

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. — Psalm 119.105

Timothy Ministries

Mini-Seminary

HERMENEUTICS 1

ESSENTIALS FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

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The Problem of Meaning: What does Exodus 29.4 mean?

Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the doorway of the tent of meeting and wash them with water.

We can express the seven meanings of this text in the following ways:

- 1. Conventional Meaning (What does the text say Grammatically?):** God commanded Moses to bring Aaron and his sons to the tabernacle entrance and wash them there with water (immerse them, according to rabbinical understanding of the text).
- 2. Intentional Meaning (What was the point of the text?):** God instructed that a water ceremony (i.e., immersion) be part of marking the end of the priests' private lives and the beginning of their public service to Himself and His people.
- 3. Resonant Meaning:** The immersion of the priests would serve as a reminder of Israel's break from her old life in Egypt, when God brought the nation across the Red Sea to begin her new life of service to Him as "a kingdom of priests" (Ex 19.6). The immersion of the priests resonates with the earlier "baptism" of the nation "in the cloud and in the sea" (1Co 10.2).
- 4. Typological Meaning:** The immersion of the priests foreshadowed the baptism of Jesus in particular and the baptism of His followers in general; in every case, baptism marks the beginning of priestly service to God.
- 5. Practical Meaning:** Christ followers must see themselves as priests and ministers, and understand that by their baptism they are consecrated to service in God's kingdom.
- 6. Esthetic Meaning:** The revelation of the profound privilege of being called into God's work as a "coworker" warms the heart. The imagery of leaving the old life behind on the far shore of the sea leaves one in awe.
- 7. Mystical Meaning: Roman Catholic:** The immersion of the priests points to the power of sanctified water to remit sin. **Lutheran:** As the ceremonial water sanctified priests, so baptism sanctifies us by producing faith and effecting our new birth. **Evangelical:** The baptism of the priests points to the fact that God's servant must be born again by "the washing of regeneration" (Tit 3.5).

Presuppositions In Biblical Interpretation: Our Options

DO I BELIEVE

THIS?

OR

THIS?

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| <p><input type="checkbox"/> God is the ultimate author of the Bible (The Holy Spirit directed human authors in writing all the varied literature of the Bible; therefore the Bible can be trusted as a comprehensive guide for truth and right living).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is true (Scripture presents facts that accurately correspond to reality; the miracles and supernatural events it reports really occurred and were capable of human verification. Predictive prophecy is real).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is objective revelation from the Holy Spirit and is not amenable to subjective interpretations based on human feeling or opinion (cf. 2Pe 1.20-21).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God creates directly by decree. He can work through process, but does not need process to form inanimate or living things (God filled and ordered the world in the course of six revolutions of our planet; He created man in the course of one day, directly forming the first man from the dust of the earth).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God instituted marriage, sacrificial rites and covenants, all of which were imitated and adapted by pagan peoples in patriarchal times (the direction of cultural influence flowed <i>from</i> the early people of God <i>to</i> the pagan peoples).</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is a human production (Gifted human authors and editors produced the books of the Bible to entertain and to promote political and religious agendas; it cannot be trusted as a metanarrative, i.e., a comprehensive guide for truth and right living).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is primarily myth (Scripture presents etiological legends that offer metaphorical explanations for the origins of things like the universe and the nation of Israel, and for the causes of things like human suffering. Predictive prophecy is a literary illusion).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is inspired in such a way as to speak uniquely to each reader, and so can be interpreted in countless different ways.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God creates by evolutionary processes (Genesis 1 is not to be taken literally; the days of creation represent long ages of untold duration; the idea that Adam and Eve were historically the very first man and woman cannot be taken seriously).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Sacrifices and treaties evolved among pagan peoples in dark antiquity: sacrifices as attempts to appease and manipulate the gods, and covenants as a means to maintain peace with <i>or</i> <i>dominate</i> rival tribes. The authors of the Pentateuch later modeled the biblical sacrifices and covenants on these pagan phenomena, giving them new religious meaning (the direction of cultural influence flowed <i>from</i> the pagan peoples <i>to</i> the developing people of God).</p> |
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Presuppositions In Biblical Interpretation: Continued ...

A few more presuppositions make an important difference in how we interpret the prophetic Scriptures:

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| <p><input type="checkbox"/> God is intimately concerned with mankind and intervenes in human affairs (= <i>theism</i>: miraculous and supernatural things happen in our world when God introduces divine power into the natural order).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Creation is the setting for a cosmic war, and a battle for the souls of human beings (God has sovereignly <i>permitted</i> evil in our world for His own deep and holy purposes, but He will destroy evil in the end and restore all things to right and good).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The church, defined as <i>the corporate body of all who have been purchased by Christ's blood</i> (Acts 20.28), was born when Adam and Eve put their faith in the promised Redeemer of Genesis 3.15. (The church's NT phase is more advanced than its OT phase, but alike in its underlying principles).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God has never renounced His promises to national, ethnic Israel ("the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable," Romans 11.29; Jeremiah 31.35-36).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Jerusalem is the geographical center of the eschatological Scriptures (most references to <i>the earth/land</i> in End-Time prophecies refer to the land of Israel, and references to <i>the world</i> refer to the prophetic world roughly contained within the territory of the ancient Roman empire).</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> If there is a God, He keeps Himself aloof from creation and humanity (= <i>deism</i>: miracles and supernatural events cannot happen because they would violate of the laws of physics).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What we perceive as "evil" is simply the on-going struggle for "the survival of the fittest" (there is no personal devil, and morality is a social construct; we must simply do our best to alleviate human and animal suffering).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The church was born on the day of Pentecost and includes only believers from that time until the moment of the rapture (= <i>Dispensationalism</i>: Some forms teach that people in the OT times were saved by different means than we are, and didn't have the Holy Spirit)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God no longer has any plan for national Israel, since they rejected Jesus's offer of the kingdom (= <i>Supersessionism</i>: all can safely ignore the blessing of Jacob [= Israel] in Genesis 27.29).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> End-Time prophecy should be interpreted in the light of the world as it is today; if there is a geographical center for End-Time prophecy, it's probably a city like New York.</p> |
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HERMENEUTICAL INFLUENCES

ERAS	THREE INFLUENCES		
	Cultural/Academic	Philosophical	Theological
AD 30 - 135 Early Christianity	Hebraic Worldview Hebrew Bible Septuagint (LXX) and “Translation Greek” ----- Hellenism*		----- Mystery Religions
AD 135 - 400	Hellenistic Worldview Koine Greek	Platonism	Mystery Religions Gnosticism
AD 400 - 1600 Mid. Ages & Renais.	Roman Worldview Latin Vulgate	Aristotle (Logic)	
AD 1600 - 1750 Reformation	Hebrew Bible	----- Plato	Augustine Apocalypticism Supersessionism
AD 1750 - 1850 Classics Revival	Classical Greek	Plato	----- Dispensationalism
AD 1850 - 1950 Modernism	Hebrew Bible Koine Greek	----- Plato	----- Pentecostalism
AD 1950 - 2024	Holocaust Psychology Dead Sea Scrolls and First-Century Studies ----- Hebraic Worldview Septuagint (LXX)	----- Postmodernism	Social Gospel Ecumenical Movement Liberation Theology Feminist Theology ----- Ecotheology

* Items below the dashed lines represent secondary influences that are growing or fading.

“St. Paul’s theology ... was not understood by the Greek Fathers. This carries with it the strong probability that St. Paul’s theology was not really Greek, but Jewish.” — G. H. Clayton, *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, Vol. 1, p. 377.

The Three Cultural Lenses

Through which lens(es) do you read Scripture?

- HEBRAIC** (Recommended, since all the biblical authors were Semitic; this lens emphasizes the practical.)
- HELLENISTIC** (i.e., Greek, emphasizes the mystical; this is the cultural lens of Eastern Christianity.)
- ROMAN** (Emphasizes the legal; this is the cultural lens of the European Reformers and their heirs.)

Using the lenses to interpret the Bible's teaching about Christian baptism:

- **Hebraic Lens:** The power of Christian baptism is in its practical testimony to the lordship of Jesus Christ, particularly when baptism is received in the face of persecution; the greater the cultural cost of a person's baptism, the deeper a commitment to Christ it expresses.
- **Hellenistic Lens:** The power of Christian baptism is in the water that has been sanctified by priestly invocation, such that it has the power to wash away sin or even produce saving faith.
- **Roman Lens** (historically often superimposed upon the Hellenistic lens): The power of Christian baptism is in the faith and obedience of the person being baptized (or for infant baptism, in the faith and obedience of the parents/sponsors); thus baptism is often seen as necessary for salvation.

First Steps

 **Read Your Bible:** Get the Genesis-to-Revelation big picture.

Resist the postmodern impulse to cherry-pick only the Bible passages that are pleasing and meaningful to you while ignoring the rest of Scripture. No one should claim to understand the New Testament if they have not read the Old Testament. No one can fully understand passages from either Testament without a fundamental understanding of both Testaments.

 **Check Your Bible:** Paragraphs or stand-alone verses?

The earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of Scripture had neither punctuation (beyond an occasional extra space on a line) nor versification. The interpretation of Scripture for us as English readers is begun by our translators who choose how to divide the Bible into chapters, verses and paragraphs, and how to punctuate the sentences.

Principle 1: Prepare Your Heart

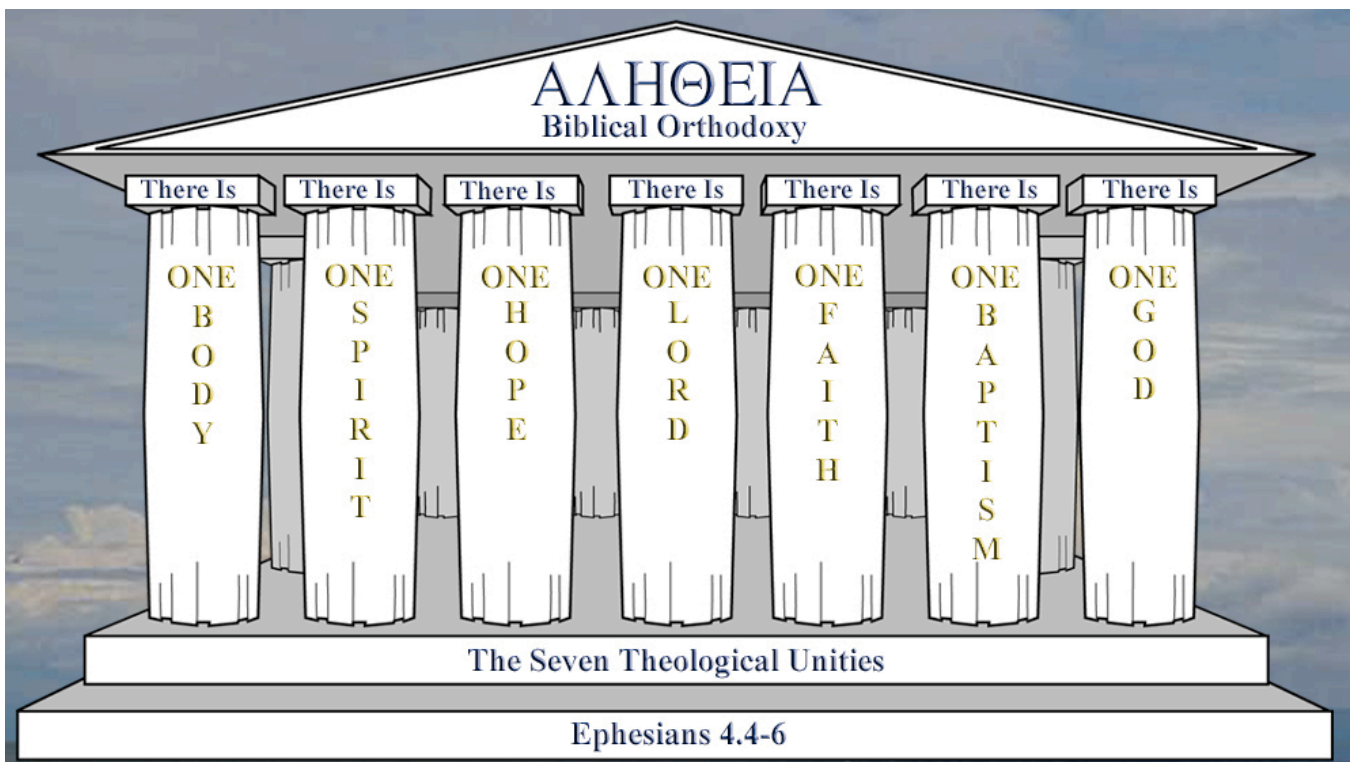
Principle 2: The Testimony Of Jesus Is The Spirit Of Prophecy

Revelation 19.10; James 2.26

Principle 3 (The Berean Principle, The Principle Of Non-Contradiction): Assume That The Parts Of The Biblical Teaching Are Consistent With One Another And With The Bible As A Whole

Isaiah 8.20; Acts 17.11

The Seven Unities: The Apostolic Test For Biblical Orthodoxy



Principle 4: Endeavor To Establish The Intentional Meaning

See Meaning #2 on page 1. The meaning of a biblical text is what God intended it to mean to its original audience. A passage may have additional *application* today that it did not have when first spoken/written, and prophetic passages may have fulfillments not entirely understood by their original hearers, but the words and phrases of a biblical text cannot mean something today that is substantially different from what those words and phrases meant when first spoken/written.

Principle 5: Context Is King

Principle 5A: Interpret a passage of Scripture in a manner consistent with its literary context, i.e., the genre of writing in which it appears.

 See more on Biblical genres on the next page!

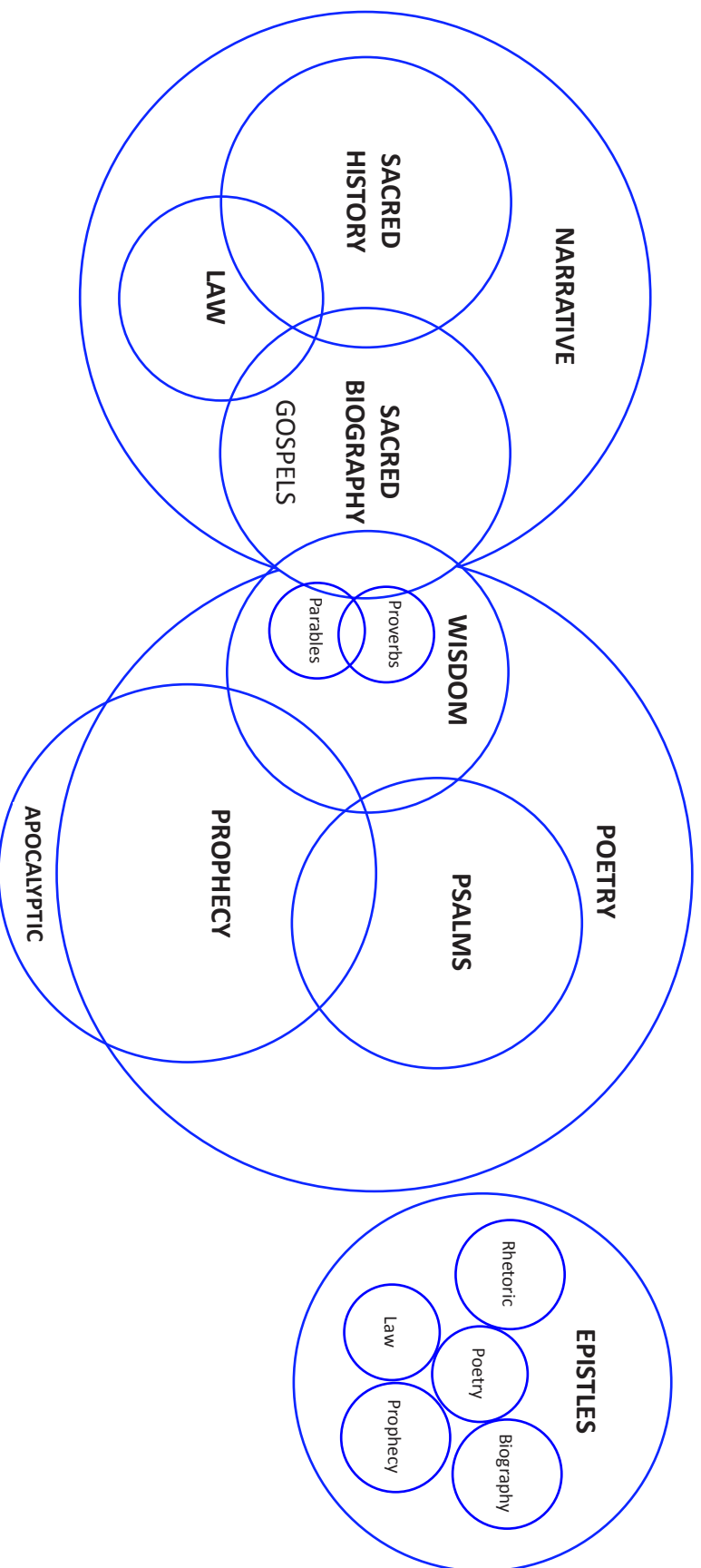
Principle 5B: Interpret a portion of Scripture in a manner consistent with its textual, historical and cultural contexts.

The only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text.... Otherwise biblical texts can be made to mean whatever they mean to any given reader. But such hermeneutics becomes total subjectivity, and who then is to say that one person's interpretation is right and another's is wrong? Anything goes.

... the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken. This is the starting point.... *a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.*

— Fee & Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth*, pp. 29-30,74,

The Importance Of Genre In Biblical Interpretation



Different types of literature, called *genres*, serve different purposes, have different compositional structures, and use different semantic devices. Because of these differences, we must apply different hermeneutical rules in the interpretation of each genre. Most hermeneutical rules apply to all the genres, but specific rules must be brought to bear in the areas of each genre's distinctive aspects.

Most genres of literature in the Bible have some overlap with other genres. For example, a narrative or an epistle may contain a verse or two of poetry. A section of law may contain a bit of history. A wisdom book like Ecclesiastes, may contain some biography. Thus, the reader must recognize both the overarching genre of a book or larger passage *as a whole*, as well as remain aware of the embedded sub-genres, in order to determine the specific interpretive rules to apply. In light of this, we can offer certain cautions: **We must not read wisdom literature as if it were law or promise; we must not read apocalyptic literature as if it were narrative history; etc. For example, proverbs are not promises, but instead teach the probable result of a given action or set of circumstances.**

Epistles in the New Testament often contain a mixture of epistolary elements (naming of author and/or recipient, greeting, salutation proper, thanksgiving, prayer, doxology/benediction) along with bits of biography, history, law, rhetoric and wisdom. The book of Revelation is mostly **apocalyptic** literature, but it begins with epistles, and understanding epistolary elements is vital for interpreting the Revelation's opening verses.

Principle 6: Begin With The Literal Sense, But Recognize Idiom, Figures Of Speech, Rhetorical Devices, and Cultural Context

We must not interpret a Bible passage as figurative or symbolic when the author intended it to be understood literally. *Neither must we think that* to take a passage literally is to ignore its idiomatic aspects. Also, we must not think we are interpreting well if we take a passage “literally” while simultaneously taking it out of its historical-cultural context.

Principle 7: Expect Literal (But Sometimes Progressive, Cumulative) Fulfillments Of Bible Prophecy

Like biblical types, biblical prophecies are often fulfilled progressively:

type \rightsquigarrow antitype \rightsquigarrow fulfillment

prophecy \rightsquigarrow pf^{n1} \rightsquigarrow pf^{n2} ... \rightsquigarrow fulfillment $^{\Omega}$

Principle 8: Don't Interpret Interpretations

Principle 9: Use Clear Passages To Interpret Ambiguous Or Obscure Ones

Principle 10: The Likelihood Of A Correct Interpretation Is In Direct Proportion To Its Support From An *Explicit* Statement Of Scripture.

Explicit VS. Implicit

Which of America's fifty states were you born in?

Implicit answer: I was born in Des Moines.

Explicit answer: I was born in Iowa.

... if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

1 Corinthians 14.8

Want To Continue Learning About This Topic?

Here are some recommended resources:

A Few Books & Articles

Note: Inclusion of a book in this list does not imply complete endorsement of a work's contents by Roderick Graciano or Timothy Ministries.

Corley, Bruce, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy. *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, 2nd ed., (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002). This book is for the student who wants to know *everything* about biblical interpretation, including the history of biblical interpretation in the different epochs of the Christian era.

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2014).

Graciano, Roderick. *Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses: 21 Rules For Interpreting The Bible*. http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/Polishing_2020.pdf

— *Making The Invisible Visible: The Characteristics Of Hebraic Thought And Their Implications For Interpreting The Bible*. http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/Invisible_2011.pdf

— *The Seven Spirits Of God, And The Man Who Will Judge The World*. http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/The_Seven_Spirits_Of_God.pdf

Kaiser, Walter C., Jr., and Moisés Silva, eds. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007). This volume contains valuable information for the advanced student.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). The beginner will appreciate some of Part 1, then this book gets more technical.

Plummer, Robert L. *40 Questions About Interpreting The Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010).

Zuck, Roy B. *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, Edited by Craig Bubeck Sr., (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991).

E-mail The Instructor

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