

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 6

Interpretation

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Main Idea

Learn principles of interpreting scripture

Exercise

How do mirages relate to interpreting?

Core questions

- How do we discern the intended message of each Biblical passage?
- How do determine what the significance of each Bible passage is?
- How should we handle ambiguities?

Interpretation

Ambiguities

Deliberate ambiguities

- **Real Complexities** – Many intelligent people through the years have disagreed on how to construct unity out of the various patterns in Scripture. In addition to discerning when Biblical texts are meant to literal or figurative, Scripture has also intentionally presented us with deliberate ambiguities. They are meant to confront us with real complexities and with the fact that there are some things we just don't know and also grapple with multiple interpretations all of which may be true.
- **Textual ambiguities** – Ambiguities within the text itself Example: Gen 25:23 - The lack of definite articles and direct object markers in the passage Gen 25:23, allows for two possible interpretations. A literal interpretation could be

“Two peoples are in your stomach, two peoples will be separated from you, one people over another will exercise strength.”

One confusion is that the opposite of “young” is usually “old,” but the Hebrew original has “great”. “Great” is not the same thing as “old”. And because of grammatical ambiguity, the translation can be “*the older will serve the younger*” or “*the younger will serve the older*”!

- **Group vs. individual sense** – Interpreters have to make sense out of the ambiguity that this text can be talking about groups of people (descendants of the twins) or individuals (the twins themselves) – or both. So many translations try to include both senses by translating this as,

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you] shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other; the older shall serve the younger.” (ESV).

- **Moral ambiguities** – Flawed characters in the Bible are presented without comment - Example: Esther Because of a plot hatched by Haman, all the Jews in Persia were faced

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with annihilation. Esther's life was in danger if she was identified as a Jew or if she approached the king without his asking for her appearance. Esther chose to approach the king with a plot of her own. The ambiguity appears in that while scripture would have advised her to show mercy even to her enemies, she seems to have responded with a spirit of vengeance, asking that even the sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows after they were killed. We need to consider the complexity of the situation and the complexities of Esther's motivations as she dealt with all the things we know about and other things we don't know about.

Esther 9:11-13 11 The number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day. 12 The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted." 13 "If it pleases the king," Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles."

- **Textual and moral ambiguities combined** –The textual ambiguities in this passage allow for two possibilities: 1) The conventional interpretation that the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites or 2) Joseph was left alone in the pit and Midianites came by first and then sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt. These possibilities leave us with the moral ambiguities of either 1) Joseph's brothers being directly and intentionally involved in selling Joseph or 2) Joseph's brothers accidentally putting Joseph in a situation where he was allowed to be sold.

Genesis 37:26-29 26 Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27 Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. 28 So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels[a] of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. 29 When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes.

- **Biblical ambiguities and life** – Ambiguities are intended for us to consider all the **multiple** meanings and also to confront us with two **realities** in life: we don't know everything, and people are complicated. We are supposed to grapple with the ambiguities knowing that we cannot be fully certain, therefore driving us to build a sense of our need for the Holy Spirit, our need for humility and our need to seek wisdom from God.

Interpretive Rules

- On one level, the **plain** reading of the Bible is clear enough for the **average** reader to understand the basic message. But the Bible is also **complex** enough to require particular

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rules to properly interpret the Bible's message. The Church has used different interpretative rules through the years. The following rules are the ones that best apply to the way we perceive the scriptures now.

- Each text was written by an author to one or more people in a particular situation using normal modes of communication that were available in that cultural moment.
- Each text should be assumed to convey a single meaning to the people receiving the text.
- It is possible to assume the author meant to imply various principles behind the meaning of the text that can be applied to other situations.
- Every interpretation needs to consider the complete context of each text: The passage the text was in, the book the passage was in, the other writings of the author, the rest of scripture.
- The basic scenario is that each author intended to convey a particular meaning to a particular audience, but the principles that were implied within that message may have a significance to other people in other places and times
- The Biblical text is deliberately and profoundly sparse. Only necessary details are left. All details (even omitted ones) are important Key words can link other texts with the same, or similar words
- Chuck's Rule - Any apparent conflict or confusion in Scripture should be handled as clues to look further instead of thinking that the conflicts create contradictions which reduce the integrity of the Bible

Biblical theology

Principles of Biblical Theology

- Looking at each book
- Discerning its details
- Discerning the intended meanings
- Discerning the implications of each passage

Approaches to Biblical theologies

- Historical - understanding each pertinent biblical passage in its original historical setting.
- Inductive - approach Scripture with an open mind, asking "What did the biblical author intend to convey in a given passage?"
- Descriptive - restates the biblical teaching. Respecting the terminology used by the writers of Scripture themselves

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Systematic Theology

Principles of Systematic Theology

Systematic Theology attempts to organize all Christian doctrines in a logical order. The list of some of the doctrines might be in an order like:

- God,
- Scripture,
- Creation,
- Fall,
- Sin,
- Redemption,
- Church and the End of History.

Makes use of biblical theology and builds on its results. But its focus is

- Collecting and summarizing all the biblical passages on each subject, and
- Summarizing the teachings of each subject in brief, carefully formulated statements

Problems with Patterns

Humans are exceptionally good pattern makers and pattern detectors. But like Rorschach blot test shows us, the pattern we think we discern in a blot test is subjective.

Our pattern abilities allow us to draw and identify caricatures. But identifying caricatures is dependent on our culture.

While it is possible to be objective about physical systems, like how systems of the body physically connect to each other, systems in the Bible are somewhat subjectively determined because they are dependent on Personalities, Experience, Culture.

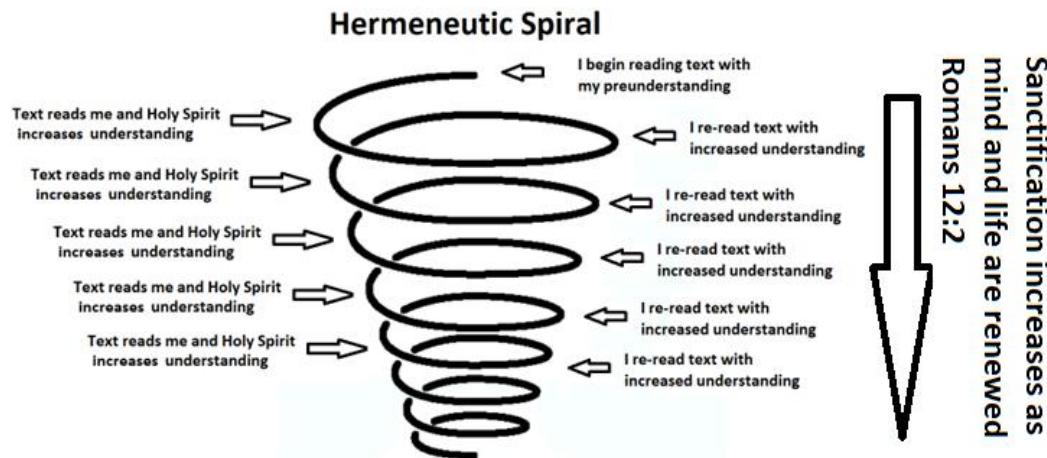


There is an added dynamic in determining biblical systems. Churches are necessarily concerned with guarding the truth, the essentials of the faith which cannot be changed. The more things that are considered essential, the less flexibility there is in allowing some level of subjectivity in their theology. This has been one pressure that has created divisions within the church.

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The Hermeneutic Spiral



Romans 12:1-2 *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

- We need to understand that despite our best efforts, we cannot be completely isolated, **objective** readers, unaffected by our **culture** or historical **traditions**.
- We all approach the Bible with **questions** and **biases** - our preunderstandings.
- As Christians, one of our preunderstandings is that the Bible is the **true**, divine word of God and our **sole** and **final** authority.
- As such, we enter into an **overlapping** process where, as we read, our preunderstandings are revised, so that we can **re-read** with a **new** understanding and the newly **clarified** text gives us **better** understanding, etc.
- If we have **memorized** and so can **meditate** on the Word of God, this can be an **active** process that happens as we go through our daily activities and live out our increasing understanding.
- As **successive** exposures to God's word brings our preunderstanding more and more into **alignment** with the truth and bring our lives more and more into **alignment** with the will of God, the hermeneutical spiral then becomes a **sanctification** process.

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The Bible as a patchwork quilt

The **Meaning** of Genesis 2-5 As the Introduction to the Tanak



The **Significance** of Genesis 2-5 for Other Areas of Interest



The stories of creation and of Adam and Eve are only the beginning of a string of many stories throughout the Hebrew Bible. Along with these stories are poems, laws, prophecies and wisdom literature creating a **patchwork** that has some resemblances to a **quilt**. There have been various theories posited about how these patches originally came into being and how they were put together. But what is most important to us is the **final form** in which we received this “quilt.” One aspect of that final form is shown in this diagram which we looked at earlier.



Sometimes, despite our best efforts, the differing worldviews of present-day interpreters can impact the development of either Biblical or Systematic **theologies**. That can lead to **rival** stories about who we are, where we came from, etc. – our **purpose** and **meaning** – and what type of hermeneutics to use. These differences have contributed to the different denominations that presently exist.

Jesus' view of the Scriptures is that they are used to **form** the **identity** and **character** of communities and individuals in those communities. They give us wisdom, help us understand that we need to be rescued through trusting the Messiah to reshape us into new humans, showing mercy and serving the poor.

2 Tim 3:15-17 – from infancy you have known the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.