

HERMENEUTICS

HERMENEUTICS

PRINCIPLES AND PROCESSES
OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Second Edition

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AND KARELYNNE GERBER AYAYO


Baker Academic
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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2007 by Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Virkler, Henry A.

Hermeneutics: principles and processes of Biblical interpretation / Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 10: 0-8010-3138-9 (pbk.)

ISBN: 978-0-8010-3138-0 (pbk.)

1. Bible—Hermeneutics. I. Ayayo, Karelynn Gerber, 1975– II. Title.

BS476.V54 2007

220.601—dc22

2007021639

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To Mary,
whose interpretation of God's Word
through her life is a constant source
of encouragement to me

To Michael,
who models devotion
to the authoritative proclamation
of Scripture in word and deed

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many people whose contributions have made this book better. We would especially like to thank Betty DeVries, Diane Zimmerman, Jim Kinney, Arika Theule-Van Dam, and Jeremy Cunningham of Baker Academic for their fine editorial assistance.

We would also like to thank the following publishers for permission to quote from their books:

Baker: *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed., by Bernard Ramm, 1970.
Cambridge University Press: *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature*, by J. Bowker, 1969.

Eerdmans: *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, by Alan Cole, 1965.

InterVarsity: *Christ and the Bible*, by John W. Wenham, 1972. *Jesus and the Old Testament*, by R. T. France, 1971.

Multnomah: *The Prayer of Jabez*, by Bruce Wilkinson, 2000.

Yale University Press: *Validity in Interpretation*, by E. D. Hirsch, 1967.

Zondervan: *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, 1993.

PREFACE

In the study of any subject there are four identifiable but overlapping developmental stages. The first stage involves the recognition of an area that is important and relevant but unexplored. Initial exploration involves identifying what is there. In the area of hermeneutics the primary question is, How do we understand the meaning of someone else's words?

In the second stage attempts are made to articulate certain broad principles characterizing the area of investigation. One set of conceptual categories is advanced, then others, as investigators try to develop conceptual systems that organize or explain the data cogently and coherently. For example, is the meaning of a text solely what the author intended it to mean, or does the meaning of a text change depending on what it means to each reader or hearer?

During the third stage the focus shifts from elucidation of broad principles to the investigation of more specific principles. Investigators with various theoretical orientations pursue the study of specific principles, although they may start with different presuppositions and may disagree about which set of broad principles yields the most accurate conceptual system.

In the fourth stage the principles elucidated in the second and third stages are translated into specific skills that can be easily taught and applied to the field being studied.

The majority of hermeneutics texts available today appear to have as their primary goal the elucidation of proper principles of biblical interpretation (third stage). It is in the fourth stage—the translation of hermeneutical theory into the practical steps needed to interpret a biblical passage—that we hope to make a contribution.

The goal of this text is to give the reader not only an understanding of the principles of proper biblical interpretation but also the ability to apply those principles in sermon preparation, personal Bible study, and/or in writing.

Past experience in teaching hermeneutics has suggested to us that if students are given seven rules for interpreting parables, five for interpreting allegories, and eight for interpreting prophecy, although they may well memorize these for a final examination, they may not be able to retain them for longer periods. For this reason we have attempted to develop a common six-step process that can be applied to all biblical literature, with memorization restricted to specific differentiating characteristics. To give practice in applying hermeneutical principles, we have included exegetical exercises drawn primarily from public sermons, books, or counseling situations. To make the exercises a better learning aid, the answers should be written out.

This textbook is intended for those who accept historical, evangelical presuppositions concerning the nature of revelation and inspiration. There are thoughtful Christians who study Scripture from other perspectives. These other views are presented briefly for comparison and contrast. Interested readers will find a brief bibliography of works in hermeneutics written from other perspectives in appendix A.

We can see as far as we do only because we build on the work of those who have gone before us. We acknowledge our debt to many careful scholars in the field—Milton S. Terry, Richard C. Trench, Bernard Ramm, Walter Kaiser Jr., A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Louis Berkhof, D. A. Carson, Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart, John Feinberg, Paul Feinberg, Moisés Silva, William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., I. Howard Marshall, Grant R. Osborne, Anthony C. Thiselton, Robert Stein, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Roy B. Zuck—to name just a few. The work of these scholars will be referred to repeatedly in the text, and there are undoubtedly instances when they should be cited and are not.

It is perhaps the height of audacity (or foolhardiness) to attempt to write a book outside one's major area of competence, which in the first author's case is the integration of theology and psychology. The first edition of this book was written because I could find no text by a theologian who translated hermeneutical principles into practical exegetical steps.¹ It was originally intended for limited distribution in the Christian counselor training program where I taught at the time and was offered

1. The late A. B. Mickelsen's *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) is a notable exception to this statement. However, he translated theory to practical exegesis only for certain literary forms.

to the broader field of theological students only after strong encouragement from several people.

God blessed the first edition of the text in ways far beyond my expectations, and it has been used and is presently being used in conservative Bible colleges and seminaries in the United States and around the world. It has been translated into eight languages.

Important advances in hermeneutical theory have been made in the last twenty-five years, and it became increasingly evident that the time had come to update the text to incorporate those refinements. Since this is an *introduction* to hermeneutics, its focus is on the most important contributions that have emerged in the last twenty-five years without including all the detail that can be found in advanced texts on the topic.

A second consideration for this second edition was the obvious importance of enlisting a person with advanced training in theology as a coauthor. Karelynn Ayayo graciously consented to serve as coauthor, and anyone familiar with the first edition of this book will see ample evidence of the fine contributions she has made.

While preserving continuity with the first edition, the second edition incorporates several changes: (1) an updated history (chap. 2) reflecting trends in the last quarter of the twentieth century; (2) a new section on computer-based resources for exegetical study (related to chap. 4 and included as appendix D); (3) significant rewriting of chapter 5 to reflect the ongoing discussions between dispensational and covenantal theologians; (4) a more nuanced theological discussion in many chapters, especially chapters 6 through 8; (5) increase in the number of exercises from sixty-eight to one hundred; and (6) the availability of an Instructor's Resource CD (see appendix E).

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INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

After completing this chapter, you should be able to

1. Define the terms *hermeneutics*, *general hermeneutics*, and *special hermeneutics*.
2. Describe the various fields of biblical study (study of the canon, textual criticism, historical criticism, exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, practical theology) and their relationship to hermeneutics.
3. Explain the theoretical and biblical basis for the need for hermeneutics.
4. Identify three basic views of the doctrine of inspiration and explain the implications of these views for hermeneutics.
5. Identify five controversial issues in contemporary hermeneutics and explain each issue in a few sentences.

Some Basic Definitions

The word *hermeneutics* is said to have its origin in the name Hermes, the Greek god who served as messenger for the gods, transmitting and

interpreting their communications to their fortunate, or often unfortunate, recipients. By the first century, the verb form *hermeneuo* was used to mean “explain,” “interpret,” or “translate.” This verb appears three times in the New Testament, each time with the sense of translating from one language to another (John 1:42; 9:7; Heb. 7:2).

In its technical meaning, hermeneutics is often defined as *the science and art of biblical interpretation*. Hermeneutics is considered a science because it has rules, and these rules can be classified in an orderly system. It is considered an art because communication is flexible, and therefore a mechanical and rigid application of rules will sometimes distort the true meaning of a communication.¹ To be a good interpreter one must learn the rules of hermeneutics as well as the art of applying those rules.

Hermeneutical theory is sometimes divided into two subcategories: general and special hermeneutics. General hermeneutics is the study of those rules governing interpretation of the entire biblical text. It includes the topics of historical-cultural, contextual, lexical-syntactical, and theological analyses. Special hermeneutics is the study of those rules that apply to specific genres, such as parables, allegories, types, and prophecy. General hermeneutics is the focus of chapters 3 through 5, special hermeneutics the focus of chapters 6 and 7.

Relations of Hermeneutics to Other Fields of Biblical Study

Hermeneutics is not isolated from other fields of biblical study. It is related to study of the canon, textual criticism, historical criticism, exegesis, and biblical, systematic, and practical theology.²

Among these various fields of biblical study, the area that conceptually precedes all others is the study of canonicity, that is, the differentiation between those books that bear the stamp of divine inspiration and those that do not. The historical process by which certain books came to be placed in the canon and others excluded is a long and interesting one and can be found elsewhere.³ Essentially the process of canonization was a

1. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 7–10. See also Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), for an excellent argument for the unity of the theological disciplines.

3. Paul R. House, “Canon of the Old Testament,” in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Robert B. Sloan (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 134–55; Linda L. Belleville, “Canon of the New Testament,” in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, Dockery et al., 374–95. A more advanced treatment appears in F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988).

historical one in which the Holy Spirit guided the church to recognize that certain books bear the impress of divine authority.

The field of biblical study that conceptually follows the development of the canon is textual criticism, sometimes referred to as lower criticism. Textual criticism is the attempt to ascertain the original wording of a text. It is needed because we have no original manuscripts, only many copies of the originals, and these copies have variations among them. By carefully comparing one manuscript with another, textual critics perform an invaluable service by providing us with a biblical text that closely approximates the original writings given to Old and New Testament believers.⁴ One of the world's most renowned New Testament scholars, F. F. Bruce, has said in this regard, "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice."⁵

A third field of biblical study is known as historical or higher criticism. Scholars in this field study the authorship and audience of a book, the date of its composition, the historical circumstances surrounding its composition, the authenticity of its contents, and its literary unity.⁶

Many scholars engaged in higher criticism have begun with presuppositions questioning the belief that Scripture is God's inspired Word to humanity. For this reason some conservative Christians have tended to equate historical criticism with liberalism. This need not be the case. It is possible to engage in historical criticism starting from presuppositions upholding biblical authority. The introductions to each book of the Bible found in the *NIV Study Bible*, in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and in conservative commentaries are examples. Knowledge of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of a book is crucial to a proper understanding of its meaning. Chapter 3 is devoted to this topic.

Only after a study of canonicity, textual criticism, and historical criticism is the scholar ready to do exegesis. In exegesis the reader of Scripture applies the principles of hermeneutics to arrive at a correct understanding of the text. The prefix *ex* ("out of" or "from") refers to the idea that the interpreter is attempting to derive understanding *from* the text, rather than reading meaning *into* the text (eisegesis).

4. The primary manuscripts for the Old Testament include the Masoretic Text, the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX), and the Dead Sea Scrolls. More than five thousand manuscripts exist recording the writings of the New Testament. Most English translations of Old and New Testament texts draw on the work of textual critics. It is noteworthy that the KJV and NKJV differ from other English translations in this regard.

5. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 14–15.

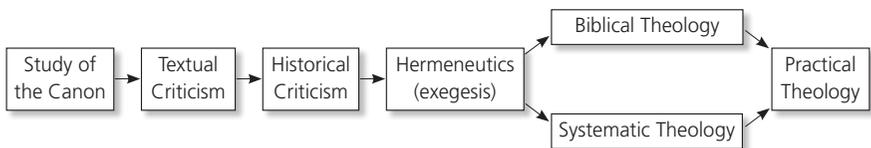
6. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 9.

Following exegesis are the twin fields of biblical theology and systematic theology. Biblical theology is the study of divine revelation as it was given through the Old and New Testaments. It asks the question, How did this specific revelation add to the knowledge that believers already possessed at that time? It attempts to show the development of theological knowledge during the Old and New Testament era.

In contrast to biblical theology, systematic theology organizes the biblical data in a logical rather than a historical manner. It attempts to place all the information on a given topic (e.g., the nature of God, the nature of the afterlife, the ministry of angels) together so that we can understand the totality of God’s revelation on that topic. Biblical and systematic theology are complementary fields: together they give us greater understanding than either would alone.

The discipline of practical theology rounds out the fields of study related to hermeneutics.⁷ Practical theology utilizes a three-step process that first describes and analyzes contemporary situations and practices. With the description of a particular situation in mind, practical theology dialogues with the work of the fields discussed above as well as with other social and natural sciences to arrive at a response to the contemporary situation. Practical theology completes its task by developing an effective strategy for Christian life and practice that speaks to the contemporary situation. Practical theology, as the final stage of the hermeneutical process, provides the necessary application of exegesis and theology to lived religious experience.

The diagram summarizes the previous discussion and shows the central role that hermeneutics plays in the development of a proper theology.



The Need for Hermeneutics

When we hear someone recite or read a text, our understanding of what we hear or read is usually spontaneous—the rules by which we interpret meaning occur automatically and unconsciously. When something blocks

7. For a more extensive introduction to this interdisciplinary field, see Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

that spontaneous understanding, we become more aware of the processes we use to understand (for example, when translating from one language to another). Hermeneutics is essentially a codification of the processes we normally use at an unconscious level to understand the meaning of a communication. The more obstacles to spontaneous understanding, the more aware we must become of the process of interpretation and the need for hermeneutics.

When we interpret Scripture, we encounter several obstacles to a spontaneous understanding of the original meaning of the message.⁸ There is a historical gap caused by the time separating the original writers and contemporary readers. Jonah's antipathy for the Ninevites, for example, takes on added meaning when we understand the extreme cruelty and sinfulness of the people of Nineveh in his time.

Second, a cultural gap results from the significant differences between the cultures of the ancient Hebrews or the first-century Mediterranean world and our contemporary one. Harold Garfinkel, the controversial UCLA sociologist and founder of ethnomethodology, suggests that it is impossible for an observer to be objective and dispassionate when studying a phenomenon (which in our case would be the study of Scripture). Each of us sees reality through eyes conditioned by our culture and a variety of other experiences. To use a favorite analogy of Garfinkel: it is impossible to study people or phenomena as if we were looking at fish in a goldfish bowl from a detached position outside the bowl; each of us is inside a bowl ourselves.⁹

Applied to hermeneutics, the analogy suggests that we are goldfish in one bowl (our own time and culture) looking at goldfish in another bowl (biblical times and culture). Failure to recognize either that cultural environment or our own, or the differences between the two, can result in serious misunderstanding of the meaning of biblical words and actions.¹⁰ More will be said about this in chapters 3 and 8.

A third significant block is the philosophical gap. Views of life, of circumstances, of the nature of the universe differ among cultures. To transmit a message successfully from one culture to another, a translator or reader must be aware of both the similarities and the contrasts in worldviews.

A fourth block to spontaneous understanding of the biblical message is the linguistic gap. The Bible was written in three languages: the Old Testament contains both Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament is in Greek. The structures and idioms of each of these three languages

8. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 4–7.

9. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967).

10. Tim Tyler, "The Ethnomethodologist," *Human Behavior* 3 (April 1974): 56–61.

differ from one another as well as from our own language. Consider the distortion in meaning that resulted, for example, when Kentucky Fried Chicken attempted to translate its ad campaign for a Chinese market. Without recognizing the presence of idioms, the translators rendered “Finger lickin’ good” as “Eat your fingers off.” Similar problems can arise in translating from other languages if the reader is not aware that phrases such as “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” may contain Hebrew idioms that make the original meaning of this phrase something different from that conveyed by the literal English translation.

Hermeneutics is needed, then, because of the historical, cultural, philosophical, and linguistic gaps that block a spontaneous, accurate understanding of God’s Word.

Exercise 1. To be an informed citizen, you regularly read your local newspaper. Are you typically aware of the hermeneutical process you utilize to understand the articles? Why, or why not? Suppose you were to read Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, written in 1863. Are you likely to be more aware or less aware of your hermeneutical process? Consider the same question with regard to your reading of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Describe the additional barriers to understanding that exist for you when you read the Emancipation Proclamation and *Macbeth* that do not exist when you read today’s newspaper.

Alternative Views of Inspiration

The view of inspiration that a biblical interpreter holds has direct implications for hermeneutics. This section offers only a very simplified introduction to the three main views of inspiration. There are several excellent discussions of the topic available elsewhere.¹¹

A position on inspiration common to liberalism is that the biblical writers were inspired in somewhat the same sense as Shakespeare and other great writers. What they transcribed were primitive Hebrew reli-

11. Carl F. H. Henry, *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958); J. I. Packer, “Fundamentalism” and *the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); J. I. Packer, “Revelation,” in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 1014–16; B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948); John M. Frame, “The Spirit and the Scriptures,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 217–35.