

# **A Background Paper for Hermeneutics Workshop Central & Eastern Europe Training Consultation**

## **BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS FROM ANCIENT TEXT TO CONTEMPORARY SETTING**

A book as ancient and varied as the Bible needs to be studied carefully. It is also vital that we apply principles of biblical interpretation to our study. Hermeneutics comes from Greek verb *hermeneuein* “to explain or interpret or to translate” and the noun “hermeneia” meaning “interpretation or translation” e.g. verb: Luke 24:27 as of Jesus explained to the two on the Emmaus road, noun: 1 Cor 12:10 Paul refers to language interpretation.

### **Who Needs Hermeneutics?**

*"God sometimes blesses a poor exegesis of a bad translation of a doubtful reading of an obscure verse • but that is no excuse for slovenliness in interpretation."* (J. Stott)

### **1. The Concept of Hermeneutical Distance**

While we don't usually need an interpreter among friends, when in another country or talking to someone of a different generation we may often feel the need for one! Significant differences between two people in a conversation can be thought of as conceptual distance, and if care is not taken in communication, a misunderstanding is the likely result.

#### **Historical Distance - Different Times**

Firstly there is a distance in time between different events described in the bible as well as a distance in time between the completion of the bible and the present day. The bible itself spans fifteen hundred years and about two thousand years have passed since the bible was completed.

#### **Geographic Distance – Different Countries**

The whole of Biblical literature was written in and refers primarily to events that took place in the Middle East. Writers and their readers knew well the terrain, associated ways of living, population centres and means of travel in that part of the world. Some of this has remained relatively unchanged, but still “foreign” to any of us who live in other parts of the world today.

#### **Cultural Distance – Different people**

As well as time distance separating us from the events of the bible, there are also huge cultural differences separating biblical times from contemporary life. The world of the bible knows nothing about information technology, cars, newspapers, industrial pollution or democratic forms of government. It is a world based around agriculture where landowners hold sway over the lives of the people who work on their farms. A world where travel is slow and dangerous and where neither medication nor education were taken for granted as they are in many countries today.

#### **Linguistic Distance – Different Languages**

There are also language differences separating us from the words of scripture. Contemporary English is very different from biblical Hebrew or Greek. Hebrew is Semitic in origin and paints vivid word pictures to compensate for the limitations in aspects of vocabulary. Biblical Greek does not follow the sentence structures which governs English. An understanding of how these languages work is therefore essential to understanding the content of biblical passages.

#### **Divine Distance**

By its own self-disclosure, the Bible is a unique set of writings that are God-breathed, living powerful words that are intended to transform lives (2 Tim. 3:15-17). There is a balance between treating the Bible as any other ancient document (which it is) and at the same time respecting it as a unique message from God. In both the Modern and Post-Modern era, respecting and understanding Divine Distance may be one of the hardest for us to accept and work through. The key here is to look for theological principles that remain valid in all times and cultures, through which the heart of God is revealed.

For all of these reasons we need to apply our minds to interpreting the bible. Unless we do so we may misunderstand what God is saying. We need to be able to differentiate between the voice of God in a passage and the voice of human culture. The bible talks about polygamy, the evil of lending money and kissing fellow Christians. We need to be able to decide whether God wants us to be polygamous, to ban banking and to kiss every church member we meet, or whether these are cultural issues which are not universally binding. A grasp of the principles of hermeneutics will enable us to do this.

### **2. Fusing Hermeneutical Horizons**

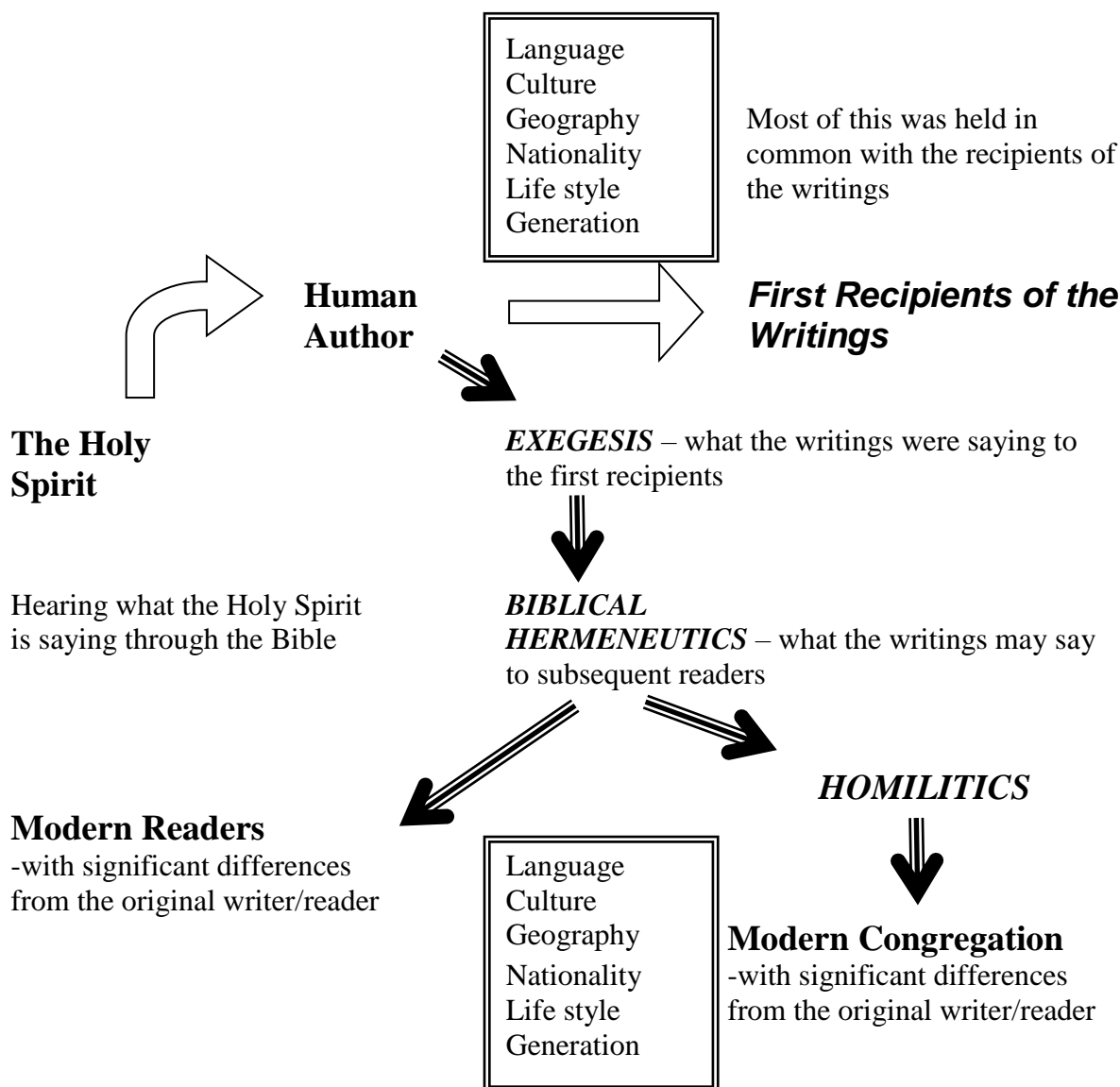
There are potentially three Horizons. Since the days of Gadamer the arena of Biblical hermeneutics has been familiar with the concept that good interpretation of a text involves the “fusion of horizons.”<sup>1</sup> Thiselton builds substantially on this concept, that a valid understanding of a text must take into account both the worldview and context of the original writer (the first horizon)

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from HG Gadamer by Thiselton in Thiselton 1980 p16

as well as the those of the interpreter (the second horizon). **The first horizon** includes all the pre-suppositions, common knowledge and experience of life that the writer of the text had and shared with the original recipients. There are significant limits to what we presently know of that horizon, but the importance of seeking to hear the text in that horizon cannot be over emphasized: as Thiselton says, the “difficulties raised by the pastness of the past in hermeneutics cannot be sidestepped.”<sup>2</sup> A serious consideration of what the text meant in that ancient horizon provides a datum point for meaning regarding that text. It is a crucial anchor that will hold meaning within a boundary in which people of all times and cultures may explore the text: otherwise the text is lost in an ocean of reader-orientated relativity. **The second horizon** in the interpretation of a text is equally critical. For the text to speak meaningfully to a new context, distanced in time and space, the interpreter needs to be aware of the pre-suppositions he and his community may bring to the text and how they compare and contrast to those of the first horizon. People in the second horizon will only hear the text transformatively (as being relevant to them and having the power to change them) if the interpreter moves the text from the original to their own, second, horizon.

**Diagram showing the flow of meaning between the source, first recipients, present day reader and audience to whom the reader speaks.**



Consider now the process, common in cross-cultural missions, where the interpreter is working in and speaking to a reader of a significantly different world from his own. This has been described as a **third horizon**, which represents the pre-suppositions that the receptor audience may have, their worldview and cultural practices. Carson in speaking of this third horizon talks of the interpreter’s need to “fuse the horizon of his own understanding with that of the hearer.”<sup>3</sup> This is far from easy, as the Interpreter in the second horizon, who would most naturally think and work with hermeneutical processes common in his own horizon, needs to take into account **and utilize** hermeneutical practices in the third horizon, both in re-reading the

<sup>2</sup> Thiselton 1980 p23

<sup>3</sup> Carson 1987 p251

text of the first horizon and in communicating his perceived meaning of the text into the third horizon. This makes the process of interpreting the text to a receptor group of people very complex and raises questions as to how such an interpretation may be judged as valid. One measure of validity in keeping with the self-declared nature of Scripture is that the recipient should be transformed morally and religiously with respect to God in an equivalent way that the text's writer and first readers would have so been transformed<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Where is the “Meaning” to be found?

So a question is raised as to what is the meaning of a text? Where is meaning to be found. From the above diagram at least five realms of meaning may be identified:-

- What the **original speaker/writer meant**
- What the **original recipients understood**
- What meaning may be encoded in the words themselves, **the Text**- in the absence of the author and the original audience, which is our starting point.
- What a **Modern reader** (distant from the original recipients) may understand from the words
- What a **recipient of an interpreter** may understand from the words, e.g. a preacher's congregation, a missionary's disciple.

We will focus on the three key realms of meaning in Biblical Hermeneutics with respect to a text:-

- **Authorial intention** – what the writer was wanting to communicate
- **Textual Meaning** – what the text in its canonical context may mean
- **Reader-Orientated Meaning**: Contemporary meaning derived from the text.

Does this mean a text has more than one meaning? What possibilities are there for a subsequent reader to find a new meaning? How would or should that relate to the authorial meaning? One key guide for us can be the way in which NT writers read and interpreted the OT.

Examine NT use and interpretation of OT Scriptures e.g. Matt. 2:15 of Hos 11:1

#### Options used by NT writers in use of OT Scriptures

- An author intends only one meaning for a text Micah 5:2
- An author may intend (therefore build into the text) more than one meaning or layers of meaning Isa 61 & Luk 4:16-21
- Along with the literal sense intended by the human author, the Holy Spirit could encode meaning into the text not known or thought out by the author. **Isa 7:14 \* Matt 1:22** This is referred to as sometimes as an aspect of the **sensus plenior**. (see Levels of Meaning)
- An original author had one intended meaning but a secondary Biblical Author discovers or creates a second layer of meaning for that original text. Hos 11:1 & Matt 2:15

This could lead to the following options for modern readers:-

- We restrict ourselves to the Textual meaning- the intended single meaning of the original author as heard by the original reader.
- Text have layers of meaning that we can explore and seek out.
- Recognising the textual meaning doesn't limit a modern reader from seeking out or reading in a new meaning to the text, unknown by the author. This is strongly used by the reader-orientated line of hermeneutics, a reader-response methodology, of saying that how a reader wishes to apply and respond to the text is what matters.
- While recognising that while it appears NT writers may have used a *sensus plenior* from an OT Scripture, they did so under direct Holy Spirit inspiration. Is such a method open to modern day interpreters?
- We are free to seek out and identify hidden meanings in Biblical texts, that may have only tangential connexions to the textual meaning (e.g. Jewish methods of Typology, Midrash and Peshar).

An examination of NT use of OT gives some grounds for recognising a Reader-Orientated methodology, in that on the basis of their knowledge of the intention of OT writers and with the hind sight of having seen Scripture fulfilled by Christ some NT writers saw analogies and typological instances in the OT text which they applied to Christ, beyond what the original authors may have seen or intended. However this doesn't open the door to any and all kinds of re-reading of the Scriptures. There are limits, there have to be limits or we are over-run by subjectivity and resulting loss of any absolute meaning of any text.

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15-17: The God-infused intention of Scripture is to save human beings from their own self-destruction and transform them by a relationship with God that restores human nature and enables us to be what God first created us to be - people of God doing the works of God.

**A guideline is to say that a properly informed reader, making a legitimate interpretation will not come up with a meaning that is unrelated to the intention of the original author or the historical meaning of the text.** Here the believing community does become a critical factor, in having a consensus as to what is a valid interpretation.

### **Validating an Interpretation**

Recognise that in one sense this side of heaven there is no way of absolutely knowing what an author originally intended. So what we are looking for is the most likely meaning of a text which falls within the bounds of understanding regarding the meaning perceived by contemporary faith communities

There are three key angles in reaching an opinion on the validity of an interpretation

- Evidence from the intention of the author
- Evidence from the text itself
- Evidence regarding the interpreter (her presuppositions, relationship to the faith community, (past, present and future = “Rule of Faith”)

### **With Respect to Authorial Intention:-**

- ▶ Fits in the range of likely meaning in the original context
- ▶ Fits into the relevant period of God’s progressive revelation
- ▶ Works within the particular Covenantal context of the passage.

### **With Respect to the Canonical Text:-**

- ▶ According to the norms of the language in which it was written
- ▶ must be able to account for each linguistic component in the text
- ▶ Must follow the conventions for its type of literature,
- ▶ Must be coherent – it must make sense in the overall revelation of God

### **v With Respect to the Reader:-**

- ▶ It takes into account the interpreters prejudices, biases, strengths and weaknesses
- ▶ It expresses conformity to orthodox Christian theology.
- ▶ It corresponds to typical paradigms of God’s truth or activity revealed in historically interpreted sections of the Bible
- ▶ It works in the crucible of Christian experience, producing godliness and other valid Christian qualities, and advancing God’s kingdom. Validating the interpretation in the “praxis of faith”, what type of people does it produce
- ▶ It finds confirmation along the full spectrum (racially, sexually, socio-economically, politically) of Christians within orthodox faith communities. Securing the discernment of the traditional orthodox believing Christian community,

(source)<sup>5</sup>

In short, a creative interpretation may be accepted if:-

- It expresses conformity to orthodox Christian theology.
- It corresponds to typical paradigms of God’s truth or activity revealed in historically interpreted sections of the Bible
- It works in the crucible of Christian experience, producing godliness and other valid Christian qualities, and advancing God’s kingdom.
- It finds confirmation along the full spectrum (racially, sexually, socio-economically, politically) of Christians within orthodox faith communities.

## **4. The Bible Interpreter - What we bring to a Text.**

### **Pre-Understandings**

It is inevitable that when we come to interpreting Biblical passages, we bring into those passage our own perspective, culture, and background. For example, when you look at African art Jesus is pictured as a black man with an African hair style. But when you look at Western paintings of Christ, He is a white man with long fawn coloured hair and blue eyes. In actual fact Jesus would have looked like a Palestinian with wiry hair and olive skin, but our picture of Jesus as many aspects of the Bible are coloured by our own perspective.

When we talk about the issue of bringing our own culture to bear on the text, we call this our pre-understanding. This refers to all the preconceived notions or understandings that we have before we actually study the text. Pre-understanding comes to us in a variety of ways. Obviously our own upbringing and the secular culture in which we live has a bearing, but also all the religious information we have taken in through Sunday school, church, hymns. It might seem a very negative thing to begin by looking at our pre-understanding, but as it greatly affects our interpretation it is important that we get this out of the way before

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<sup>5</sup> Partly drawn from Hirsch and Swartley in Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, 1993

we begin to think more deeply about the text. Our pre-understandings include our background, social status, gender, political and theological leanings, etc.

A battle that we will always face is found in the fact that our own culture will in many cases be in direct opposition to what the Bible teaches. As we look at some of the Bible's commands we find our whole culture crying out and saying 'that is wrong'. When Jesus calls upon us to be forgiving, and to consider others before we consider ourselves, our self-centred and fiercely independent culture cries 'No'. We therefore, need to listen carefully to Scripture and not allow our whole cultural attitude to get in the way of being obedient.

Many scholars have noted that it is difficult to be personally objective when interpreting Scripture. This must be acknowledged, but we must also recognise that we are not trying to be totally objective. Christians have an intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We are not striving for a neutral objective viewpoint. We do want to understand what was actually meant by the text, but we also want to hear what the text is saying to us. God is gracious and helps us in this regard, but this is also a dynamic process in which we endeavour to understand what God is saying whilst recognising all the time that as we are fallible we may still err.

## The Issue of Presuppositions

We considered pre-understandings above which relate to the generally sub-conscious way we see our world (culture and upbringing). As we go through processes of education and make personal choices about what we believe, we then develop view points from which we choose to see the world in which we live, and along with that the way we choose to view for example the literature we read. This we may define as pre-suppositions which are consciously taken in approaching the Bible. No-one can or does approach the Bible in a vacuum, without any pre-suppositions. A failure to recognise this is either naivety, self-deception or sheer arrogant self-will. What is required is that we try to see and understand our individual set of presuppositions which can enable us to be aware of the limitations of our own interpretation.

### Presuppositions regarding the nature of the Bible

- Inspiration
- Authority
- Relationship to Absolute Truth
- Spiritual nature
- Internal unity/diversity
- Purpose: Is it meant to be understood?
- Canonicity: What it actually is

### Presuppositions about the Nature of the Interpreter

In particular the attitude of the Interpreter to the Bible itself.

- **Faith:** recognition and belief in the existence of a personal self-revealing God specifically interested in the human race. Heb. 11:6
- **Obedience:** Willingness to put self under the revelation of God and bring life and understanding into line to God's revelation of himself and his ways.. John 14:23; 15:14
- **Illumination:** Believe in the necessity and the existence of the work of the Holy Spirit to enable the clearest sense of truth to be gleaned from the Scriptures. 1 Cor 2:10-16
- **Corporate Fellowship:** Recognition and acceptance of being a member of the Body of Christ, sharing with and submitting to the various and commonly accepted interpretations given by other members of the Body to the Scriptures. 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 5:21

### Presuppositions about Methodology

Both in the willingness to recognise the role of methodology in interpretation and in recognising the degree of usefulness and degree of danger in each methodology adopted.

- **Reasonable Methodology:** Willingness to use reasonable and accepted scholarly methods of handling an ancient text. This is not to place rational thinking as the judge of Scriptures but to recognise that God created human intelligence capacities and in communicating to human beings God has used methodology that matches those he is communicating with. So He expects us to utilise a range of available techniques in handling ancient literature, because His divine inspiration of the Scriptures is tuned such that His truth will be clearly seen and not destroyed but the correct application of sound methodology. Nor does this mean that an uneducated person cannot understand the essential truths necessary for salvation and living a godly life by merely his/her reading of the Scriptures. Such is the divine nature of the Scriptures that the less educated can know the truth through reading and the most highly educated can also appreciate and revel in the depths of the same truth by detailed study.

## Presuppositions about the goal of hermeneutics

Various goals adopted by some are:-

- Reaching the meaning of the text to the original reader
- The meaning intended by the author
- The meaning understood by a contemporary reader in a given cultural context.

Existentially based New hermeneutic leads to a studying of the text through present day lenses to see what use the text may be to us today. This contrasts with a traditional approach, pre-understanding the text to be the record or words of Transcendent God to humanity, which tries to see today's life through the lens of the text. The New hermeneutic has a genuine aim of seeking the word to speak powerfully today but the focus is often times more on freshness rather than accepting that at times the same meaning understood in 1<sup>st</sup> C ad is precisely the one we need to hear today.

## Some key Evangelical Pre-understandings

1. That the Bible is the inspired work of the Holy Spirit: There is a supernatural, spiritual element to all of Scripture.
2. That the entire accepted canon of Scripture is the complete revelation of God with regards to human beings and their relationship with God and one another.
3. There is progression in the revelation found in the Bible
4. The whole Scripture is the interpreter of the parts therein: The concept of harmony, that an individual part will not give an interpretation that conflicts with the whole.
5. Scriptures meaning is clear and plain: God intended to communicate effectively
6. Not only is the Scripture supernatural in origins but it also speaks of the supernatural: Our interpretations should allow for the existence of the supernatural We are not naturalistic in our pre-suppositions
7. There is theological intent in the Historical meaning of the text: We are not meant to stop at correctly understanding history but learn what that informs us regarding God and all matters relating to him.

## 5. The Hermeneutic Spiral

We accept that there is a reader-text dynamic. That the meaning a reader extracts from the text should affect his understanding leading to a clearer and evolving understanding. This creates an upward, expanding spiral, because our pre-understanding grows with the study of the text. This combines with the concept of the fusing of horizons, because as we better understand the horizon of the author and his readers, so we can compensate our cultural/time horizon and better see the equivalent effect the text should have in our lives and times.

D.S. Ferguson defines four Pre-understandings as:-

- **Informational:** previous information known about the subject
- **Attitudinal:** attitude towards the subject (positive/negative, antagonistic, apathetic, disinterested, personal matter, etc)
- **Ideological:** world view , belief systems,
- **Methodological:** naturalistic, scientific, rational, literary, supernatural,

As we develop in our reading of the Bible, which we believe should be transformational, we will change in some way in each of these four areas. Which we means the second, third, fourth, etc time we read the Bible we will see it differently.

## 6 – Levels of Meaning.

### a) The “Plain Meaning”

Some argue that the Bible should always be taken literally. However we have seen already one qualification of this is that the Bible itself uses the full range of human language and makes frequent and widespread use of figures of speech, which are never meant to be taken literally but to be interpreted and understood in their metaphorical senses. We have also seen that some literature within the Bible, particularly Apocalyptic and some other prophetic material, is inherently non-literal. It is full of symbology, where earth bound descriptions are used to describe what may be as yet unseen realities or things happening in the spiritual domain. In each of these cases though, given the correct use of the interpretation of figures of speech and apocalyptic literature, we can seek the “plain” meaning of the text. The Bible cannot always be read “literally” but it does always have a plain meaning. By “plain” we mean a meaning intended by the author, even if it is not always so plain and obvious to us!

### b) The “Plenary Meaning” – Sensus Plenior

. Often there are other deeper levels of spiritual meaning that go beyond the plain meaning. Through the generations of the Faithful who have read and used the Scriptures, from OT days through to the Christian interpreters of the past 2,000 years, a richness of meaning and application of Scripture has emerged. This in another sense is a reflection of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to apply God's word, inspired from of old, to contemporary life in all generations. Provided the “Plenary” meaning taken from a text doesn't violate the “Plain meaning” nor any other Biblical statement or principle, then it may be used as a valid meaning drawn from God's word. Plenary meanings include the use of “allegory”, “Typology” and “Analogy”

### **(i) Allegory**

The first type of non-literal literature is called 'allegory'. An allegory is a story that uses an extensive amount of symbolism. It is similar to a parable but generally has a greater degree of correspondence. Perhaps the most famous extra-Biblical allegory is Pilgrim's Progress. Here the entire book is an allegory, it is not meant to be read as history.

A good example of allegory is Isaiah 5.1-7. Isaiah is preaching to Israel to warn them that God will judge them for their lack of justice and righteousness. Thankfully in v.7 Isaiah gives us the meaning of the allegory and tells us what the corresponding elements are. Some of Jesus' parables were allegories such as Luke 19:11-27.

Allegories are comparatively rare, but when we come across them we need to be careful not to spiritualise them too much. We need to see what the writer is trying to say and not read too much into it. Be careful not to over-spiritualise.

### **(ii) Typology.**

Another type of "Plenary Meaning" is typology. A type is the foreshadowing of a reality that is yet to come. For example, the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ, that is, it was a type of Christ.

Psalm 22 is a good example of typology. Although David wrote this Psalm 1000 BC there is clearly a correspondence between what he expresses here and the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. David wrote the Psalm during a time of personal suffering, and God uses his experiences as a kind of picture of what Jesus himself would eventually have to go through. One note of caution that needs to be sounded, it is best to see typology in the Old Testament where it is confirmed by the New Testament. In fact almost by definition a "Type" will never be recognised as such at the time, but only with hind-sight after the type has been fulfilled. The Book of Hebrews shows how so much in the OT Covenant was a "type" of the Jesus Christ and the New Covenant, and uses this as an argument to encourage believing Jews not to lose faith in the fact that Jesus was the Christ.

Again care has to be taken whenever we go beyond what the NT writers clearly reveal as types, but there is reasonable line of thought that sees seeing aspects of the lives of Joseph, David, Solomon, etc as types of Christ,

### **(iii) Analogy**

In common usage in literature this means two texts or situations which are similar to one another, neither exactly the same nor also totally different. In the realm of interpretation we can draw lessons from one text to bring meaning into a new situation which is not the same as the situation into which the text was written, but neither is it totally different. So something can be learnt from the most ancient of texts for use in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

There is Biblical precedent for the use of analogy, found in the way later Biblical writers have used earlier Scriptures. E.g. Hosea 12:1-4 (esp. 3-4) draws on an incident in Jacob (the deceiver) -Israel's life who wrestled with God, to teach lessons to his contemporary "Israel." It may be behind Paul's wrestling with God over the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:10) and certainly lay behind Charles Wesley's hymn "And when my all of strength shall fail, I shall with the God-Man prevail."<sup>6</sup>

In the world of Bible Interpretation there has been the broad use of something called **the "Analogy of Faith."** In this a text which appears to either be very difficult to understand or relates to an ancient and very different context can be given a contemporary meaning, on the basis that the meaning fits into what is generally accepted as the Christian Faith, e.g. Song of Solomon as a picture of Christ and the Church, Israel through the wilderness as the Christian's life experience, The Exile as being 21<sup>st</sup> C UK, a post-Christendom experience. Obviously there is room for a high degree of subjectivity here and much care must be taken. The Roman Catholic Church, with heavy weight given to the Interpretive powers of the Church and Tradition, would draw on the "Analogy of Faith" principle to justify many of their church traditions. Equally, and at times in a much more chaotic way, Protestant interpreters have justified many practises and policies in the same way.

The guarding boundary limits for the use of the "Analogy of Faith", and in fact also of typology and allegory, should be that:-

- Primarily the plain meaning of the text should be sought and respected.
- Secondly that any meaning derived by analogy should find clear precedent from the plain meaning of other Scriptures.
- Thirdly that no analogous meaning should be permitted which contravenes teaching from the plain meaning of other Scriptures.

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<sup>6</sup> Elwell, 1984 p567

# A Brief History of Interpretation

## 1. The Jewish Lead

Considering that the OT Prophets drew their inspiration from the Law, there is a sense in that the earliest “Bible Interpreters” were the Prophets in the Pre-Exilic period. So we can learn some things from their use of the imagery and content of the Pentateuch as applied to the times in which they were living. During and after the Exile a particular group of mainly Levites, later called Scribes started to develop the tradition of copying manuscripts and explaining the Scriptures to the people of their days. Such as in Ezra’s days, when the Hebrew Scriptures needed to be explained in Aramaic post-Exile (Neh 8:7-8). This was the probable start of the Jewish TARGUMS (oral and later on written translation-interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Law.

By NT times the Jewish traditions of Bible Interpretation had three distinct branches:-

**(a) Rabbinic:** Law based, it promoted literal obedience to the Torah in the face of pressure from Greek/Roman cultures. It contained Halakah (Heb “rule to go by”) principles and regulations derived from the Torah and Haggadah (Heb. “a telling”) derived from the whole of OT stories and proverbs to give examples to guide contemporary Jews.

They produced the Mishnah published in AD 200 (written version of oral teachings of rabbis including Hillel and Shammai (1<sup>st</sup> BC /AD). Then the Abot ( Jewish Religious Council) met in AD 250 which affirmed the Mishnah as part of the oral law taught by Moses. These are of Halakah type

Later on the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (AD 400 and 600) gives commentary on the Mishnah by later Rabbis. The later are linked to the Midrashim (Heb. “to search”) which gives interpretation of OT books.’ ``These are mainly of Haggadah type.

In summary, key aspects of the Rabbinic mode of Interpretation are that;-

- It relies heavily on accumulated Rabbinic Interpretive Tradition, citing previous rabbis as interpretative authority.
- It is quite a literal way of handling the text.
- It is midrash in intent; aiming to uncover hidden meanings within the text so as to apply it to a new contemporary context.

### (b) Hellenistic Judaism

333 BC Alexander the Great conquers the Persian world, resulting in the increased spread of Greek culture. A strong Jewish community lived in Alexandria, Egypt, who were a key group of scholars who sought to interpret Jewish beliefs in the Greek philosophical context, especially with works such as those of Plato.

By 200 BC they produced the Septuagint.

Main interpretative method was the Allegorical one with links to Platos’ dictums such as that true reality lay behind what they can see. So with respect to the text, the true meaning lies behind the words not in them. Key Alexandrian Jewish thinker was Philo (20 BC –AD 54) who taught that the Biblical text has body (literal meaning) and soul (allegorical meaning) and laid greater emphasis on the latter over the former.

### (c) Qumran Community

150 BC –AD 68 re Dead Sea Scrolls. Strong eschatological flavour, emphasising the prophets even as the rabbinic tradition emphasised the Law.

Introduced the use of “Peshar”:-

- An interpreter may suggest an amendment of the original text to bring out a certain meaning (either using an alternative text or actual amending the text)
- Contemporising the text, seeing an existent people in the place of the original text, e.g. Rome instead of Babylon
- Atomising the text, taking meaning from individual words and phrases without reference to the paragraphs overall meaning.

## Comparisons

Rabbinic	Hellenistic	Qumran
Torah driven	Greek Philosophy influenced	Prophets driven
Used the Law to protect traditional Jewish identity	Seeking to accommodate contemporary Jewish life in a Greek context esp. Platonic	Explain the events of their day from the Scriptures.
Body (Literal)	Soul (Allegorical)	Spirit (Eschatological)

## 2. The Apostolic “Innovations”

Continuity in that the Early Christians were Jewish and worked from a Jewish Interpretational perspective, yet discontinuity both in following Jesus use of the OT and the ongoing Interpretational work of the Holy Spirit through them. As Jesus was viewed by them as the Fulfilment of the Law, and focal point of OT Eschatology (re prophets), how he handled the OT had a big influence on them.

- **Literal Fulfilment of OT Scriptures** relating to the Christ
- **Typological Interpretation** e.g. Matthew 2:17 where Herod’s killing of Jewish babies is linked to Jer 31:15



- **Literal-Contextual:** using the normal sense of OT in its historical context.
- **Principle/Application** where a principle is drawn from an OT historical event and used to predict or guide a NT event e.g. Paul's use of Hos 2:1,23 in Rom 9:25-26

### **3. The Patristic Period (AD100-590)**

As the canon of Scripture was gradually forming but not yet fully formed, early church leaders wrote comments regarding Apostolic writings. Gradually a sense of Church tradition grew alongside the canon of Scripture. So the issue of recognised "orthodox" lines of interpretation grew to become later on a formidable force and a significant factor in the overall issue of Hermeneutics.

**Apostolic fathers** (AD 100-150) used the following methods:-

- Literal
- Typology
- Allegory
- Midrashic

**Alexandria-Antioch contrast** (AD150-400)

**Alexandria- Allegorical**, Clement (AD 190-203) and then Origen (AD 185-254)

Body (literal meaning), soul (spiritual meaning) spirit (moral meaning) so in a given passage Origen sought to move from the events of the passage to hidden principle which guide Christian living to Doctrines of truth

**Antioch – Historical-Literal** : This was reaction that rejected allegory and used the Historical-grammatical method of interpretation. This was not a rejection however of spiritual message in the text, rather that there was a direct correspondence between the histo-grammatical deduced meaning and the spiritual meaning underlying it. The Antiochan teachers distinguished between OT passages that were Messianic in terms of predictive of Christ and others which were not. Also Song of Solomon as a poetic love story rather than essentially an allegory of God/Israel and Christ/Church.

Church Councils (400-590) were convened as much for political reasons as for doctrinal reasons. On the doctrinal side, there seemed to be stalemates as all sides on an issue based their beliefs on texts, so it appeared that interpretational differences were to blame for their divisions. Church councils while clarifying what the Scriptures mean on one hand, effectively gave significant authority to the growing body of Church Opinion, traditional interpretation, to the point of establishing a locus of authority apart from the Scriptures.. Late in this period the Latin Vulgate also became accepted as the norm and rule of Scripture and the study and use of Hebrew and Greek declined.

### **4. Middle Ages (AD 590-1500)**

Key modes of Interpretation

(a) **Traditional Interpretation:** views of the church Fathers and the Councils. Written "**Catena's**" of Augustine and Jerome being highly prized became the accepted norm of interpretation. The heavy use of such commentaries alongside the Bible led to the Medieval practice of **Interpretive Gloss**, being notes inserted into the margins and between lines of Scripture based on the catenas. These were later compiled into one work called the Glossa Ordinaria, which gained acceptance as the standard commentary coming out of the medieval period.

(b) **Anagogical** (Eschatological) This was a fourth level of meaning that could be derived from a passage. The Four levels can be summed up by Medieval poem

- Literal                      The letter shows us what God and our fathers did:
- Allegorical                The allegory shows us where our faith is hid.
- Moral                        The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life:
- Anagogical                The anagogy shows us where we end our strife."

(Grant and Tracy Short History p85 translation)

(c) **Historical line used** by some kept alive the Antiochan-Judaic methods of Interpretation

(d) Later on in the Middle Ages a **Scholasticism** emerged which was a pre-renaissance return to sort out the relationship between Christian faith and human reason. Thomas Aquinas was of this line of approach and wrote a lengthy summary of academic discussion on the Scriptures in his Summa theological (13thC). This among other things led to the decline of the allegorical method by the end of the Middle Ages.

### **5. Reformation Period (AD 1500-1650)**

A return to Greek and Hebrew, an exploration of pre-Vulgate scriptures, eventually led to a laying aside of the Church/traditional authority in Interpretation to go back to Sola Scriptura (Martin Luther). Emphasis was placed on:-

- Sola Scriptura
- Scripture is its own best interpreter.
- Rejection of the Allegorical method as a primary interpretational tool, as it can be used to make Scripture say almost anything you want!
- A return to the historical sense of Scripture, meaning based on an histo-grammatical method.

- Yet believing that all Scripture is centred in and on Christ, there was a return to an aspect of typological interpretation, as found in NT use of OT.
- Belief in the primacy of the Holy Spirit in an individual who reads and studies the Scriptures, leading to a spiritual understanding.

## 6. Post-Reformation (AD 1650-1800)

Emergence of the **Pietist** movement placed an additional emphasis on the devotional practical study of the Bible, using the historical-grammatical basis of Interpretation.

Later on though the **rationalism** that came from the Enlightenment movement (the secular equivalent of the Reformation, driven by human reason rather than Sola Scriptura), invaded the church and led to the questioning of the authority of Scripture itself.

Thus within the reformed churches a dual, diverging line of those who by Scripture/Spirit based study fed their souls and those who by rationalistic study undermined their own faith (Liberalism).

## 7 The Modern period AD 1800 to date)

### Nineteenth Century

Esp. from within German Theologians the **Historical-Critical method**, sought to approach Bible Interpretation primarily from an objective scientific base. Strongly influenced by rationalistic philosophical approaches, they treated the Bible as any other piece of ancient literature, with a naturalistic worldview

This led to **Source Criticism**, seeking to know what lay behind the text (how it was written, what its sources were, etc) and also from an evolutionary/developmental angle to see what human development is reflected in the text.

### Pre- World war I

**History of religions concept**, seeking to understand the Judo-Christian tradition as part of the development of Religious thought in human history. Trying to trace Judaistic theology to Babylonian and Egyptian roots. Two positives is that it gave evidence as to how possible it was that OT law did date back to Moses and not the ideas of the later prophets and secondly that it is important to understand ancient texts in their ancient context and compare with whatever else is known of that period.

**Form Criticism:** This originated in attempts to find the oral forms that lay behind written texts, but developed into gaining an understanding of literary forms and how this affects the meaning of a text (**Literary Criticism**).

### Post World War I

A Swiss theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968) re-emphasised the authority of scripture and of a personal encounter with God (influenced by existential philosopher Soren Kierkegaard)

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) influenced by existential philosopher Martin Heideggard. He used form criticism to try and analyse the Gospels to get back to the original contexts of the Gospel stories. This led to an undermining of the historical reliability of the Gospels. He created the division in concept between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith” He also sought to de-mythologise the Bible to extract what he felt was the message (kerygma) which he felt was couched in an outmoded mythological worldview. He was, like Barth, genuinely trying to make the Bible relevant to a new scientific rationalistic generation of people, so felt by de-mythologising the Bible and bringing the perceived kerygma into the 20C Faith would be strengthened again.

Both Barth and Bultmann and others led to what is recognised as the Neo-Orthodoxy movement, characterised in its interpretation of Scripture by three pre-suppositions:-

- God is a subject not an object. As a Thou not an It the Bible cannot adequately convey to us a knowledge of Him. We can only know Him personally and by implication subjectively, in our own experience.
- A great gap exist between transcendent God and our fallen humanity. So God can only be known through myth. This is to down play the historical reality of much of Scripture and see them as myths that teach.
- Truth is ultimately paradoxical in nature, so rational thinking is not necessary to gain the truth. Seek not to reconcile paradoxical statements, which down played any sense or desire to maintain the rational nature of much of Scripture.
- :-

### Post World War II

Some perceive a movement loosely called the Biblical Theology Movement which promoted five tenets:-

- A re-discovery of the Bible’s theological dimension
- The unity of the Bible (a metanarrative to use a more modern term)
- The revelation of God in history
- The distinctiveness of the Bible’s mentality being Hebrew in contrast to Greek
- The contrast of the Bible to its ancient environment.

Mid 1950’s **Redaction Criticism** emerged which is roughly parallel to form criticism, but it seeks to discern the distinctive theological and thematic emphasis of books or Bible writers. So it seeks to know e.g. how Paul developed in understanding a matter such as the Holy Spirit and then uses that to interpret passage about the Holy Spirit in different ways at different stages in Paul’s ministry.

Also the **new quest for the Historical Jesus movement**, which in fact was a reaction to Bultman and an attempt to close the perceived gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Faith. In the process they tended to imply again a lot of historical unreliability in the Gospels in their process.

**Reader-Orientated approach** has led to many new lines of hermeneutics and theology. In this concept it is accepted that what a meaning reader “intends,” i.e. understands by reading and interpreting a text, does not need to match what the original author intended.

Also the **New hermeneutic** emerged from developments made in understanding linguistics. The concept that was emphasised was of the power of the text over the reader. In the past the text had been viewed more as a passive object with meaning that an interpreter sort out. Now text is seen as something that exerts an influence on the interpreter, each new reading is a new speech-event, which will vary from a previous or subsequent reading. Positives from this include;-

- Highlights the complex nature of the relationship between a text and a student of that text, as being dynamic not static.
- Notes that a text affects the reader, draws the reader into its world and then enables the reader to reflect on his own world in a new way.
- The speech-event concept also reminds a reader that the text has something to say in the contemporary setting of the reader.

On the negative side there is a the de-emphasis of the historical original meaning and the tendency to see only what the text is perceived to say to the contemporary and not what it has and does say objectively.

Canon Criticism: Study made of the place of a book in the canon and how and hwy and when it got there, as a means to better interpreting its contents.

An issue for debate is the matter of do we (the reader) have the right to choose to understand words according to our situations with little or no reference to context or what the speaker intended to mean when he uttered them. Some argue that the modern reader can do what he pleases with them. Yet there are many precedents and systems set in the modern world which show that words must be understood in their context and according to original intent e.g. contract law, DVD player instructions, BBC news, etc

More recently various hermeneutics have evolved reflecting either sociological groupings or specialisations E.g.

- Feminist Hermeneutics
- Liberation Hermeneutics
- Literary Criticism
- Structuralism
- Deconstruction
- Process theology: that life is made up of a progression of causes and effects, so seek out the cause/effect relationships in Scripture as a means to reaching the meaning of a text.

## Some Major Hermeneutical Principles

- **Inspiration:** Seek the meaning that God is communicating through His Word today.
- **Authority:** God's word properly interpreted has authority over my own thinking: Isa. 55:8-9 God reveals himself to the humble and those of an obedient heart.
- **Clarity:** The Bible is meant to be understood, look for plain meaning. Mat 14:17; Rev 5:6; 7:14; John 3:3-6.
- **Authorial Intention:** Meaning is anchored in what the author wrote and intended to mean
- **Context:** A text should be read in its immediate, book and Testament context
- **Principle of Harmony** – an interpretation should be in harmony with other relevant Scriptures
- **Progressive Revelation** – in particular the Old to the New Covenant, meaning shouldn't be read "backwards."

## A BASIC HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS

### 1. What did the text mean to the original audience?

Carefully examine the text to see what was actually being said to the people in the setting.

(a) What did he write?

- ⇒ textual criticism – seeking to know the contents of the original manuscripts
- ⇒ translation – utilising a variety of translations from the Greek/Hebrew (2 Tim 2:15 exercise)

(b) What did he mean?

- ⇒ genre (form of literature) -> presuppositions
- ⇒ situation (author/addressees) -> purpose
- ⇒ language (words, sentences, paragraphs) -> flow of discourse
- ⇒ context (biblical/cultural) -> allusions

### 2. What is the theological principle in the text?

This is the most difficult bit. Discover what is the basic lesson that is being communicated by this incident.

(a) What does it teach? E.g. -

- ⇒ God & the world (theology)
- ⇒ People & God (spirituality)
- ⇒ People & people (morality)
- ⇒ Church life (ecclesiology)

(b) Where does it fit in?

- ⇒ Progressive revelation
- ⇒ Relationship to Christ
- ⇒ Balance of Scripture
- ⇒ Purpose of Scripture

(c) What may be the Theological principles?

- The principle should be reflected in the text.
- The principle should be timeless.
- The principle will not be culturally bound.
- The principle should tally with the rest of scripture.
- The principle should be relevant to both the biblical and contemporary audience.

### 3. What are the differences between their world and ours?

Make a careful note of all the differences that you can see between the situation in the passage and your own.

### 4. How should we apply the text to our situation?

You cannot just leave this principle as just an abstract concept. You then need to apply it to your own situation. What is it saying to me and my church?

- ⇒ Something to believe? (mind)
- ⇒ Something to respond to? (heart)
- ⇒ Something to do? (will)

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