

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

Timothy Ministries

Mini-Seminary

HERMENEUTICS 1

ESSENTIALS FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

Updated February 28, 2026 7:01 PM

The Problem of Meaning: What does Exodus 29.4 mean?

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

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

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

Key Presuppositions In Biblical Interpretation

PRESUPPOSITION: An idea, or set of interconnected ideas (= a perspective), *already held* by a person who begins an argument, pursues a course of action, or **interprets a situation or a text**. A presupposition may be based on objective evidence, popular assent, or subjective feelings.

DO I BELIEVE

THIS?

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THE OBJECTIVE vs SUBJECTIVE QUESTION

Along with songs of worship and wisdom teachings, the books of the Bible collectively present a unified message from God. This message consists of objective facts and propositions. God intends that people understand the conventional meaning of the biblical text, as well as His intentional meaning for the unified biblical message. Therefore, the Bible is not amenable to subjective interpretations based on human feeling or opinion (cf. 2Pe 1.20-21).

The books of the Bible are human productions, written by gifted human authors and editors to promote political and religious agendas. The “scriptures” are “inspired” in such a way as to speak differently to each reader. **Therefore, the Bible can be interpreted in countless different ways, and should not be adopted as a meta-narrative, i.e., a comprehensive guide for truth and right living.**

THE HEBRAIC vs GRECO-ROMAN QUESTION

The Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, was transmitted to mankind by way of Jewish, Israelite and patriarchal authors, all of whom wrote from the perspective of what can be characterized as a Hebraic cultural background. Therefore, the Scriptures should be understood and interpreted as emerging from a Hebraic worldview. To oversimplify: the Bible is culturally a Jewish book, in which relationship, supported by a moral code, is paramount.

The most important part of the Bible, the New Testament, was written in Greek by Christian believers of the first century, when the culture of the entire Mediterranean world had been influenced by the Greek worldview, and was already being shaped by the Roman worldview as well. Therefore, the later Scriptures should be understood and interpreted from a combined mystical and legal perspective. To oversimplify, the Bible is a western book in which law and ritual are paramount.

Key Presuppositions In Biblical Interpretation

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DO I BELIEVE

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THE PROMISES QUESTION

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| <input type="checkbox"/> God has never renounced His promises to national, ethnic Israel (“the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable,” Romans 11.29; Jeremiah 31.35-36). Therefore, Jerusalem remains the geographical center of the eschatological Scriptures (most references to <i>the earth/land</i> in End-Time prophecies refer to the land of Israel, and references to <i>the world</i> refer to the prophetic world roughly contained within the territory of the ancient Roman empire). | <input type="checkbox"/> God no longer has any plan for national Israel, since they rejected Jesus’s offer of the kingdom (= <i>Supersessionism</i> : all can safely ignore the blessing of Jacob [= Israel] in Genesis 27.29). Therefore, eschatological scriptures should be interpreted in the light of the world as it is today; if there is a geographical center for End-Time prophecy, it’s probably a city like New York. |
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THE REIGNING QUESTION

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| <input type="checkbox"/> The eschatological scriptures cannot be correctly interpreted without a well-ordered doctrine of “The Day of the LORD.” The day of the LORD is mentioned over 200 times in the OT and almost 60 times in the NT. According to the Bible, the day of the LORD is Christ’s day, it will begin at His second coming (<i>parousia</i>), it will unfold on the present earth, and will involve His reigning with the redeemed on the earth for somewhat longer than a thousand years. Therefore, End-Time prophecy should be interpreted in harmony with this biblical doctrine. | <input type="checkbox"/> Eschatological passages cannot be interpreted literally like the rest of Scripture. They are mostly figurative, exalting Christ, the gospel and the heavenly blessings that await the redeemed. Therefore, so-called End-Time prophecy should be interpreted according to its rich symbolism, and believers should understand that their destiny, when they die, is to reign with Christ in heaven. There they will await the eternal state in the new heavens and new earth that will begin at Christ’s “second coming” (<i>parousia</i>). |
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Other Important Presuppositions In Biblical Interpretation

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| <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is true. Scripture presents facts that accurately correspond to reality; the miracles and supernatural events it reports really occurred and were capable of human verification. Predictive prophecy is real. Therefore, interpret Scripture at face value, even when it describes or implies supernatural events.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God is intimately concerned with mankind and intervenes in human affairs (= theism). Miraculous things happen in our world when God introduces divine power into the natural order. Therefore, interpret Scripture at face value when it describes God's interventions.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God creates directly by decree. He does not need processes to produce inanimate or living things. God filled and ordered the world in the course of six revolutions of our planet; He created man in the course of one day. Therefore, interpret God's creative acts in Genesis as historical.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God instituted marriage, sacrificial rites and covenants, all of which were imitated and adapted by pagan peoples in patriarchal times. After the flood, the direction of cultural influence flowed from the early descendants of Noah to the dispersing pagan peoples. Therefore, marriage, sacrifice and covenant in Scripture should be interpreted as having eternal significance tied to God's character and His purposes for humanity.</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> The Bible is primarily myth. Scripture presents stories that convey religious and social truths, but that are not to be taken literally as recording historical events¹. Predictive prophecy is a literary illusion. Therefore, interpret Scripture as entertaining, and spiritually therapeutic, but not as in any way authoritative.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> If there is a God, He keeps Himself aloof from creation and humanity (= deism). Miracles cannot happen because they would violate the laws of physics. Don't interpret Scripture literally when it describes divine interventions.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> God creates by evolutionary processes. The days of creation in Genesis 1 represent long ages of untold duration. Therefore, the idea that Adam and Eve were historically the first man and woman should not be taken seriously, nor should other creative acts of "God."</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Sacrifices and treaties evolved among pagan peoples in deep antiquity. Sacrifices were to appease and manipulate the gods, and treaties were a means to maintain peace with, or dominate, rival tribes. Bible authors then modeled Israelite sacrifices and covenants on these pagan phenomena, giving them new religious meaning. Prehistorically, the direction of cultural influence flowed from the pagan peoples to the developing people of God. Therefore, Bible sacrifices and covenants should be interpreted as human adaptations for religious and socio-political purposes, and as having no enduring significance beyond their original cultural setting.</p> |
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1 Cf. J. M. Boice, *Genesis*, V.1, p. 160.

Other Important Presuppositions In Biblical Interpretation

DO I BELIEVE

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- The church, defined as *the corporate body of all believers purchased by Christ's blood* (Acts 20.28), was born when Adam and Eve put their faith in the promised Redeemer of Genesis 3.15. Therefore, while the church's NT phase is more advanced than its OT phase, God's redemptive work in both testaments should be interpreted as consistently based upon the same underlying principles.
- Creation is the setting for a cosmic war, and a battle for the souls of human beings. God has sovereignly *permitted* supernatural evil entities to enter our world for His own deep purposes, *and* He will eventually destroy all such evil entities, in order to restore the world to its original pristine state. **Therefore, Scripture should be interpreted as encouraging aggressive prayer, and spiritual vigilance with regard to invisible evil influences.**
- Consistent with the "Spirit of truth," the Bible's human authors used number words literally (with only one exception, Revelation 13.16-18). Nevertheless, number words in the Bible can allude and connote (e.g., *two* and *three* in 1 Timothy 5.19 allude to Deuteronomy 19.15, and the number *twelve* can connote the twelve tribes of Israel). When alluding or connoting, number words will simultaneously fulfill their basic function of quantifying (cardinal numbers) or sequencing (ordinal numbers). Number words in Scripture can also be rounded (usually implied by context) or explicitly approximate (using words like *about*). **Therefore, a number word in Scripture must be understood as signifying a literal quantity (even when rounded or approximate) or as a literal sequential position, even while fulfilling additional functions.**

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- The church was born on the day of Pentecost and includes only believers from that time until the moment of the rapture (= *Dispensationalism*). Therefore, the Bible should be interpreted in a manner that allows for the possibilities that people in the OT times were saved by different means than we are, and didn't have the Holy Spirit.
- What we perceive as "evil" is simply the ongoing struggle for "the survival of the fittest" in the face of social problems, diseases and natural disasters. There is no personal devil, and morality is a social construct. **Therefore, we must interpret Scripture as simply encouraging us to do our best to alleviate human and animal suffering.**
- Consistent with the later rabbinical system of number symbolism (*gematria*), the Jewish authors of Scripture after the 6th century BC adopted the number symbolism of the pagan mathematician and mystic, Pythagoras. In time, the followers of Pythagoras gave every number a special symbolical meaning. **Therefore, number words in the Bible, especially in the later prophets (like Daniel and Ezekiel), and in the New Testament (especially in the Revelation) should not be understood literally but symbolically.** Even numbers in the gospels, like the "hundred and fifty-three" fish of John 21.11 should be interpreted symbolically, and not as an example of eye-witness numerical accuracy.

HERMENEUTICAL INFLUENCES

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

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

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

The Three Cultural Lenses

Through which lens(es) do you read Scripture?

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

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

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

First Steps

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

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

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

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

Principle 1: Prepare Your Heart

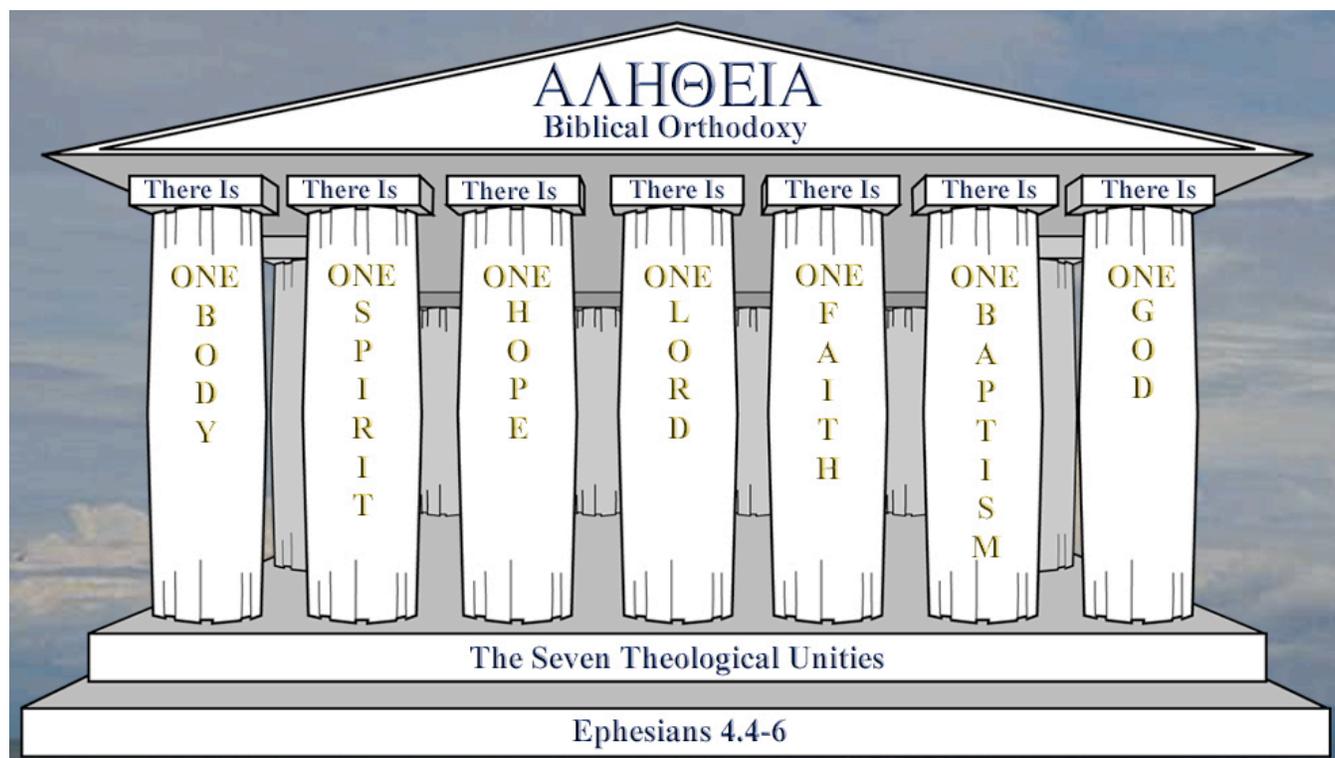
Principle 2: The Testimony Of Jesus Is The Spirit Of Prophecy

Revelation 19.10; James 2.26

Principle 3: The Berean Principle (Rule Of Non-Contradiction)

Assume that the different portions of scripture are consistent with one another and with the bible as a whole (Isaiah 8.20; Acts 17.11).

The Seven Unities: The Apostolic Test For Biblical Orthodoxy



Principle 4: Endeavor To Establish The Intentional Meaning

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

Principle 5: Context Is King

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

 See more on Biblical genres on the next page!

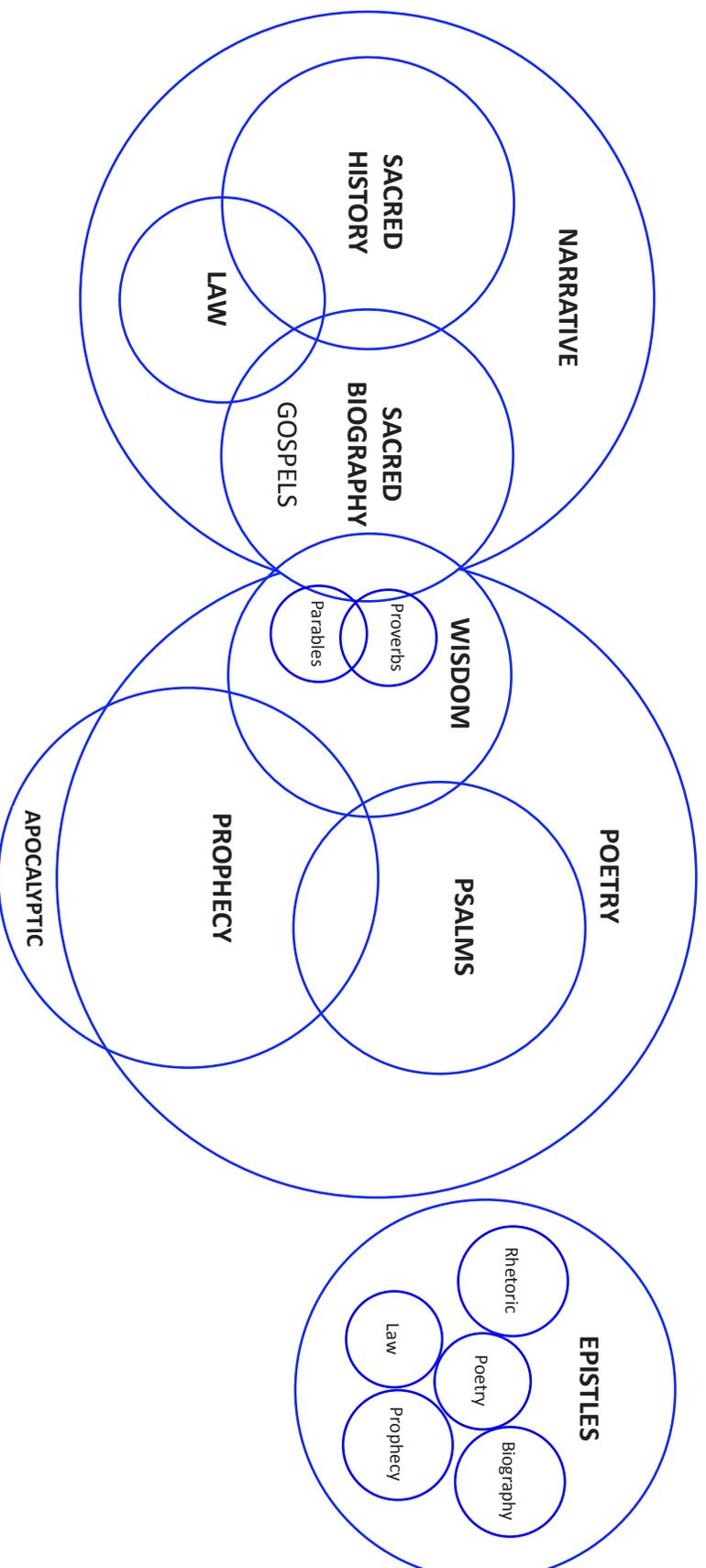
Principle 5B: Interpret a portion of Scripture in a manner consistent with its textual, historical and cultural contexts.

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

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

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

The Importance Of Genre In Biblical Interpretation



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

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

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

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

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

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

Like biblical types, biblical prophecies are often fulfilled progressively, with preliminary and then complete fulfillments:

type \Rightarrow antitype \Rightarrow fulfillment

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

Principle 8: Don't Interpret Interpretations

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

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

Explicit VS. Implicit

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

Implicit answer: I was born in Des Moines.

Explicit answer: I was born in Iowa.

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

1 Corinthians 14.8

Want To Continue Learning About This Topic?

Here are some recommended resources:

A Few Books & Articles

Note: With the exception of our own works, inclusion of a book in this list does not imply complete endorsement of a work's contents by Roderick Graciano or Timothy Ministries.

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

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

Graciano, Roderick. *Interpreting Number Words In The Scriptures: Ten Observations For Exegetical Clarity*. https://www.tmin.org/pdfs/Interpreting_Number_Words.pdf

— *Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses: 21 Rules For Interpreting The Bible*. https://www.tmin.org/pdfs/Polishing_2020.pdf

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

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

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

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

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

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

E-mail The Instructor

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