



# Biblical Interpretation 101

## SESSION 2

| *How can we interpret the Bible more faithfully?*

### Introduction

Differences in interpretation are historically well attested and numerous. The way the Bible was heard in the fifth, sixteenth, and nineteenth centuries and now in the twenty-first century differs dramatically, in some instances, and yet it is the same book. In this session we will give attention to some of the basic models, or paradigms, of interpretation that have evolved across the centuries, some old methods still used, and some newer ones that have emerged.

There are four major historical eras, quite unequal in length, to consider: roughly 200 to 1500; 1500 to 1750; 1750 to 1950; and 1950 to the present. Each of these periods produced major models of interpretation, though there was great diversity within each and the boundaries between eras are not hard and fast. In many instances older models or methods continue to be utilized right to the present, though interpreters often do not realize that they are following an earlier pattern. The aim of this session is to identify and explore some of the more widely used models so that current interpreters can better understand their options and choices.

### Scripture as Divine Oracle

Perhaps the earliest model to gain wide use in the church was based on the assumption that the Bible was primarily a direct, divine word to God's people. As the Bible was afforded ever-greater authority by the church (eventually in the fourth and fifth centuries being officially canonized), the historical setting from which it had originated became less and less important. Verses, even words, could be taken totally out of context and



Luther became convinced that the only hope for the church was for the people to be enabled to read the Bible for themselves in their own language—not in the secret code of the Latin Bible reserved for the priesthood.

interpreted. That these verses had once been directed to particular people in particular times became unimportant. They were considered timeless and addressed to all people in every time.

Basically the Bible was used to provide the foundation for or to bolster theological formulations being fashioned in the church. Church doctrine or dogma was primary, and the Bible was a sourcebook for proof texts. After all, the Bible was God's direct word to the church—a divine oracle so to speak—and thus every letter, every word, and every sentence could be a source of insight into God's will on anything and everything. This attitude prevailed pretty much until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Two major schools of interpretation developed, one based in Alexandria, Egypt, and the other in Antioch, Syria. The Antiochians read the Bible more literally, stressing the grammatical meaning of a text. Tertullian provides an early example of this approach. The Alex-

andrians, on the other hand, as represented by Origen for instance, recognized increasingly profound levels of meaning contained within each particular text that both allowed for and indeed required more spiritual readings. The simple meaning (as insisted upon by Antioch) was there, but there were also several other levels of symbolic and allegorical meaning to be recognized by the more spiritual interpreters.

The results of these two methods of interpretation were somewhat different, but the assumptions on which they were based were largely the same: The Bible was a direct, divine oracle, mysterious but intended for edification and spiritual growth. During the nearly fifteen hundred years between Origen of Alexandria and the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation, the spiritual or allegorical interpretation rendered by this approach received the most emphasis. “Jerusalem” was often taken as a reference to heaven or to the soul, the spiritual or allegorical meaning of course, rather than as a reference to the historical city mentioned so often in the Bible, the more Antiochian reading. It should be noted that this same style of interpretation was also being exercised among Jews who had, like the Christians, decided to understand the Bible as a one-dimensional oracle of God.

There are still many who read the Bible with the assumptions that undergird this approach. Particular words or verses are lifted out of context and utilized in support of doctrinal positions being developed or already in place. Contemporary practitioners of this model of interpretation usually claim to be reading the Bible more literally than others, but they seem more often than not to be allowing ideology to dictate the way they are reading the Bible. If they are against abortion, they may lift a verse like Jeremiah 1:5 out of context and use it to “prove” their position. If they are against war, they may lift a verse such as Exodus 20:13 (as translated in the King James Version) out of context and use it to “prove” their position. The overall intention of the passage from which a verse is taken is usually ignored. The basic assumption supporting this approach is that each word and each sentence, quite independently, have significance as God’s direct word.

## The Bible as the Church’s Foundation

There were at least two major results of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century that initiated a new

approach to interpreting the Bible. The first is epitomized in the story often recounted of Martin Luther’s personal spiritual struggle. Weighed down by an enormous sense of guilt provoked by own inability to live a *holy life*, Luther was in great despair. Added to that was his great unease with the church’s practice of selling indulgences to people to shorten the time that their loved ones would suffer in purgatory. In the course of studying Paul’s letter to the Romans, Luther came to a life-changing realization. He was justified before God by his faith in Jesus Christ’s atoning work! There was absolutely nothing that he or anyone else had or could *do to earn* divine forgiveness! Justification by faith was a gift, not a work. Indulgences had no place at all. They were useless, and, in fact, sinful, because they used fear to frighten people and blind them to the enormous love and grace of God. Luther became convinced that the only hope for the church was for the people to be enabled to read the Bible for themselves in their own language—not in the secret code of the Latin Bible reserved for the priesthood. Direct access to the Bible was necessary for the people of God to discover the wonder of the gospel message.

Luther’s insights seem obvious now, but in his time they were anything but. Quite apart from the specific content of his theological awakening was the fact that the Bible took on a new role. Rather than being used to bolster church doctrine, the Bible became the basis for critique of church, particularly priestly, practice. The Bible no longer *served* the church. The church became the *servant* of the Bible. The implications of this new approach did not become immediately apparent, but a decisive shift began to take place that was to affect in significant ways the life of many Christians and the way they interpreted the Bible.

The second major result of the Reformation on biblical interpretation is associated with John Calvin. Calvin was a very well-trained lawyer before he became a theologian—and an intellectually curious man as well. There was a growing awareness that the Bible, as other documents from antiquity, had a long history of transmission. The Bible had first been written in languages other than Latin. It deserved to be studied in the best and earliest form that could be obtained. For the Old Testament, that meant reading in Hebrew; for the New Testament, Greek. Translations based on the Hebrew and Greek, then, should provide the basis for rendering the Bible into the modern vernacular: German, French, and English being the primary languages involved.

Not only did Calvin champion working from original languages; he also challenged the whole notion of texts having multiple, mysterious, symbolic meanings, an assumption that had for so long predominated the interpretation of the Bible. Calvin insisted on concentrating on the “plain sense” of a passage. Basic grammatical and contextual rules were to be acknowledged. While Calvin recognized that there were passages intentionally written in symbolic or allegorical form, most passages were not. The common sense, the “plain sense,” was first of all to be presented and understood before any further interpretation was offered. Reading the Bible as Calvin suggested led to an even more severe critique of much of church doctrine and the development of a radically new understanding of what the church was meant to be and do. The basic approach of the Reformation continues to inform many interpreters.

## The Bible as a Historical Document

The period of the Reformation was followed immediately by the period called the Enlightenment. For the next several hundred years, down until the decade preceding the beginning of World War II, in fact, the methodology that began in the century following the Reformation slowly but steadily evolved. In the early eighteenth century the discipline of biblical study in and for itself emerged. No longer was the function of studying the Bible aimed at informing or critiquing church dogma. Scholars began to study the Bible in the same way that other documents from the past were explored. The historical background of the languages involved and the societies described were studied. The history of the writing of the Bible and the process by which the church invested authority in it began to be understood. Less and less was the inspiration of the Spirit the focus. More and more the human character of the writings and their individuality were stressed.

This did not happen overnight. The study of the Bible as a historical document grew over the course of several centuries and continues to exercise great influence on many contemporary interpreters. The criteria for seeking to understand a passage stress the need to know the background of the writing both in terms of language, social setting, and so forth as well as the historical circumstances of the author and the audience. The Bible was to be read and studied as any other historical document would be read and studied.

This approach became dominant within Protestant theological circles by the end of the 1930s, but not without controversy. In North America the clash has come to be described as the struggle between modernism and fundamentalism. Without going into all the details of this “thirty years war” (1890–1920), it is enough to say that those who wanted to emphasize a more literal reading of the text in the service of a particular form of Calvinism (fundamentalists) resisted those who wanted to use contemporary methods of historical study (modernists).

In the mainline denominations, modernism finally won the day, though not without cost. The Presbyterians were especially split over the matter of how to read the Bible. Many fundamentalists withdrew and formed competing, relatively small denominations. This model of interpretation continues to demonstrate its power among some large evangelical communions.

An example of the historical approach may serve as illustration. It is clear that Paul advised some in the church at Corinth not to marry (e.g., 1 Cor. 7). One might interpret Paul’s teaching to endorse celibacy as a standard in the church. But reading the letter historically, one recognizes that Paul was voicing one particular option in light of his own belief that the world would soon end and Christ would return. Since that has not yet happened, one can conclude that Paul was simply wrong and therefore to be ignored. Interpreting Paul from a historical perspective, however, suggests that Paul was wise in struggling with a real problem. That does not require contemporary interpreters, however, to conclude that Paul reached the only possible solution to the issue. Paul’s approach offers insight on how we might consider such an issue without providing an answer that must be imposed in every circumstance.

## The Bible as Literature

Since the 1950s a number of new methodologies for interpretation have appeared. They are clearly related to the scientific approaches that have previously been developed, but they concentrate more on the literary character of the Bible. It should also be noted that in the mid-’60s Vatican II provided both the impetus and the freedom for Roman Catholic biblical scholars to participate fully in the modern approaches being explored. For many North American biblical scholars the historical-critical method considered in the preceding section continues to provide the basic approach for interpretation, but more and more

it is being supplemented—and sometimes replaced—by the more literary approaches.

In this short study we can do little more than mention three of the more widely used. First, there is rhetorical criticism. This model emphasizes the way a passage is literarily structured. By looking at repetitions, various kinds of poetic or narrative styles, and literary devices such as wordplays and the like, one can better determine the aim of a passage and communicate it. The rhetoric of a passage is part of the message and is to be fully appreciated. The opening chapter of Genesis is a case in point. The orderliness of creation is underscored by the careful way the writer developed and presented the account. To disregard the rhetoric is to miss some of the message.

Second, there is canonical criticism. This model takes seriously the ancient approach to the Bible as divine oracle but stresses the need to consider the final form of a book. A verse in Isaiah must be read in light of the whole book of Isaiah. Isaiah in turn can be interpreted only as part of the rest of the Bible, which for Christians includes, of course, the New Testament. Some see in the work of Karl Barth during the 1920s and '30s the beginning of this model. But it has been Brevard Childs, writing in the '80s and '90s, who has done the most to popularize this approach. Some criticize this model as basically a return to literalism, but its advocates deny such an accusation as the result of misunderstanding the method.

A third method of interpretation is called reader response. This method requires that readers personally engage the Bible. Readers do not need to know all of the historical background of a passage or the language in which it was originally written. The Bible comes to the modern reader directly with no need to know the original intention of the author. Rather, contemporary readers need to read the Bible carefully in their own language and relate what they read to their own personal experience. What does the text mean to me, now? This approach runs the risk, of course, of becoming highly

subjective, but for the proponents of this method that is somewhat desirable. To be most effective, a sharing of understanding in a group setting is most helpful and can prove to be very stimulating and enriching.

## Summary and Conclusion

The interpretation of the Bible has gone on since the Bible's inception. There is no reason to suppose that interpreters will cease to continue this work. In different times particular models have tended to be most frequently employed, but no one model has ever become so compelling as to close the door on all other approaches. What's more, many interpreters knowingly or unknowingly mix models, drawing first from one and then from another, as particular passages seem to require.

Only a few models have been briefly reviewed in this session. Certainly the approach that assumes the Bible to be a divine oracle, mysterious but authoritative in all its detail, has had the longest use in the church. From the second century down to the present, Christians have utilized this approach. Since the Protestant Reformation, however, the major competitor among North American scholars has become the historical-critical method, particularly as this has been enhanced in recent years by various methods of literary interpretation.

These various forms of interpretation serve to remind contemporary readers of the complexity, challenge, and creativeness implicit in every act of interpretation. They also remind us of the fact that we cannot escape our own time and place, our own culture and worldview. Different periods in church history have provided interpretative methods suited for the day. God's Spirit continues to work among us and raise up those who will dedicate themselves to the enterprise of interpretation, some formally and many informally.

## About the Writer

*Eugene W. March is A. B. Rhodes Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and the author of Israel and the Politics of Land and The Mighty Acts of God, rev. ed.*