¹³
- In 1564, "*The Tridentine Confession of Faith and the Vatican Council* (Sess. III, Const. de fide cath., cap. ii) enjoin in a positive form that in 'matters of faith and morals belonging to the building-up of Christian doctrine', the Scriptures be explained according to the teaching of the Church and the unanimous consent of the Fathers."¹⁴ One of the "professions" that came from this Council is quoted by Schaff: "I also admit the holy Scriptures, according to that sense which our holy mother Church has held and does hold, to which it belongs to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Scriptures; neither will I ever take and interpret them otherwise than according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers."¹⁵
- The danger with this type of hermeneutic is that "the traditions of men are placed on an equality with the word of God: the authority of the church gives authority to the Gospel."¹⁶
- On July 18, 1870, the Roman Church pronounced the final blow of apostasy. The Vatican Council decreed that the Pope was infallible.
- This hermeneutic approach left all authority in the hands of the church and the final decision of interpretation on the Pope.
- What the Catholic Church deemed to solve the problem of interpretation actually took away man's ability to reason for himself and rely on the God breathed scriptures to be his guide in life. Under the Catholic system, people were compelled to accept the church's interpretation.

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 866

¹¹ Haily, H. *Attitudes and Consequences In The Restoration Movement*; Pg. 18

¹² Ibid. Pg. 18

¹³ Ibid. Pg. 21

¹⁴ Fuller, D. P. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 pg. 866

¹⁵ Haily, H. *Attitudes and Consequences In The Restoration Movement*; Pg. 23.

¹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 16

- In later years members of the body of Christ have come up with a "New Hermeneutic (NH)." Their motto; "out with the old and in with the new!"¹⁷ The NH viewed the "old hermeneutic" as legalistic patternism. Advocates of this system concluded that "truth in its 'fullness and wholeness lies beyond the grasp of the human mind.'"¹⁸

To summarize the history of Biblical hermeneutics is to look at man's attempts to understand or perceive, by the ability of reason, God's revelation. With hermeneutics came 'ism(s).' The suffix 'ism' "denotes action or practice, state or condition, principles, doctrines, a usage or characteristic, devotion or adherence, etc."¹⁹ Ism(s) such as pluralism, subjectivism, existentialism, Agnosticism, relativism, ecumenism, humanism, traditionalism and premillennialism, to name a few, advocate a form of hermeneutic which followers perceive and adhere to. There is also an 'ism' known as Christianity-ism. The hermeneutic of this 'ism' follows the teachings of Jesus Christ, the apostles and prophets of the New Testament. It is interesting to discover that every ism or philosophy exercised by man today can be traced back to an origin. Christianity-ism is traced back to Acts 2 in our New Testament. All other ism(s) are traced back to man's philosophy. Humanism, for example, is traced back to Greek philosophers known as the Sophists (484-415 BC). A brief explanation of these 'ism's' is given in Appendix One.

Interpreting the Scriptures Today

Paul termed anything contrary to the teachings of our Lord as "*the wisdom of this world,*" and the wisdom of the world is "*foolishness with God*" (I Corinthians 3:19). The apostles taught the wisdom of God and most of them, save John, gave up their lives for it. In this section of our study, we will examine the issue of how to interpret the teachings left behind by our Lord to the apostles and prophets. Before we discuss interpretation; however, let us discuss two bible words: truth and law.

Truth

The outline above quotes a Pepperdine Biblical scholar who advocates that truth cannot be obtained. The agnostic also feels that absolute truth cannot be attained, therefore we should not be dogmatic about our beliefs. Those of a relativism disposition reason that "truth changes from one culture to the next, therefore, what the Bible meant in New Testament times is different that what it means today in the 20th century."²⁰

What does the Bible say about truth?

- A. We can know the truth (John 8:32; I Timothy 4:3; II Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 10:26).

¹⁷ Reeves, C. *Out with the Old and In With the New: The Cry of the "New Hermeneutic."* Pg. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 12 (A quote from Pepperdine scholar, Richard T. Hughes).

¹⁹ *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*; 1996 Random House Value Publishing, Inc. pg. 1012.

²⁰ Ibid. pg. 13

- B. God wants us to know the truth (I Timothy 2:4).
- C. God's word is truth (John 17:17; I Thessalonians 2:13).
- D. The truth can be heard (Ephesians 1:13).
- E. The truth can be learned and taught (Ephesians 4:20-21).
- F. The truth is to be obeyed (I Peter 1:22) and followed (II John 4).
- G. The church is known as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (I Timothy 3:15).
- H. We must defend the truth and "speak the truth in love" (Jude 3; I Peter. 3:15; Ephesians 4:15).
- I. We will be punished for not knowing the truth (II Thessalonians 1:8).
- J. If men do not learn the truth, it is not because truth is unattainable; it is because "*they received not the love of the truth*" (II Thessalonians 2:10). (The above is paraphrased from "*Out with the Old and In With The New; A Cry for a New Hermeneutic*" by Chris Reeves).
- K. To say that we cannot know truth is to say that we cannot know Jesus (John 14:6). Who can believe it?

Obviously, then, the Lord desires us to know the truth and he has not given us an impossible task. Many today want to muddy the waters of truth. If it can be proved that truth is unattainable, then lifestyles can be geared to being Christ centered without law. It is the give little and take much philosophy. Take all that Christ has to offer regarding eternal life and give little in return. Moses speaking by inspiration said, "*The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law*" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Our God has given his son on the cross for our sins (John 3:16); however, he never intended man to have no guidance in life. If truth cannot be perceived, surely confusion over God's laws will forever prevail. However, God is not the author of confusion (I Corinthians 14:33). God has laid down a pattern that is to be followed (Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 4:6; II Timothy 1:13; II John 9).

Law

One who seeks to interpret scripture must first understand that truth can be obtained, and secondly, that law does exist. The New Testament is law. God revealed his message through Christ, the apostles and prophets laying down law, which he intended to be followed (Ephesians 3:3-5).

Let us consider the following regarding law:

- A.** The New Testament is identified as Law (Romans 3:27, 8:2; Galatians 6:2; I Corinthians 9:22; James 1:25; 2:12).
- B.** Jeremiah the prophet referred to God's "new covenant" under Christ as law. "I will put my law in their inward parts..." (Jeremiah 31:31 and Hebrews 8:10). The prophet Isaiah said "for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of Jehovah from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).
- C.** The very word "lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23 and I John 3:4) indicates the law of God.

D. If there is no law to follow then there is no sin (Romans 4:15; I John 3:4).

Now that we know that truth *is* obtainable, the Christian *can understand* it (Luke 8:15; Ephesians 3:4), and law *does exist* in the New Testament, we must acknowledge that there is a way to handle aright God's word (to interpret by means of reason). The Christian is commanded to do so (II Timothy 2:15).

It has been said that all things spoken are either said explicitly, implicitly, or by example. To say something explicitly is to say it directly or plainly. To say something implicitly is to say it by implication. To follow another's example is to emulate an action. God's word is no different. When God tells us, through His word, to do something we follow it by proper interpretation. The apostle Paul stated, "*whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*" (Colossians 3:17). In other words, we need the authority of Jesus Christ for all that we do.

The chief priests and the elders of the Jews recognized the need for authority when they asked Jesus, "*By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?*" (Matthew 21:23-27). Jesus answered with a question of his own, "*The baptism of John; where was it from? From heaven or from men?*" (Matthew 21:25). Jesus' answer indicated that there are only two sources of authority: Heaven and Men; Divine and Human. Therefore, as Paul said in Colossians 3:17, let us **establish authority from Heaven** for all that we do!

To begin, let's define two terms:

1. **Establish:** "to introduce and put (a law, for example) into force" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, pg. 466).
2. **Authority:** "The power of rule or government (the power of him whose WILL and COMMANDS must be submitted to by others and obeyed)" (Thayer # 1849). (cf. Jude 25 and Matthew 28:18).

Now, for an action to be lawful to God (the lawgiver) it must be found in his word. If I want to establish authority for ANY (cf. Colossians 3:17) action, I must not use my own thoughts, but that which has been revealed through revelation (Galatians 1:11-12). We have no option then but to give book, chapter, and verse for all that we do! Let's examine this thought closely. Remember, the words and thoughts transferred in any language are done so by either explicit (direct) statements, implicit (things said by inference) statements, or by examples (everyday actions).

Direct Statements

We find explicit (or direct) statements, commands, or precepts used by Jesus and His apostles to get His revelation across to man. Read and study the following examples.

Matthew 4:4-10

Matthew 22:23-33; 34-40

I Corinthians 11:23-24 (Speaking of the Lord's supper in this passage, the

apostle Paul gave an explicit statement when he said, "**This do** in remembrance of me" (v. 24). That leaves us with no options; we must partake of the Lord's supper.)

I Corinthians 14:37

II Peter 3:1-2

I John 2:3-4

Within these precepts we find both specific and generic commands given.

- **Specific** means: "precisely formulated or restricted: specifying or explicit." Specific authority excludes every thing not particularly specified. God has made the choice, and man is left no option.
- **Generic**, or general, authority includes any thing, method, or means of execution that falls within the class or order of the precept, example, or necessary inference. It includes all, within the scope and class of the command, necessary to carry out the command. God gives the authority, but He leaves to man the choice as to the how of doing it. The action is set out, but the "how" is not spelled out.

General authority includes; specific authority excludes. For example: God told Noah to build an ark of Gopher wood (Genesis 6:14). Thus God **explicitly** told Noah to: first of all, build an ark, and, second, to make the ark of Gopher wood. The **generic command** was to build however the **explicit command** was the species of wood. Noah was at liberty to use various tools to accomplish God's command to build; however, he was not at liberty to use a different wood than gopher. Had Noah substituted pinewood for Gopher, the ark would have been an abomination to God!

The story of Nadab and Abihu is indelibly impressed in our minds. Nadab and Abihu (Aaron's two sons) brought "*strange fire*" before God's altar and they were punished by death (cf. Leviticus 10). This was an awful incident. However; it illustrates that only that which God authorizes is acceptable to him.

Implication (Inference):

Inference is defined as "to derive by reasoning; conclude or judge from premises or evidences." To say something implicitly is to say it by implication (inference). When a command is neither expressly stated nor specifically exemplified, it may be determined by logical induction. However, let it be observed that in order to establish scriptural authority the inference must be **NECESSARY**. That is, it must be the *only* inference that can be made from the statement. For example, I cannot conclude that infants of Lydia's household were baptized for the remission of their sins simply because Acts 16:15 uses the word "household." That is merely one possible inference. To be authorized, the inference must be *necessarily* implied.

Jesus and the apostles taught by inference. Read and study the following examples.

Matthew 3:16

Matthew 22:23-33

Acts 15:7-11

Acts 20:7 (Consider the Lord's supper. I Corinthians 11:24 (see note above) indicates by explicit statement that we MUST partake of the Lord's supper (LS). Acts 20:7, by example, indicates the time of partaking the LS, the first day of the week (see note below). By implication, this same verse tells us the frequency of partaking of the LS. Just as when Exodus 20:8 teaches that God's people under the Law given to Moses were to keep the Sabbath, and that included every Sabbath of every week, we understand that every week today has a first day, Sunday. Therefore, the LS is to be taken every first day of every week.)

I Corinthians 1:13

Hebrews 4:6-9

Examples

Jesus and His apostles also taught by example. What constitutes an authoritative Biblical example? I Corinthians 4:16-17; Philippians 4:9, and I Thessalonians 1:6-7 indicates that the binding example is defined by the apostle's actions. Read and study the samples below.

Matthew 12:1-8; 38-42

Acts 20:7 (The apostle Paul and his companions were headed back to Judea at the end of their third tour of preaching. They stopped in the coastal city of Troas for a purpose: "*upon the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread (Lord's supper)...*" Therefore we have an apostolic example of *when* the early church partook of the Lord's supper. It was taken on the first day of the week. Since they did this, and we are commanded to follow their example (Philippians 4:9), we must partake of the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week.)

I Corinthians 4:16-17

I Corinthians 11:1

I Thessalonians 1:5-7

I Peter 2:21

Silence in the Scriptures

There is one more principle we must consider when discussing the interpretation of the scriptures. If we find no precept, example, or necessary implication, we must conclude then that the act is not "authorized" by Jesus Christ. The silence of God is to be respected (Hebrews 7:11-14).

Many people today want to see a "thou shalt not" in the Bible for unauthorized works. Those who make this statement have not read Hebrews 7:11-14. God does not have to say, "thou shalt not." If God proclaims by explicit statement, implicit statement, or example a thought or action, that settles the matter. Hebrews 7 indicates that Levites were to be priests. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah "*as to which Moses spake nothing concerning priests*" (Hebrews 7:14). The point, of course, is that God did not have to specify that those of the tribe of Judah were not to be priests; he had already revealed that the Levites were to be priests. That excluded any other tribe.

Summary of Hermeneutics

History reveals that man has often sought a hermeneutic approach to the scriptures. However, as this same history reveals, man has often failed to realize God has a method of interpreting his message incorporated in his message. Our Lord used direct commands or explicit statements, examples, and inference (implication) to get his laws across. Truth can be known regarding the revelation of God. However, we must be willing to put forth the effort towards perception. By taking context and language into consideration along with the above mentioned methods of interpretation used by Jesus and the apostles we will know the truth and confusion will be eliminated.

Remember, the Lord has encouraged us to do so: *"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; who would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth"* (I Timothy 2:3-4).

Appendix

"Isms"

Consider the following "isms."

Pluralism: "The doctrine that reality is composed of many ultimate substances. The belief that no single explanatory system or view of reality can account for all the phenomena of life" (AHD 955).

Subjectivism "The doctrine that all knowledge is restricted to the conscious self and its sensory states; the theory that individual conscience is the only valid standard of moral judgment" (AHD 1212).

Existentialism: "regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts" (AHD 475).

Agnosticism: "the doctrines of the agnostics, holding that certainty, first or absolute truths, are unattainable and that only perceptual phenomena are objects of exact knowledge. Theol. A theory that does not deny God but denies the possibility of knowing Him" (AHD 87-88).

Relativism: "The theory that truth is an ethical relative to the individual or group that holds it" (AHD 1043).

Ecumenism: "A movement seeking to achieve worldwide unity among religions through greater cooperation and improved understanding" (AHD 438).

Antinomianism: "A member of a Christian sect holding that faith alone is necessary to salvation: Gk. Anti, against + nomos, law" (AHD 115).

Humanism: "A doctrine or attitude that is concerned primarily with human beings and their values, capacities, and achievements" (AHD 627).

Questions:

1. How shall you and I bring glory to the name of God? (Cf. John 15:7-10).
2. Fill in the blanks. “He that rejects me, and receives not my _____, hath one that judges him: the _____ that I have spoken, the same shall _____ him in the last day” (John 12:48).
3. Define the word “hermeneutic.”
4. Give the date in which the Catholic church officially announced the infallibility of the Pope:
5. What does the Bible have to say about “*truth?*”
6. Fill in the blank. The apostle Paul said, “wherefore be ye not unwise, but _____ what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17).
7. Is the New Testament a law?
8. Fill in the blank. “And _____ ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by Him” (Colossians 3:17).
9. Define the word “authority.”
10. What are two sources of authority? (Cf. Matthew 21:23-27).
11. Explicit statements, implicit statements, and examples transfer ideas. Please define each of these terms and explain why God does not have to say, “thou shalt not” in order for an action to be unauthorized (Hebrews 7).

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