

Rules of Biblical Interpretation

EXEGESIS & HERMENEUTICS by Institute of Religion (CGI Jamaica)

What is exegesis and hermeneutics?

A very simple definition of exegesis is the interpretation of scripture. The careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning, in other words, an attempt to hear the words of the Bible, as the original recipients were to have heard them. Hermeneutics is the set of principles or rules employed in interpreting scripture. Exegesis and hermeneutics are sometimes used interchangeably.

Why exegesis or hermeneutics?

Exegesis and hermeneutics are important because the bible is not an easy book to understand. Yes, some passages are pretty straightforward, but many are not so explicit. The books of the bible were written many years ago, in different languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic), in a different culture and era. Even back then, persons had difficulties understanding portions of scripture. Peter recognized it and mentioned it in his writings (2 Peter 3:16). It is sheer folly then for some of us in this present time, in a completely different era and tradition, without training, to come to scripture purporting to know what the original writers intended for their audience. The numerous denominations in Christianity and their diverse, and many times contradictory doctrines reveal a lack of proper understanding of scriptures.

And yet there is an approach we can take in studying scriptures that will enlighten us and make the meanings of the bible clearer to us. We therefore offer the following principles, which if employed, should clarify aspects of the bible and open our understanding to the truths therein.

Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture:

— The very first thing we should do before we attempt to understand scripture or carry out a bible study is to pray and ask God to open our understanding (1 Corinthians 2:12-14).

— Do not come to scriptures with preconceived ideas (2 Peter 1:20). This is violated so many times when we try to interpret the scriptures. We have the tendency to impose or read into scripture texts our denominational beliefs and doctrines. We ought to divest ourselves of previously held beliefs and approach the scriptures with an open mind intent on finding out exactly what the author was trying to say. As a matter of general knowledge, the act of reading your own ideas into a text is known as eisegesis. Please note the spelling and do not confuse with exegesis. Examples: Hebrews 8:13, Romans 14 (The abolition of the Sabbath is usually read into these passages when no such reference is made).

— Equip yourselves with different translations of the English bible. Many persons possess the King James Version of the books of the bible. Sometimes however, a passage of scripture is easier to understand when it is rendered in another version. In addition, newer bible versions have corrected some of the errors which evidently exist in other versions, eg. the KJV. Some versions that can be helpful in bible study are the New King James Version, the New International Version and the Revised Standard Version. We have to be careful about some versions, as they are too liberal with their translations.

Example: Revelation 5:8 – 10 in the KJV and NIV translations.

King James Version

8And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

9And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

10And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

New International Version

8And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb.

Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

9And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

The first thing to note is that in verses 9 and 10 of the KJV the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘we’ are used indicating that the 24 elders around God’s throne were once men who lived on the earth. They died, but are now before God’s throne worshipping Him. This interpretation supports the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and that heaven is the reward of the saints.

However, notice the difference in the NIV, the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘we’ are absent and instead we have the 24 elders saying that Jesus has redeemed men or persons from the earth and have made ‘them’, not ‘us’ kings and priests. This rendering shifts the meaning of the text in that one can no longer definitively state that the 24 elders were men who lived on the earth. Hence, this text can no longer be used to support the immortal soul doctrine or the usual teaching about men going to reside in heaven.

The NIV, which is a more recent and modern translation, relied on older and more credible manuscripts. These older manuscripts do not contain the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘we’. The literal rendering of the text from these manuscripts for example is “...and have purchased for God with your blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation...” The translators of the NIV inserted men and the associated pronouns as they sought to accurately express the original text. Revelation 5:8-10 would be questionable as a proof text for the immortal soul doctrine based on this information. Hence, reading from various bible translations is a profitable exercise.

→ Do a literary analysis of the text. This means that we must determine what type of literary or writing style is being employed. There are various writing styles in scripture and they should not be treated or understood in the same manner (history, poetry, prophecy (apocalypse), proverbs, parables, simile, metaphor, irony, hyperbole, anthropomorphism etc.).

History – History passages recount events of the past in the way they actually occurred. Thus, history passages of scripture are generally interpreted literally e.g. Story of the children of Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

Parable – Not to be read in a typically literal way. A parable is a short story that illustrates a moral or spiritual lesson or truth. e.g. Luke 16:19-31. To understand a parable one must first understand the common idea and then seek the main point or emphasis of comparison.

Prophecies – Have to do with things that are yet to occur, cannot be read literally, use a lot of symbolism or figurative language e.g. Revelation 13:1. There are books of the bible, which are not about prophecy that use a lot of symbolism or figurative language. For example, Jesus used figurative language frequently. One such instance can be found in Matt 16:6.

Literary styles that can be found in the bible are:

Hyperbole – Literary exaggeration for emphasis or rhetorical effect. Lk 14:26: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” (Our love for God must be so strong, that our love to others would seem like hate in comparison.)

Metaphor – A direct comparison of two items, eg., James 3:6: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.”

Simile – A comparison of two items using a connective such as like, as, etc James. 1:23-24: “Anyone who listens to the words but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror, and after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

Personification -Something inanimate is given human form, Prov. 9:1-6: Wisdom is personified as a woman calling out to those in need.

Anthropomorphism -This type of personification involves ascribing human characteristics (physical form, human-like emotion, etc.) to God in order to make Him more understandable to us. Gen. 6.6: “The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”

Types – Literary prefiguring: that is, one person or item serves as a metaphorical prefigure or type of another that is to come later in some particular respect. For example, Isaac in almost being sacrificed serves as a prefiguring and foreshadowing of Christ, the Sabbath is a type of the millennial rest.

→ Do a grammatical analysis. A grammatical analysis would involve a study of the rules governing sentence structure, such as the relationships of the words in sentences, which might include such items as the use of adjectives for description, of verbs to denote action, switching between tenses to move between present and past, punctuations or any use of unusual combinations of words or phrases to create special effects. This is important because the slightest change in punctuation marks, misapplication of parts of speech or any such errors can radically change the meaning of sentences or statements, sometimes with serious consequences.

Simple Illustrations:

- 1 a. Did you see that man eating lobster?
- 1 b. Did you see that man-eating lobster?
- 2 a. Mary Jane and I went to see the latest action film.
- 2 b. Mary, Jane and I went to see the latest action film.

Biblical examples:

The meanings of the following passages change when the positions of the commas change.

Case 1 (a) – Mark 16:9

Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.

Case 1 (b) – Mark 16:9

Now when Jesus was risen, early the first day of the week he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.

Case 2 (a) – Luke 23:43

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Case 2 (b) – Luke 23:43

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee today, shalt thou be with me in paradise.

→ Do a lexical analysis. Identify significant or key words in the passage and check their definitions, i.e., look up the meaning of the words in the original Greek or Hebrew. Some words have shades of meaning and sometimes only the context in which it is used would help us to understand what meaning should be applied to the word. There are also instances where the meanings of words change over time. Therefore if we only read the English version of the bible and never check up on the meanings of the Greek and Hebrew original words, we could misunderstand some serious points of doctrine.

Example: Revelation 3:14 (beginning)

The word beginning here seems to suggest that Jesus was the first one created, which is actually the interpretation Jehovah’s witnesses rely on in this passage to justify their belief that Jesus was a created being.

Definition of the word beginning from Thayer’s Greek Dictionary:

- 1) to be the first to do (anything), to begin
- 2) to be chief, leader, ruler
- 3) to begin, make a beginning

If we should apply another of the meanings given above, eg., ruler, then the sense of the passage changes. Instead of suggesting that Jesus was the first one created (as would be the case with the word beginning) we now see Jesus as taking precedence over the creation because he is the ruler and source of the creation. This concept lines up well with the text John 1:3, which reveals Jesus as the creator of all things.

→ Context, context, context. Always examine the full context of a passage. When you interpret Scripture, whether it is a single word, a verse or a paragraph, you must always consider the Scripture in light of the surrounding verses, chapters and book in which it is found. At times one may need to go as far as considering

the entire bible or theological framework. Your interpretation should never contradict the context of the book, chapter or paragraph you are studying.

Example 1: John 17:21-22 Here the passages speak about the Father and the Son being one and goes even further to say that the Son is in the Father and vice versa. The Jesus only adherents usually draw on texts like these as proof that the Father and the Son are one in that they are the same being. They further try to bolster the view by adding that the verse says that both are in each other. However, the context of the very passage invalidates that very view. Jesus prayed that the oneness (unity) of the believers parallels the oneness (unity) of Himself and the Father. We can clearly see that the 'one' spoken of here is not in terms of identity since we are unique individuals from our brethren. In the way that we are not the same person as our brethren yet we are one, it is in that manner that the Father and the Son are distinct from each other but are one. The context of the passage is very clear.

— Research the historical and cultural background. The historical and cultural background has to do with issues such as when was the passage written and what were the circumstances, customs, concepts and prevailing ideologies of the time and how did the people understand and relate to them. There is a little principle that would be helpful in this area, the five "W"s, – when, where, who, why and what. Consider the epistle to the Colossians in this regard.

WHEN: the time was likely between AD 60 and AD 62, about 30 years after the crucifixion, when Christianity was spreading rapidly to the Gentile world.

WHERE: the epistle was written from prison in Rome, to the church in Colossae, a small city of Phrygia, around 100 miles East of Ephesus (Colossae is part of what is now western Turkey).

WHO: Paul, a former Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, who had been dramatically converted to Christianity decades before and who has been a major force in its spread throughout the Roman empire, is writing to a group of recent converts, almost all of whom are not Jews, but formerly pagan Gentiles. The church at Colossae was confronted with a philosophy called Gnosticism, which had crept into the church by false teachers. A basic tenet of Gnosticism is the idea that mankind is comprised of a material body and an immortal soul. The material body was thought to be evil, while the immortal soul was mankind's spiritual good side. It was therefore felt that by conquering the evil material body, the spiritual side of man would be enhanced. The belief then was that the body should undergo suffering and was therefore subjected to strict restrictions such as abstention from food, drink, sex, and other physical pleasures, often accompanied by self-inflicted pain.

WHY: The Colossian church comprised basically new converts from paganism. The environment is one in which the church is surrounded by pagans and pagan philosophies. The new converts were being influenced by some of these pagan philosophies and so Paul had to write to strengthen the group by warning against the pagan ideas and to redirect their focus on to the right path.

WHAT: Finally, using the above historical & cultural context as a reference, we can read the epistle and have a chance of seeing exactly what it was that Paul was trying to say. So that in Col.2:16-17, for example, the converted Colossians were learning how to enjoy life as God intended, and were eating meat, drinking wine, and enjoying food and fellowship when observing God's Sabbath and festivals. The people persuaded by Gnostic thought began to look down on them and condemn them. Paul was simply telling the converts that they need not be bothered by the attitude of the Colossian society and others in the church toward the practices and their way of life in the church, as Christ has conquered the world and all of its rulers, so they do not need to be concerned about what the world thinks about them.

Although the internal evidence within the epistle should cast some doubt on the popular belief that Colossians 2 was about a disagreement between Jewish and Gentile Christians, many would not readily understand or acknowledge that the conflict was of a different nature unless presented with research on the historical and cultural setting. Thus, we see how an understanding of the history and culture of a particular time can enhance our understanding of scripture.

→ Consider all the passages dealing with a particular subject, and move from the clear passages to the not so clear or ambiguous ones. Remember, precept must be upon precept and line upon line. If we want to know what is the biblical view on a particular subject, then we need to examine all the scriptures dealing with that subject and bear in mind that the scriptures do not contradict each other. Then, interpret the ambiguous texts in light of the clear passages of scripture.

The importance of this step cannot be over emphasized. Serious errors can be avoided if this biblical study principle is applied eg. Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9 versus Romans 2:13; James 2:21, 24. Here we have a set of scriptures, both promoting ‘contradicting’ ideas on the same subject. It is cases like these that underline the need for serious bible study and proper exegesis that involves examining all the scriptures dealing with a particular theme.

→ Consult secondary literature – the writings of historians, commentaries etc. A word of caution. These secondary literature or reference materials are not inspired works, so we should not use them to establish doctrine. They are beneficial in helping to increase our understanding on certain aspects or points of scripture. But that is as far as they go.

→ Document your findings or overall analysis of the passage. Also jot down any application of this passage for your life (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This can be typed on your computer or written down in a notebook or on flash cards. Jottings can also be made in your bibles.

Bible Study Resources:

⊗ Study Bibles – Harper Collins Study Bible, The NIV Study Bible

⊗ Dictionaries – Smith’s Bible Dictionary, Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Vines Expository Dictionary, Easton’s Bible Dictionary

⊗ Concordances – Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, Nave’s Topical Concordance

⊗ Greek/Hebrew lexicons – Thayer’s Greek Definitions, Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Definitions

⊗ Commentaries – Word Biblical Commentary, Adam Clarke Commentary, Matthew Henry Commentary, John Gill’s Exposition of the Bible

⊗ Bible software – PC study, E-Sword, Bible Gateway, Preacher’s Software