

History of Interpretation

Session 2

Overview

Objectives

1. Learn Key Issues
2. Understand Dynamics of Biblical Reading
3. Acquire humility – Accept challenges that history presents – We don't necessarily know best in our modern time!

What are we about to Learn?

- A brief and quick overview of interpretation throughout History from ancient Israel to the modern day
- We will also expand briefly on some of the postmodern approaches that we see regularly in Biblical interpretation

Why should we know about this?

Jewish Interpretation

- Inner Biblical Allusion
 - o Reworking and interpreting of texts throughout the periods of the OT.
 - Ex. 1 and 2 Kings get reworked as 1 and 2 Chronicles from a post-exilic perspective. (67)
 - o Scribes become authors themselves as their interpretations became authoritative.

Pre-exilic	Exilic	Post-exilic
Jer. 25:11-12	Jer. 29:10	2 Chr. 36:21
<i>Seventy Years</i>	<i>Seventy Years</i>	<i>Sabbath rest</i>

Read: 2 Chr. 36:20-21, The author sees the events in hindsight. The scribe takes an understanding of the seventy years as written in Jeremiah, not solely as the time allotted for Israel's exile, but also for the land to enjoy a sabbath rest.

- Post-Biblical Interpretation: The Transition
 - o The first interpreters known by name: Ezra publicly reads the Mosaic law (in Hebrew), *Levites explained* to the crowd (in Aramaic)
 - Instituted the *Targum*. Oral reading and interpretation from Hebrew Scripture readings into the common language of Aramaic.
 - o Hellenistic and Roman empires forced Jews to *define and preserve* their religious identity (69)

- Interpretation was made into a central and fundamental religious activity, establishing the basic methods and patterns of how to read the Bible that would be used for centuries and even to today.
 - Hebrew to Aramaic to Greek
 - School in Alexandria of Jewish Scholars produced the Septuagint (LXX) (70 authors) – later became the Bible of the Early Church. (70)
 - Allegorical method – a text’s true meaning is found behind the written words – Plato - An extended metaphor (71)
 - Philo – One could disregard a text’s literal meaning when it: (71)
 - Said anything unworthy of God
 - Contained some insolvable difficulty, unusual grammar, or unique rhetoric
 - Involved an obvious allegorical expression
 - From a modern viewpoint, Philo’s approach too often seems dependant on subjectivity, arbitrariness and artificiality. (71)
 - Qumran Community
 - Mined OT prophecies to explain involvement in the events of their own day (77)
 - Rabbinic Jerusalem
 - Depends heavily on earlier revered Rabbi’s interpretations. (74)
 - Rabbinic commentators often interpreted Scripture literally (75)
 - “Motives were pastoral – to give logical biblical teaching for situations not covered directly in Scripture.” (75)
 - Desired to apply Scripture to the problems of a modern audience.

Christian Interpretation

Apostolic Period (AD 30-100)

- Used many of the same principles as other Jewish Groups, but now revered Jesus as the new Moses and an authority more superior to the law of Moses. (77)
 - Radically new perspective!
- Interpreted the OT through Literal Interpretation, Literal-contextual Interpretation, and Principle/Application Interpretation
 - *Literal* – Jesus literally fulfilling OT prophecy – Is. 61:1-2, 35:5-6
 - Reading the OT through the lens of Christ
 - *Literal/Contextual* – Interprets more broadly according to normal meaning and context (79)
 - Jesus cited Hosea 6:6 twice in its normal use against the Pharisees, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13; 12:8)
 - *Principle/Application* – Not interpreted literally, but rather they applied the principle of the passage and applied it to a different but comparable situation than that of the original (79)
 - Paul quoted Hosea 2:23 in Rom. 9:25.

- Not entirely pulled out of its context. Applied to a comparable context.
- Main Form was *Typology* - a representation of an actual, historical reference. According to Christian exegesis, biblical typology deals with the parallels between actual, historical (usually OT) figures or events in salvation history and their later, analogous fulfillment. Often NT events and figures are typologically understood and interpreted according to an OT pattern (e.g., creation and the new creation, Adam and Christ, the exodus and NT concepts of salvation,). On this basis typology became one of the four prevalent ways (together with the literal, the analogical and the spiritual) of interpreting Scripture in the Middle Ages. [Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 117.]

Patristic Period [*The Church Fathers*] (AD 100-590)

- Apostolic Fathers (AD 100-150)
 - Early Church leaders like Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and pseudonymous writer called Barnabas (81)
 - Occasionally used *Typology*
 - Favoured *Allegory* in interpreting the OT
 - Sparked many heretical groups such as the Gnostics
 - No canonical collection of NT scriptures yet
 - Needed to appeal to the authority of tradition
 - Started the hermeneutical approach of *traditional interpretation* (83)
 - The traditional interpretation being what the churches taught.
 - Valid interpretation was only what was taught by the current Church leaders allowing for the church to defend against the gnostics and other heretics.

- The Alexandrian School (AD 150-400)
 - Mainly Allegorical as adopted by Jewish scholar, Philo
 - Origen argued that Scripture has a 4-fold meaning in his approach to allegorical interpretation. See example of Lot and his Daughters - Gen. 19:30-38
 - The *literal* sense – what actually happened
 - Story as it is written
 - The *moral* sense – hidden principles for Christian Living
 - Lot – the rational human mind
 - Lot’s wife – the flesh inclined to pleasures
 - Lot’s daughters – pride.
 - The *spiritual* sense – doctrinal truth
 - Lot – OT Law
 - Lot’s daughters – Jerusalem and Samaria
 - Lot’s wife – Israelites who rebelled in the wilderness
 - The *anagogical* sense – eschatological
 - Origen had no comment in this case

- Church Councils (Ad 400-590)
 - Church Fathers found refuge in their own claim to Apostolicity – they alone could interpret the apostles teachings correctly
 - Adhered to the Apostles’ teachings along with properly interpreted scripture to defend against heresies
 - Augustine – comprehensive orthodox interpretation
 - Refreshing change from the arbitrariness of allegory
 - **Interpretation goal is to lead readers to love God and other people**
 - Should be of a texts literal or historical meaning
 - Safeguard 1 – Interpret obscure passages in light of clearer ones
 - Safeguard 2 – Should conform to the Rule of Faith or the Church’s interpretation
 - Safeguard 3 – Conform to the “Rule of Context” Best fits the immediate context.
 - At the end of this period, Church leaders convinced a scholar named Jerome to translate the NT and OT into Latin, creating the Vulgate (common), becoming the official Bible of the Western Church. This also ceased any interaction with the original languages of Greek and Hebrew. (88-89)
 - Luke 1:28 – Hail Mary full *of grace*
 - Favoured one (Gk.)
 - You who are highly favoured (NIV)
 - Moved further away from a dependence on the original text as the source for its teachings.

Middle Ages (590-1500)

- 3 Approaches to Interpretation
 - Traditional interpretation
 - Catena: Chain of interpretation – interpreting based on former interpretations
 - Continued dominance of the Allegorical method
 - Ex. Jerusalem
 - Literal – city of Jerusalem
 - Moral – The Faithful Christian Soul
 - Spiritual – Christian Church
 - Anagogical – The heavenly city
 - Historical Interpretation
 - Thomas Aquinas
 - Scholasticism – Main concern was to sort out the relationship between Christian Faith and human reason. (90)

Exercise – David and Goliath – 1 Samuel 17:38-40 – Allegorize this story

- **Who does David represent?**
- **What does the ill-fitting armor represent?**
- **What could the stones represent?**

- **What does Goliath represent?**

Reformation (1500-1650)

- Erasmus laid the egg, Luther hatched it.
- Luther and Calvin –
 - o Scripture trumps tradition and clergy (*sola scriptura*)(96)
 - o Scripture is its own best interpreter – Goodbye allegory and dependence on Church fathers. Welcome back Christo-centrism and the Holy Spirit.
- Reformers did not always agree
 - o Calvin, Luther, the Anabaptists (radical reformers)
- Beginning of denominations and separations due to theological differences
- Counter Reformation - *Council of Trent* (96)
 - o The Catholic church was authoritative
 - o Vulgate was primary as the scripture of the Church and the guiding scripture rather than original languages

Post-Reformation (1650-1750)

- Pietism (97)
 - o Movement of home bible study and prayer
 - o Sought to recover Christianity as a way of life/morality
 - o Sought spiritual food for their souls and moral guidance
 - o Evangelicalism spawns out of pietism and later revivalism that took place in North America in the 18th-19th century
- Enlightenment/Rationalism
 - o “The human mind in an independent authority capable of determining truth” (98)
 - o Study scripture like any other book
 - o Divine inspiration written off in rational arguments
 - o Bernard Spinoza – Reason trumps scripture
 - Promoted radical divorce of faith and reason

Modern Period (1750-Present)

19th Century

- o Everything needed to be studied by Science
 - Historical-critical method (99)
 - Supernatural intervention excluded
 - Bible was timebound not timeless
 - Bible is just another book
- o Developmentalism (99)
 - Change or progress is inevitable
 - 2 histories – The bible (Suspect) and real history
- o Other voices
 - Restoration Movement to recover 1st century Christianity

- Pentecost revivals
- Post World War I
 - Karl Barth
 - Return to the authority of Scripture as the word of God
 - The necessity of a personal encounter with God
- Post World War II
 - Biblical Theology Movement
 - Publications and journals sought to recover the Bible's Theology
 - New methods
 - Redaction criticism – deal with whole final texts
 - Canon criticism – sought to recover Scripture as the church's authoritative book
 - Literary Criticism – study of the literary artistry within Scripture
 - Deconstruction
 - Quests to recover the Historical Jesus/Real Jesus
 - Pentecostal Studies
 - Perspectivalism – hermeneutics from different perspectives/advocacy groups
 - Different ethnic groups
 - Feminist, LGBT hermeneutics,

21st Century

- New commentary series
- Theological commentaries
- Reception history
 - Music, film, pop culture
- Recovery of church father's works

What has History Taught us?

- History has taught us that we face an ongoing challenge with reading the bible. We must look at what it means to worship God with all of our heart and minds, looking at the tension between rationalism and piety. The recovering of ancient manuscripts, contemporary translations and our desire to grow and learn through scripture push us to explore how Scripture serves the church. Our spiritual formation has been given us a head start as we live in this modern age having access to God's word through the development of history.

Literary and Social-Scientific Approaches to Interpretation

What is a Criticism? - the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work

Literary Criticism - study of the literary artistry within Scripture

- Narrative Criticism
 - Addresses the surface features of the text
 - Plot, theme, motifs, characterization
 - Meter, rhyme, parallelism
- Structuralism
 - Addresses the 'deep structures' of the text
 - 1970's-80's
 - Analyzing *How* a sender communicates an object to a receiver through subject, potentially helped or opposed (119)
 - Few exegetical insights resulted from this method.
 - Not used much at all today
- Poststructuralism (part of Postmodernism)
 - Reader-response criticism
 - Deconstruction

Narrative Criticism

- Analyzes Scripture for ordinary narrative features
 - Plot, theme, motifs, characterization, style, figures of speech, symbolism, foreshadowing, repetition, narrative time, point of view, etc. (119)
- Samson (Judges 13-16)
 - Samson's characterization is quite complex
 - Heroic death and continual filling of the Spirit in His life make him someone to emulate, though not in every aspect
- Saul (1 Sam 9 - 2 Sam 1)
 - Someone not to emulate as he was given everything and while knowing better, lost everything.
- Nicodemus (John 3:1-15; 7:50-52; 19:39)
 - Did he become a disciple? We are not given conclusive information.
 - Do we view him as someone who eventually came to faith against the pressure of his peers both slowly and secretly?
 - Or as someone who failed to make a decisive break from his past as discipleship requires? (120)
- Helps us focus on main points rather than side details (climax)

- Understand repetition
- Helps us understand the depth of characters
- Distinguish implied and real authors and texts
- Stories are told from a narrators point of view
- Strengths of Narrative Criticism
 - Helps us to see parts of the text we would not otherwise see
 - Can be used in standard exegesis and theology
 - Allows us to bracket historical debates about what really happened or didn't
- Weaknesses of Narrative Criticism
 - Presupposes a fictional nature of the stories – Which it doesn't need to do.
 - Can indefinitely postpone the theological interaction with the text (125)

Poststructuralism/Postmodernism

Convictions and Values of Poststructuralism

- Ideological pluralism – No one religion or worldview contains absolute truth.
- Impossible to have an objective interpretation
- Communities are important in shaping interpretive traditions
- Rejects modernist devaluation of religion/spirituality
- Emphasizes aesthetic, symbolic, and ancient tradition
- Stories are formative in making meaning in our world
- Language is determinative of thought and meaning (126)
- Strengths
 - Leaves room for spiritual, symbolic, aesthetic
- Weakness
 - Conflicts with the Bible's metanarrative (The Big Picture of the Bible)

Reader-Response Criticism

- Claims that meaning *is the product of individual readers* in interaction with texts; there is no objective meaning in a text itself. (128)
- Focuses on the diverse way that readers respond to the text and not the author's intentions
- Focuses on narrative gaps – Did Uriah know what was going on when David brought him back from battle?
- Need to distinguish between fixed meaning and contemporary significance/application

Deconstruction

- Seeks to show how all text deconstruct (undermine) themselves; texts make no absolute claims on readers (128) ***This is the root of the deconstructed faith today***
- We should not take on this approach as Christians
- Looking for tensions and paradoxes however can be illuminating

Advocacy Movements

- Liberation Hermeneutics
 - Based in Christian response to world poverty
 - While biblical in nature, can easily become moralistic and forced
- Cultural Criticism
 - Movement about what happens after liberation.
 - Ex. The fall of communism
 - Benefits to the cultural criticism movement is that we should each be aware of the cultural factors that shape how we interpret the bible

Denominational/Church history	Norms/Standards valued besides the Bible	Working Theology
Ethnicity	Gender	Social Class
Educational Background	Community Priorities	Explicit Political position
Implicit political stances	Customary exposures to the bible	Bible translations used
Use of other bible study tools	Past exposure to Biblical preaching	Orientation toward biblical scholarship
Family influences	Life crises	Spiritual and divine guidance

Feminist Hermeneutics

- Evangelical and non-evangelical – what is authoritative?
 - Is the text liberating?
- Complimentarianism vs. egalitarianism – What does Paul mean by the word *authentein* in 1 Timothy 2:12?
 - Usurp authority? KJV
 - Exercise ordinary authority? (Many Modern translations)
 - Assume authority? (John Calvin) (NIV)
 - Assumption of legitimate or illegitimate authority
- Understanding the term “helper”
 - Less than?
 - Complimentary?
 - Equal to or superior to?

LGBT Hermeneutics

- William Webb’s book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality*
 - Belief in a redemptive trajectory throughout Scriptures narrative
 - Slavery becomes less acceptable
 - Women begin to have more rights and respect
 - Homosexuality as a practice?...
- Often mistakenly read examples of homosexuality into passages and stories of close friendships in which there is no evidence.

- Ruth and Naomi
- David and Jonathan
- Jesus and the beloved disciple.

This is an exploration of the many ways in which interpretation has been approached throughout history through to the present. The ways in which interpretation has been approached, have shaped the ways in which we currently interpret whether through specific teaching of how to read Scripture or through the influence of our culture and world-views.

What are some of the approaches that you have seen yourself work out of as you interpret Scripture?

Why does this matter?

We need to start with an understanding of the complex nature and history of interpretation. It helps us to see areas where we have failed to interpret well in the past and the dangers that incorrect interpretation can have in the church. It also shows the ways in which the church flourished under healthy methods of interpretation. It helps us start to understand the various methods that we use when approaching the text ourselves.

The history of interpretation also shows us a grand view of the grace and power of God through His imperfect people. We must be humbled by the fact that even if we get our interpretations wrong at times, Christ will still be growing his kingdom and bringing people to Him.

Jesus said, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Matthew 9:13.

God desires our heart and our love above all.