The History of Biblical Hermeneutics

Principal sources used for preparing this class:

Robinson, Jason C. and Porter, Stanley E. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman’s, 2011)

Yarchin, William, History of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004)

Oakes, John M., From Shadow to Reality (Spring, TX: IPIBooks, 2005)

Also Oakes, John M. Finding the Church in Church History, Vol I - IV (Spring, TX: IPIBooks, 2007, 2012, 2019, 2022)

A. Jewish Hermeneutics in the First Century.

The hermeneutics of the Jews will give us insight into how those with whom Jesus interacted interpreted the Hebrew Scripture (or perhaps more accurately the Greek Septuagint).

It will also give us a starting point from which hermeneutics was done by the primitive church.

The Jewish teachers of the law approached their Scripture as a sort of open document. They considered their interpretations, for example in the Midrash (which literally means textual interpretation) and Mishnah, as part of the Scriptures themselves. They considered lively discussion about the meaning of the text as part of the practice of Judaism. They did not do what we in the West, especially modernists (as opposed to postmodernists) do, which is to try to discover “the” meaning of the text. Their intent was not to end the discussion, but to continue the discussion.

"The Jewish mode of interpretation not only engages the words of the text, but also that behind the text, and beyond the text."[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Open-ended interpretations constitute the norm rather than the exception. Modern desires for a debate-ending discovery of the final, uncontestable determinate meaning of a biblical text, resulting from a methodologically impeccable analysis performed upon the text by a transcendent self—such desires are frustrated in the world of rabbinic exegesis.”

“To belong to the dialogue is to belong to Judaism.” History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader p. xvi-xvii.

The Jews, especially Philo, are especially known for allegorical interpretation, which tradition was continued by the early church, but this is certainly not the whole story.

1. Literal meaning. The Jews believed that we must begin with the literal sense before allegorizing.

2. Predictive meaning. They saw the OT as predicting events that were happening around them. This was particularly true of the Essenes, who saw events happening in Jerusalem as predicted by certain negative prophecies in the OT.

Ex: The Damascus Covenant claimed that current events were the fulfillment of Numbers 21:18 “A well which the princes dug, which the nobles of the people delved with the staff.” The “well” is the Law. And those who “dug” are the converts of Israel who left Israel and lived in the land of Damascus. The “staff” is the interpreter of the Law, of whom Isaiah said: “He produces a tool for his labor.” (Isaiah 54:16), and the “nobles of the people” are those who came, throughout the whole age of wickedness, to “dig the well” with the prescriptions that the Law-giver had prescribed for them to walk in.

3. Jews also used typological (distinct from allegorical) interpretation of the OT. It is a form of “expectation fulfillment.” Here the older text represents more than its literal subject. It is also a prophetical expectation of later events. Ex: Melito of Sardis (late 2nd century) viewed the Passover story typologically (as I would!!!)

“As then with the perishable examples, so also with the imperishable things; (Like I say, from Shadow to Reality—from physical to spiritual) as with the earthly things, so also with the heavenly. For the very salvation and reality of the Lord were prefigured in the people [of the Exodus story] And the decrees of the gospels were proclaimed in advance by the law. The people then were a model [typos] by way of preliminary sketch, and the law was the writing of a parable. The gospel is the recounting and fulfillment of the law, and the church is the repository of the reality.

Jesus and Paul did the same: Jesus saw Jonah in the fish as a foreshadow of his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:39-42)

Of course, Paul interpreted the Old Testament typologically as well, saying in Galatians 4:24 “These things can be taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants…”

Also Peter: 1 Peter 3:21 This water (Noah) symbolizes baptism that now saves you also. Here a physical thing is used to foreshadow a spiritual thing.

Also Peter does this in 2 Peter 3:3-7 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

4. But the most characteristic hermeneutical tendency of the Jews in the 1st century is represented by the approach of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – AD 50)

Allegory: Def (Goppelt)[[2]](#footnote-2) “A kind of exegesis which, in addition to the literal sense of the text, and, at times even to the exclusion of it, finds another different and supposedly deeper meaning, even though the context does not indicate the presence of any figurative language.” (the world outside the text)

Philo: “We must now speak of that which may be given if the story be looked at as figurative and symbolical.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“We say that nearly all, or that at all events, the greater part of the history of the giving of the law is full of allegories.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

About the rib taken from Adam: “He took one of the many powers of the mind, namely, that power which dwells in the outward senses. And when he uses the expression, ‘He took,’ we are not to understand it as if he had said ‘He took away,” but rather as an equivalent to ‘He counted, He examined.’ Philo interpreted the taking of the rib as symbolic of God examining our conscious thoughts.

About the four kings of Genesis 14, Philo interpreted these four kings to be symbols of the four passions—pleasure, desire, fear and grief. The other five kings in Genesis 14 represent the five senses, because they rule over us. In this chapter, the fact that the five latter kings serve the four prior kings and pay them tribute as reflecting that the four passions arrive from the five senses and that passions rule over the senses.

For Philo, as, later for Clement and Origen the allegorizing permits the imposition of philosophical beliefs into the biblical text.

It permitted him to steer the reader away from the gross, literal interpretation which would imply anything “unworthy” of God’s perfection, such as anthropomorphisms.

His use of the Greek idea of logos influenced Christian interpreters, and possibly even the apostle John.

B. Early Christian Hermeneutics: Antioch vs. Alexandria

I. Literal/historical interpretation (see below with Antioch)

II. Typology good examples: Ignatius Letter to the Magnesians 7:2 (temple prefigure), 10:2 (new leaven), Letter to the Philadelphians 9:1 used typological interpretation of the Old Testament, Epistle of Barnabas 7:10ff (scapegoat)

Questionable examples: Epistle of Barnabas 12:2ff: When Moses prayed before the people with outstretched hands (Exodus 17:8-13) it was interpreted as a foreshadow of Jesus hanging of the cross.

Clement of Rome 1 Clement 12:7 interpreted the scarlet cord which Rahab tied to her window (Joshua 2:17-20) as a foreshadow of the blood of Jesus.

[Origen interpreted the story of the witch of Endor calling up Samuel from the dead (1 Sam 28) as a foreshadow of Jesus’ resurrection.]

III. Prophecy fulfillment Ex. Justin: Prophecy fulfillment. In his Dialogue with Trypho, he claimed to be handing down the method of interpretation of the apostles. He mentioned Genesis 49:10 (binding his foal to the vine, washing his robe in the blood of the grape) Zechariah 9:9 (on a colt the foal of a donkey) Isaiah 7:14 (virgin will be with child) Isaiah 11:1 (a branch from the root of Jesse) Micah 5:2 (Bethlehem) and many more.

IV. Allegorical interpretation. But the allegorical approach was from the earliest time the principle mode used by Christian interpreters.

Origen, Clement of Alexandria allegory.

Like Philo, Origen sought an allegorical interpretation particularly when the literal meaning, for him, seemed unworthy of God.

Origen (184-253, the most influential Christian thinker in the 3rd century): The “body” of the Scripture refers to its literal, grammatical sense. The “soul” is the figurative, spiritual meaning intended by God for earnest seekers of divine wisdom.

He even allegorized the gospels, and taught that some OT passages were not written for any literal meaning, but only for the spiritual/allegorized meaning.

He also claimed that this is what Paul did!

He did all this to make the Bible work within a Platonic or neo-Platonic worldview. Every object and event give us access to a deeper, inner, spiritual reality.

Origen saw three levels of interpretation:

Body Literal/historical soul typological/figurative spirit deeper, allegorical.

A specific example from Origen:  
He proposed that Lot’s daughters did not have sex with their father, but that this had only an allegorical meaning.

However, from the earliest times the school at Antioch pushed historical/grammatical/contextual hermeneutics. For example, Eustathius of Antioch and Diodorus of Tarsus, as well as Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus rejected allegorical interpretation entirely. They were more influenced by rhetorical than philosophical schools.

They were less open (but not closed) to typology in general, and saw a more limited range of messianic prophecies in the Psalms (accepting Ps 2, 7, 14,110 as messianic).

Looked at genre, context, author. Denied that SoS is an allegory for Christ’s love.

C. Medieval Hermeneutics

Augustine, as always, is the connection between the church fathers and the Medieval.

Augustine, too, favored an allegorical approach, which meant that Western Medieval Christians did as well.

His world-view was influenced first by 1. Manicheeism and later by

2. Neoplatonism. Manicheeism: Dualistic worldview. Physical things are evil. Neoplatonism: The visible world is a manifestation of an unseen, higher world. This affected his hermeneutics, similar to Origen. It also affected his view of sacrament and ex opere operato.

3. He looked at God through love. All interpretation of scripture and of the world is through a lens of love. “So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not understood them.”

But, unlike Origen, Augustine did not so much ignore historical context, grammar, the literal sense, translation, etc..

Medieval “Hermeneutics”

Mimicked Augustine.

I would like to cover Thomas Aquinas and the switch to an Aristotlean worldview, but I do not have the time. He moved slightly away from allegory and toward literal means of interpretation. Refused to abandon the literal sense. Also he always looked for other parallel passages to support a particular interpretation. Taught that any allegoricalization of a text must agree with parallel literal meanings.

D. Hermeneutics of the Reformation

By 1500 the Renaissance began to influence biblical interpretation.

Scholars began to peel back the layers of Medieval interpretation, seeking the original meaning.

They began to read the Septuagint and Greek NT, trying to get a sense of the original Jewish meaning of words and idioms. Learn about ancient customs, idioms, words and phrases. Hebrew lexicons were created. Scholars began to study Syriac and Aramaic.

John Calvin. A humanist. Moved Western hermeneutics back toward the Antiochan school.

He moved hermeneutics toward the historic/literal sense. He viewed the Bible through covenant theology. Under what covenant was this passage written. Paid careful attention to grammar and sentence structure. Studied directly from Hebrew and Greek, also looking at the quality of the available manuscripts. Used the work of Erasmus with the Greek Textus Receptus.

With Calvin hermeneutics and exegesis are hard to separate.

Asked what was in the mind of the ancient author.

“The only business he [the commentator] has is to lay open the mind of the writer he has set out to explain. The more he deviates the reader away from it, the more he deviates from his own purpose, and is sure to wander out of bounds.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

His opposition to allegorical interpretation was that this was not in the mind of the writer.

(unlike those who came before him) he rejected the apocryphal books.

Polemical in his opposition to figurative interpretation.

Created the tradition of going through a passage word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase.

“Scripture they [the allegorizers] say is fertile, and thus produce a variety of meanings. I acknowledge that Scripture is a most rich and inexhaustible fountain of all wisdom; but I deny that its fertility consists in the various meanings with any man, at his pleasure, may assign.”

Sought the “natural and obvious meaning.”

Supported sola scriptura, and rejected all human authority.

This, in essence, is the hermeneutics of modernist Eurpean interpreters. We can read Calvin in translation from Latin and not recognize that he is living in the sixteenth century.

Less appeal to reason than modernist interpreters.

Weakness—over-emphasis on covenant? Over-reaction against typological interpretation?

17th century: Descartes, Spinoza began to appeal to reason in their interpretation.

Enlightenment: Interpreters began to look to the Bible more as a source of morality than theology, anthropology, as these were less “reasonable.” We start to see the emergence of liberal hermeneutics.

19th century: Two trends emerge: Liberal Protestant theology

Conservative/Evangelical (inc. Restoration)

E. Liberal Protestant hermeneutics can be represented by David Friederich Strauss and Friedrich Schliermacher. But I will cover Schliermacher.

Schliermacher, the “Father of Modern Theology. The Romantic Era

Raised as a pietist of the German school. Influenced by the Moravians.

He decided that the Bible could not be defended in an Age of Reason by Reason alone in an era when Enlightenment thinkers increasingly attacked inerrancy and even inspiration.

Author-oriented hermeneutic. Look to the author and his socio-historical context over and above the text itself. Psychological approach. Put yourself into the mind and heart of the author to understand the basis of their experience. (This is not modernist or Calvinist authorial intenet)

To Schleiermacher, the Bible was not a source of authoritative, propositional truth, but a record of true religious experience. The Bible is not a source of absolute truth but of religious experience.

“True religion is a feeling, awareness or consciousness of God—a Gefulh—a feeling of absolute dependence of God.

He looked to the Bible as a record of humans experiencing this gefuhl.

The Bible is a source of encouragement to Christian communities toward the experience of God. “Truth”—even the truth of the Bible—is found in the communities which have these experiences

He was, like Barth, a fideist, who found truth in the experience of God.

Evidence of historical “error” not a problem. Will not defend reliability of the Bible.

If asked to choose between science and the miraculous, he would downplay the miraculous.

Liberal theologians and interpreters after Schliermacher increasingly denied the miraculous and what they saw as irrational elements of Christianity. They moved decisively away from all ideas of propositional truth, infallibility and inspiration—bringing us to the likes of the Jesus Seminar.

F. Conservative Enlightenment/Modernist Protestant Hermeneutics.

Alexander Campbell

Historical/critical method.

Command, Example, Necessary Demonstration.

Speak where the Bible speaks, be silent where the Bible is silent.

Tend to look at the Bible as an ancient document which we look at through the eyes of the world of the author. The preacher’s job is to bridge this massive gap, explain what it meant to them, then make application to us.

Mark Love: “Stripmine the text for objective meaning.”

Baconian inductive analysis.

Seeking the facts of the Bible.

The original intention of the author is a “holy grail.” Only one meaning to any given text.

**Rules of Interpretation**: (a summary)

1. Every passage has one meaning.

2. The most obvious meaning is usually the correct one.

3. Always allow the author’s explanation to stand.

4. Always interpret a passage within the context of the passage, the book, and the situation.

5. An interpretation of a passage should conform to the environment of the author.

6. Rightly divide books by dispensation, covenant and setting.

7. Interpret every passage in the light of all others.

8. One passage will often explain another.

9. Let plain passages interpret difficult ones.

10. All passages on a subject must be studied before a conclusion is drawn.

11. Observe the proper balance of scriptural truth.

12. Passages should be interpreted in harmony with the idioms contained.

13. Rightly divide the language (grammar and figures of speech).

14. Learn to distinguish the figurative from the literal.

15. Know the meaning of sentences, phrases and words.

16. Rightly divide books by type of literature (poetry, apocalyptic, historical, doctrinal…).

Suggested Text: Gordon and Fee How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth.

G. Barth and neo-orthodoxy: Christocentric approach. “Jesus, the living Word of God, is the subject matter of the Bible, and if one is to understand the Bible, he must understand it because he has perceived the image of the Word of God about whom it speaks.”

Barth held to conservative exegetical techniques to approach the Scripture, but he was skeptical of such methods, as the exegete can dominate the text. held that we ought to be humble, as our hermeneutics are only accurate is so far that we understand the not-understandable trinitarian God.

In important ways he anticipated what I am calling Postmodern Hermeneutics

H. Hermeneutics in a Postmodern World

Conservative Postmodern Hermeneutics, which my Professor Mark Love calls Missional Hermeneutics does not deny the validity of this approach, but considers it inadequate. It will even incorporate certain elements of Schliermacher’s approach, but rejecting his rejection of inspiration.

I. Attention to narrative.

II. Attention to culture.

The Bible is not a source of propositional truths. The Bible is first and foremost a narrative of the triune God’s interaction with human beings and salvation history.

Letting the Bible create its own space. Let the text perform. The text is trying to create a world, not reflecting a world.

We do not go way back, mine the meaning and then cross this huge gap.

The Bible is a living text which is always being reinterpreted in the light of culture. (and that is a good thing)

The Gospel is the announcement of an event. The announcement of an eschatological event. The coming of the kingdom.

Sample quotes from Mark Love’s Missional Hermeneutics class:

The one unjustly killed has been raised from the dead. No longer can scapegoat violence be the thing that brings peace.

The thread of witnesses runs through Acts. They are not creating dogma, but pursuing the Spirit and witnessing to the risen Christ and what he is doing. What is Christ doing = What the Holy Spirit is doing. Resurrection ≥ Death.

Luke’s story of the kingdom is “inscribed” in the story of Israel. They are one story. How can Gentiles find a place in the story of Israel as Gentiles? This is worked out in Acts. We are restoring True Israel, as God intended from the beginning.

For Paul, the death and resurrection is not a formula, but the narrative he lives in.

We have no metaphors and theories. Paul teaches about being in Christ through narrative. Christ has created a realm in which we live in Him.

Paul does not have a dogmatic core. His is theology in context. But he has an underlying narrative story.

Gospel is news. It needs to remain news (not dogma).

1. Narrative

2. Metaphor

3. no theory.

This will be important as we start to talk about culture. Narrative and theory interact differently with culture. Theories foreclose on meaning. They limit our options. Metaphors and narrative are the opposite. They expand, rather than focus. You send a lover a poem, not a memo. Theories do not make us cry. Stories make us cry. There is power is story. Theory has little power. Theories foreclose. Narratives disclose.

There is nothing about the gospel that is not cultural. Anything that has language is cultural. The incarnation is God being expressed culturally. The gospel is a cultural stream. Gospel, though not reducible to a message, is identifiable by the way it expresses itself in the world.

Practical application:

How might postmodernist vs modernist hermeneutics make a difference? In many ways:

1. On the woman’s role question. John Mark Hicks argues for full egalitarianism primarily based on narrative. The narrative about the kingdom of God is that we are already but not yet. The not yet is that men and women will be fully egalitarianism in the eschaton. Hicks uses a partially culturally-based argument and a partially narrative based hermeneutic to conclude full egalitarianism. What he does NOT use is Christian dogma or historical/critical analysis (although he DOES DO THIS in his book)

Our ICOC teachers seem not to be willing to fully adopt this hermeneutic. I agree.

2. On the question of atonement. Based on narrative (and other reasoning), I have become convinced that the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement is either faulty or, at the very least, far from the whole picture on the nature of atonement.

The cross/atonement is a demonstration of God’s love.

The cross/atonement is Christ’s victory over the powers of this world

1. Lovelace, Vanessa (2018-09-11). "Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne, written by Wilda C. Gafney". Horizons in Biblical Theology. **40** (2): 212–215. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos* (Grand Rapids, Michigah: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Philo, *On the Life of Joseph*, 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From the preface to Calvin’s commentary on Romans. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)