Principles of Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

The art and science of interpreting ancient documents is known as hermeneutics. Some of the most important principles to follow in biblical interpretation are:

1. The Grammatical Principle

   This principle requires that Scripture must be interpreted in light of its original language. An example of the importance of the principle may be seen in the following terms: "deacon", "angel", and “baptize." None of these English words comes from a translation of the Greek. Instead, they are transliterations. A transliteration occurs when the equivalent letter of a language replaces the letters of the word of another language. For example, the English term “deacon” is a transliteration of the Greek diakonos. The Greek word actually means, “one who takes orders from another,” or “one who serves another;” however, the word was not translated – it was transliterated to “deacon.” Other terms that were transliterated rather than translated are “angel” (from angelos, “messenger”) and “baptize” (from baptizo, “to dip”).

2. The Contextual Principle

   This principle requires that one must interpret the passage according to its context. One should examine what comes before and after the passage being studied (including the entire book in which it is found). An obvious need for this principle is seen in the writings of Paul and James. In Paul’s writings the term “faith” refers to an act of commitment, such as a person committing himself to another person in marriage. But in the Book of James, the term “faith” refers to belief or doctrine. Understanding this difference of meaning helps explain the seeming “contradiction” between Paul and James over the role of faith in salvation. Paul maintains that a person is saved by “faith” alone, but James states that “faith” alone cannot save. In James, “faith” means belief without action. What he means is this: so you believe the right doctrines – so what? The devils believe, but they are not saved. James is simply emphasizing what is assumed in Paul’s usage – true faith is a commitment that will manifest itself in works.

3. The Historical Principle

   This principle requires that one should interpret a passage against its historical background (including history, culture, geography, and thought patterns). This is one of the most important principles to apply to the Bible. Readers must remember that the Bible was written centuries ago to ancient people. Even today, cultural expectations govern what is considered appropriate in religious practice. For example, women in Islamic cultures cannot conduct public worship or participate openly in public meetings. This was certainly the case in ancient times.

   When Paul told the women in the church at Corinth they must wear veils and not speak publicly, he was simply accommodating to the culture of the city. Corinth was well known for its vice and immorality. The only women who appeared in public without veils or who spoke in public gatherings were prostitutes. The passage in 1 Cor. 14 that limits the participation of women in worship must be interpreted in light of the cultural, historical context.

   Another example of the need for this principle is seen in 1 Corinthians. Paul in chapter 11, verse 4 warns men not to cover their heads in worship. This would apply in a Greek context in ancient times, but today Paul would not say this in a Jewish context because now men are required to cover their heads.
It is also important to note that the Bible presents history as an account of God’s encounter with humanity, or *heilsgeschichte* (holy history).

4. The Theological Principle

This principle requires that one should seek to discern what the passage says about the major doctrines or theological issues of the Bible (God, humanity, sin, salvation, etc.). This principle is not concerned with “trivial” issues and details that do not relate to a sense of overall purpose.

**Biblical Criticism**

The term “criticism” in “Biblical Criticism” does not refer to anything negative regarding the Bible. Rather it is used in the same sense as that of a music, art, or movie critic – it simply refers to an area of study that analyzes the biblical materials from the perspective of its origin, transmission and interpretation. In the past, scholars divided biblical criticism into two categories, lower and higher. Lower criticism referred to an analysis of the actual text of the biblical materials themselves. Higher criticism simply referred to all other types of biblical criticism. In recent times, the categories of Literary Criticism and Canonical Criticism have been added as well.

1. Textual (“Lower”) Criticism

Textual criticism refers to an analysis of how the present “text” of the Bible came to us. The issue arises because of the fact that there are no original manuscripts (abbreviation of the word “manuscripts” is MM), called “autographs,” of the biblical materials. This means that none of the original documents written by the biblical writers have survived to the present time. All that are now available are copies of these documents. Ancient scribes were extremely cautious, but inevitably they made errors of copying. Corruption of the text was unavoidable. The task of restoring various manuscripts to a form as close as possible to the original is called textual or lower criticism.

Textual criticism is an intensive process of comparing the many copies available of the biblical documents to determine how they vary from one to another. For example, if one copy of a document includes a statement but most others do not, then the statement not found in most copies is viewed as a scribal addition, or “error.” It is not included. Since there are far more copies of the Bible than of any other ancient writing, textual critics have sufficient material to work with to give them assurance that the copy we have of the Bible today is thoroughly reliable; although, textual criticism can be a problem for those with a mechanical dictation or verbal plenary view of inspiration, because these view rely on *every word* of the Bible being exact.

2. Historical-Critical (“Higher”) Criticism

Although the term “Historical Criticism” is not as widely used by Bible scholars now as in the past, it is important for students to understand its meaning and history. One could make the case that this discipline began as an attempt to respond to critics who undermined the credibility of the Bible. Such critics said that the Bible could not be viewed as trustworthy simply because its readers claimed that God inspired it. Obviously, persons of other religious traditions would discount such a claim, since the Bible is not their Scripture. The question to be asked is, should one take the Bible seriously even if she does not accept it as divinely inspired? Can one demonstrate that its contents are valuable and reliable? Does the Bible have credibility even to those who do not view it as Scripture?
Such questions led Bible scholars to begin to study carefully the way the biblical materials came into their final form. Questions of authorship, sources, editing, transmission of materials, and historical influences led to what came to be called, "higher criticism" or "historical criticism." Beginning with the Old Testament, this discipline of study included the following:

a) **Source Criticism**

Source criticism asked who were the authors and what sources did they use in writing. Source criticism can best be illustrated by looking at the Pentateuch as an example. The source critical study of the Pentateuch involves:

1) **The Traditional View of Authorship of the Pentateuch**

The traditional view of the authorship of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) is that Moses was the author. Opinions vary, but this view holds that Moses was the key influence behind these materials. The Pentateuch itself is anonymous; however, references are made to Moses as being ordered to write laws, codes, or historical facts (Exod. 17:14, Num. 33:2, Exod. 24:4; 34:27).

Some holding this view admit that Moses may not have been the author of the Pentateuch in its final form, but they believe that he was the originator and most important influence that produced the material. Such persons acknowledge that Ezra or someone in the restoration era of Judah could have collected the Pentateuch into its final form. A New Testament example of this would be that of Jesus. Although Jesus is the subject of the four gospels and the words found there are his, he did not actually write any of them. In this same way, Moses could be seen as the “author” of the Pentateuch, although he may not actually have written it. In fact, the Pentateuch records Moses’ death and burial (Deut. 34:5-6)

2) **The Documentary Hypothesis**

The so-called documentary hypothesis holds that the Pentateuch developed into its final form gradually in a four-stage process.

Jean Astruc, a French doctor and amateur biblical scholar, concluded that Moses used three sources, sources A, B, and C. Others continued on this path until Julius Wellhausen developed the classic form known as the Documentary Hypothesis. This theory proposes that the Pentateuch was written by four authors at four different time periods as described below:

1) **The J Source:** A history of ancient Israel written in Solomon’s time characterized by use of God’s personal name Yahweh. This source is dated around the time of Solomon, 950 B.C.

2) **The E Source:** A second edition of this history was characterized by the use of the Hebrew name for God, Elohim. This source is dated around 850 B.C.

3) **The D Source:** The third edition of this history resulted from the discovery of the book of Deuteronomy in the Temple in
Josiah’s time (621 B.C.). Material that reports events in light of the blessings/cursings of the book of Deuteronomy are said to be part of this source, commonly called the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through II Kings).

4) **The P Source:** According to this approach priests brought together and edited all the above material around 450 B.C. adding in the legal material of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

In Wellhausen's view (which is commonly called the JEDP theory) each of these histories reflected the time in which they were written. He held that those who assembled these materials were the actual authors. This view denied any involvement by Moses himself in either the writing or the influencing of the Pentateuch, since the materials came long after the time of Moses.

In addition, some scholars who hold this approach, or a modification of it (such as the J-E-JE-D-P), do not believe that the narratives described in the Pentateuch actually occurred. They deny the existence of any of the Patriarchs like Abraham or other leaders such as Moses or Joshua. Also, they reject the claim that events such as the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt ever happened. **Students need to be aware that many of the programs and articles in the popular media (e.g., The Learning Channel, the Discovery Channel, Time & Newsweek Magazines, etc.) follow the approach held by scholars holding these views.** Often, these programs and articles do not inform people that there are equally qualified scholars who do believe the basic content of the Pentateuch is reliable and should be taken seriously.

(3) **Oral Tradition**

Scholars led by Ivan Engnell challenged Wellhausen's thesis that writers wrote the Pentateuch during the later periods of Old Testament history. They suggested that the materials of the developed stages came from ancient times and were not written by later authors. The materials, though collected and put into final written form by later editors, came from stories passed down through history in an oral form. This approach came to be known as oral tradition.

According to this view, the stories told in the Pentateuch did occur, they just were not written down until much later. Ancient cultures were far more advanced in remembering stories than people are today. They did not have machines such as computers to record data and remember it for them. Ancient people had to depend upon their own memory. The Pentateuch itself illustrates this. Following the Passover event, the people were told to conduct an annual ritual to remember the event, and they were commanded to tell the story behind it to their children so that they could pass it along to future generations.

An example of oral tradition today is that of jokes. Prior to the popular use of the internet and e-mail, jokes were introduced by these words: “Have you heard the one about…” Most jokes circulated orally and only later were written down by some enterprising author.
(4) Deuteronomistic History

Martin Noth introduced another historical approach to the Old Testament. Noth held that there is a self-contained history introduced by the Book of Deuteronomy that is independent of the other books of the Pentateuch. This history includes the Book of Deuteronomy, plus the Books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings (“The Former Prophets”). Noth claimed this history was a single literary unit that existed along with the two other historical sections of the Old Testament, the so-called Tetratuch (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus) and the Chronicles unit (1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah). According to Noth’s view, an author/editor in the Sixth Century B.C.E. wrote this material in an attempt to explain why Judah had been defeated and was then in exile in Babylon. The writer claimed that his people were suffering the consequences of the failure to be true to God for many centuries.

Frank Cross modified Noth’s view by adding an additional writer to the Deuteronomistic History. According to Cross, a first edition of this history came from an editor who emphasized the reform attempt by Josiah during the time of the Prophet Jeremiah. This was an effort to get the people to obey the Mosaic Law and enable God to restore the kingdom to the greatness it had experienced during the time of King David. Cross claimed that a second editor brought the earlier material up to date to fit the circumstances Judah faced during the exile. This editor blamed the exile on King Manasseh, whose sinful leadership destroyed all that Josiah’s reform had sought to accomplish.

Scholars who hold to the Deteronomistic History viewpoint claim that the Book of Deuteronomy was written very late and could not have been influenced by Moses. In addition, this view would displace Deuteronomy from its place in the Pentateuch and remove it from the role of serving to be a reinterpretation of the first four books of the Bible.

b) Form Criticism

Form criticism is the approach to the Bible holding that particular types of communication have preferred forms and are often associated with specific social settings. A contemporary example is that of sermons in churches. If one happens to tune a radio to the broadcast of someone preaching a sermon, he immediately recognizes a particular “form” of communication. He can deduce certain data just by listening. The fact that the person is preaching a sermon suggests a style and form – sermons have their own unique standards for organization and presentation. In addition, the listener can usually deduce the day (Sunday), time (probably between 10:00 – 11:00 a.m.), and place (a church) where the oral presentation is being made. If the listener is an expert on preaching such as a professor of homiletics, he can even deduce whether or not the sermon is contemporary or recorded from an earlier era. Form critics are persons with the training to examine the biblical materials and analyze them in this way.

Form critics believe that units of tradition originally circulated independently. They try to trace the history of the biblical material before its appearance in written form. In doing this, they can actually study the biblical materials prior to the time they were written in their final form.
Hermann Gunkel introduced form criticism into Old Testament study. He also contributed the concept of *Sitz im Leben* or “setting in life” to criticism of the biblical text. This concept refers to interpreting the Bible with respect to the events and daily life of the times in which it was written.

c) **Redaction Criticism**

Redaction criticism studies how a "redactor" combined the various sources used in the biblical materials into larger units. The redactor was an editor who assembled the materials to fit a theological purpose. An example of this may be seen in the Gospel of John. Readers note that this gospel is very much different than the other three. One might ask why John omits so much that is told in the others. He does not mention Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem. He does not give any of the Sermon on the Mount. John gives none of Jesus’ traditional type of parables. He only lists seven of Jesus’ miracles. In fact, almost half of John’s gospel relates to one week of Jesus’ life. Perhaps we could look at the writer of John as an editor who has much material available to him, but not all of it fits the purpose for his writing. The writer of John states in chapter 20 that his purpose is to “convert” the reader (John 20:30-31). He feels that the events that focus on the last week of Jesus’ life best suit this purpose; therefore, he edits out the other material available.

Redaction criticism seeks to understand how various literary units function in the position that they have in the current biblical text. In addition, it seeks to discern the social situation in which the text was finally formulated. Also form critics try to determine how writers used older materials to fit a new situation in the life of God's people. An example of this would be how Paul and James in the New Testament used the story of Abraham in the Old Testament. Paul used Abraham’s story to teach that one can only receive salvation (be “justified”) by faith, but James used Abraham to illustrate that faith must be demonstrated by works.

The classic example is the book of Isaiah. This criticism says that the book of Isaiah is divided into three great sections, each written by different authors in three different situations. Isaiah 1-39 was written in the 8th century by the prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem. The second section, Isaiah 40-55 was written after the exile after 587 B.C., and the third section, Isaiah 56-66 written in the restoration period, around 400 B.C. This criticism also considers the superscriptions found in the prophets (the first verse that identifies the prophet) and in the psalms (identification of the author of the psalm) as redaction by a later redactor or editor.

3. **Literary Criticism**

Literary criticism rejects the methods of historical criticism. It views the Bible exclusively as literature and studies the "whole" text as it is without concern for sources, historicity, and doctrinal meanings. Literary critics seek to understand the Bible with the same methods used for other literature. Methods related to literary criticism are:

a) **Rhetorical Criticism**

James Muilenberg called for a literary criticism that went beyond form criticism. He desired to focus on the text as a whole. Rhetorical criticism compares the biblical materials to the Greco-Roman orators. It seeks to know the personal aspects of the writers thought, including his emotional attitude.
b) Genre Criticism

Genre criticism emphasizes the importance of recognizing the genre, or literary type of the biblical text. Most of the Bible is narrative and poetry; although, other genres include historical chronicles, drama, theological treatises, moral commands, gospel, epistle, and apocalyptic.

A Special Note on Apocalyptic Literature:
This genre was written mainly in symbolic code imagery and is generally thought to be “tracts for hard times.” These writings arose in times of persecution to give encouragement to God’s distressed people. The book of Daniel is the chief example of apocalyptic in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation is the chief example in the New Testament. There are shorter passages found in Ezekiel, Isaiah, Joel, and Zechariah (and Mark 13 in the New Testament). Apocalyptic literature is very difficult to read and interpret and should be dealt with carefully as difficult to interpret and very easy to misinterpret.

c) Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism focuses on the stories of biblical literature. It examines the plot, characters, and outcome of biblical stories. Narrative critics seek the stories in non-narrative texts such as Paul’s letters. They claim that Jesus’ story, Paul’s own “story,” and that of his readers inform the meaning and purpose of the text.

d) Structural Criticism

Structural criticism searches for the deep structures of the text. It focuses on the linguistic structure of the text rather than the meaning of the language itself. This criticism includes discourse analysis, which analyzes the way people talk and the meaning of what they say.

e) Reader Response Criticism

This method focuses on the role of the reader of the text in interpretation. The reader gains knowledge when his own social experience impacts the biblical text. Readers are permitted to bring to the text their own ideologies and "read" (interpret) it accordingly (e.g., Marxist, feminist, or liberation ideologies). Walter Brueggemann is a contemporary advocate of this approach.

4. Canon (or “Canonical”) Criticism

Brevard Childs advocates reading the Bible in its canonical context. The Bible must be interpreted as the sacred text of a religious community. One can understand the Bible from the perspective of the community of faith; therefore, interpreters must examine it theologically rather than by literary categories. Canon criticism emphasizes the function the Bible serves as the scripture of the community of faith.

Childs proposes that where the text is placed in the canon says something about what the community thought about the text. For example, the Protestant canon and the Roman Catholic canon place Daniel in the prophets, Ruth after Judges, Lamentations after Jeremiah, but in the Hebrew canon all three are placed in the Writings. Childs would consider the significance of this placement.