

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 1

Introduction to Biblical  
Hermeneutics

Manuscript



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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson One

### Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics

#### INTRODUCTION

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We all know that young children often think they know a lot more than they really do. They watch their mothers cook, help a little bit, and assume that they know enough to do it on their own. They watch their fathers do their work, they play at it once or twice, and they think they know everything their fathers know. But at some point, children usually find out that they have much more to learn than they ever imagined.

Unfortunately, adults often make the same mistake, even when it comes to something as important as interpreting the Bible. Most of us read our Bibles regularly; some of us have done so for many years. So, we often assume that we know enough about interpreting the Scriptures to just go ahead and do it. But biblical interpretation is one of those things that can seem much simpler than it really is. And when we take time to reflect carefully on what interpreting the Bible entails, we often find that we have much more to learn than we ever imagined.

This is the first lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*. In this series, we'll explore several crucial outlooks on biblical interpretation and investigate ways to improve our ability to understand the Bible. We've entitled this lesson "Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics." This lesson will introduce a basic framework for sound and scholarly biblical interpretation.

Our introduction to biblical hermeneutics will divide into three main parts. First, we'll gain an orientation to our subject by introducing some important terminology. Second, we'll explore "scientific" approaches to hermeneutics that characterize scholarly interpretation of the Bible. And third, we'll look at the value of employing devotional hermeneutics in conjunction with traditional academic approaches. Let's begin with some important terminology.

#### TERMINOLOGY

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Misunderstanding key terminology can be a big source of confusion in any discussion, so we'll introduce several terms for our study. First, we'll touch on what we mean by biblical hermeneutics. And second, we'll look at three hermeneutical processes. Let's look first at the concept of biblical hermeneutics.

## BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

“Hermeneutics” is a common word in theological and biblical studies, but we don’t use it often in our daily lives. Many of us will notice that the word “hermeneutics” derives from the family of Greek terms that includes the name “Hermes,” the mythological messenger of the gods. The word itself derives from a family of Greek words related to the verb *hermeneuo*, which means “interpret” or “explain.” So, broadly speaking when we refer to hermeneutics, we have in mind the interpretation or explanation of some kind of message or communication.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, who lived from 1768 to 1834, is often called the father of modern hermeneutics. In 1819 he spoke of the need for “general hermeneutics,” a unified theory for understanding all literature. He acknowledged that we should approach different subjects with their own special hermeneutics, but he argued that all hermeneutics should share a common method of interpretation.

By the end of the twentieth century, leading scholars saw the need for general hermeneutics because the processes of interpretation had become an important facet of many fields of study. Today, hermeneutical discussions appear in philosophy, literature and the arts. Hermeneutics is also useful in psychology, sociology, and even fields like physics and biology. This expansion has occurred because many leading figures in these fields have become more aware of how much their disciplines involve interpreting the meaning of the objects that they study.

As the title of this lesson suggests, we’re primarily interested in biblical hermeneutics, the study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture. If you’ve ever read the Scriptures, then you’ve involved yourself in biblical hermeneutics, at least informally. Informal approaches to the Bible are of great value, and these lessons will build on what most of us already understand. But we’ll also move beyond informal hermeneutics and explore the kinds of issues that move to the foreground in academic, scholarly interpretation of the Bible.

**It’s helpful to make a distinction and a comparison between general hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics. The Bible has in common with general hermeneutics the ideas of what does a verb do? What are parts of speech? What is grammar, syntax, and so forth? How do we determine what an author meant when he or she wrote those words? But there are particular rules that pertain to biblical hermeneutics principally because the Bible claims to be the Word of God, and as such, it is authoritative, and it reveals God to us. And since God is one and God is truth, the Bible never contradicts itself. And so, one particular aspect of biblical hermeneutics that’s unique is that we try to seek to relate all the data of Scripture together under the assumption that they don’t contradict one another, but rather they speak — while of the variety of God’s revelation — they also speak one in agreement with itself.**

— Rev. Mike Glodo

Keeping in mind what we mean by biblical hermeneutics, we should turn to a second important term, hermeneutical processes — the main procedures we follow as we interpret the Bible.

## HERMENEUTICAL PROCESSES

Throughout this series, we'll speak of three main hermeneutical processes: preparation, investigation, and application. These processes are so essential to biblical interpretation that each lesson in this series will fall into one of these three categories. Let's look first at preparation.

### Preparation

The hermeneutical process of preparation takes place before we begin to interpret a portion of Scripture. And of course, this means that we prepare repeatedly because we read and study the Bible over and over. In a very important sense, preparation is inescapable because no one ever comes to the Bible as a *tabula rasa* — a blank slate. We all approach the Scriptures influenced by an assortment of concepts, behaviors and emotions. Whether we realize it or not, every time we begin to read the Bible, many influences have already prepared us for handling the Scriptures well, but other influences have created obstacles to sound biblical interpretation. For this reason, these lessons will give deliberate attention to preparing ourselves as well as we can for interpreting the Bible.

**I think there's a lot of things we do to prepare ourselves, or should do to prepare ourselves, to study Scripture... Studying Scripture can be hard work. There are details that we need to examine, and there are many, many details that we need to remember as we're going through the study of Scripture, as well as listening to the Spirit of God. And so we need to prepare by having good tools. We need to prepare by having good material written by others. We need to prepare by praying and allowing the Holy Spirit, giving him freedom to work in our lives... You're going to be listening for God's voice, and listening for God's voice for your own life, and then to pass that voice on to others as well.**

— Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

In addition to the hermeneutical process of preparation, we'll also explore the process of investigation. When we speak of investigation we have in mind concentrating on the original meaning of a biblical passage.

## Investigation

Essentially, when we investigate the Scriptures, we do our best to leave our modern world behind and grasp the meaning of portions of the Bible when they were first written. In the process of investigation, we focus on the original meaning intended by God and the Bible's human authors, on the biblical documents themselves, and on Scriptures' first audiences. In many respects, whenever we read Scripture, we can't avoid dealing, to some extent, with original meaning.

For instance, if we explore the Bible in its original languages, we have to take into account the linguistic conventions of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Even if we rely on a modern translation of the Bible, that translation is based on assessments of the ancient meanings of terms and grammatical expressions. In these and many other ways, the original meaning of a biblical passage is always crucial to its interpretation. So, we must also give a great deal of attention to the process of investigation.

Hermeneutical processes not only include preparation and investigation, but they also entail the process of application.

## Application

In simple terms, application amounts to appropriately connecting original meaning to contemporary audiences. Once we've understood the original meaning, we travel, as it were, through the millennia to our modern situation. In application, we reflect on the ways the Scriptures should apply to us as the people of God.

As with the other hermeneutical processes, it's impossible to avoid application completely. Even when we merely gain superficial understanding of a biblical passage, we still apply it, to some degree, to our thinking. Of course, the Scriptures warn against the hypocrisy of understanding the Bible and not obeying it. So, in this series we'll give a lot of attention to applying the Scriptures deliberately and thoroughly.

As we go through these lessons, we'll see that preparation, investigation and application are highly interdependent processes. We can only do well in one process when we're also doing well in the others. Of course, everyone has different inclinations and abilities, and as a result we tend to stress only one or two of these processes. But the interdependence of preparation, investigation and application reminds us to develop our skills in all three areas.

Now that we've explained some important terminology in our Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics, we should turn to our second main topic: scientific hermeneutics — how biblical scholars over the centuries have approached the interpretation of Scripture more and more like a scientific exercise.

## SCIENTIFIC HERMENEUTICS

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To one degree or another, biblical hermeneutics has always had something of a scientific flavor, and this tendency has grown over the millennia, much like it has in many other disciplines. The reason for these developments is plain enough. The Bible was written by people living thousands of years ago. So, in many ways, we rightly treat the Scriptures like other writings of the ancient world. As scholars have handled the Bible with its historical context in view, they've often drawn from scientific disciplines like archeology, history, anthropology, sociology and linguistics. As in these and other scientific endeavors, academic interpreters of Scriptures have applied factual, or rational, scientific methods to the Bible.

To see what we mean, we'll touch on three issues related to scientific hermeneutics. First, we'll point out the legitimacy of this approach by noting its biblical roots. Second, we'll mention some historical examples that illustrate developments in this type of hermeneutics. And third, we'll see how this approach to Scripture establishes certain priorities for the processes of interpretation. Let's turn first to the biblical roots of scientific hermeneutics.

### BIBLICAL ROOTS

People living in biblical times weren't modern scientists. But this doesn't mean that they were unintelligent or irrational. On the contrary, their sophisticated architectural accomplishments, extensive maritime travel, innovative agricultural programs, and countless other cultural achievements demonstrate that people in biblical days dealt with facts and thought rationally about the world, much like modern scientists do.

For this reason, it shouldn't surprise us that biblical authors themselves often interpreted other Scriptures with an orientation toward factual and logical analysis. For the sake of time, let's illustrate what we mean with just one passage. In Romans 4:3-5 the apostle Paul wrote:

What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:3-5).

In these verses, Paul quoted from Genesis 15:6 where God "credited" righteousness to Abraham when he believed God's promise. But notice how methodically Paul treated this Old Testament passage. In verses 4 and 5, Paul carefully analyzed the meaning of the word "credited," or "reckoned" as the Greek term *logizomai* may be translated. From his knowledge of Greek, he argued that, "wages are not credited ... as a gift, but as an obligation." But then he noted that for anyone who trusts God their "faith," — not works — "is credited as righteousness." So, he concluded on the basis of this reasoning that Genesis 15:6 indicates that Abraham was granted righteousness as a free

gift through faith. It isn't difficult to see here that the apostle Paul handled Genesis 15 with meticulously factual and logical analysis.

As this one example illustrates, time and again biblical authors presented this kind of careful interpretation of Scripture. And their approach to Scripture indicates that scientific biblical hermeneutics is firmly rooted in the Scriptures themselves.

With the biblical roots of scientific hermeneutics in mind, let's look briefly at some historical examples of this kind of biblical interpretation.

## EXAMPLES

During the Patristic period, one of the most influential figures in biblical interpretation was Origen of Alexandria who lived from A.D. 185 to 254. As we'll see later in this lesson, Origen went far beyond scientific interpretation, but he nonetheless devoted himself to careful factual and rational analyses of the Bible. For instance, one of Origen's greatest accomplishments was the creation of the *Hexapla*, reportedly a 6,000 page work of more than 50 volumes in which Origen made a word-by-word comparison of various Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament. Although this work was lost centuries later, it still represents a remarkable example of scientific biblical interpretation in early church history.

Other prominent examples of developing scientific approaches to Scripture appear after the days of Origen. For instance, Augustine of Hippo, who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, continued to focus on careful, often painstaking, factual and rational analysis of the Bible. And by the time of Thomas Aquinas, who lived from around 1225 to 1274, the mainstream of biblical interpretation in Western Christianity reflected the influence of the rational, scientific philosophy of Aristotle. Aquinas and his followers applied rigorous empirical and logical analysis to the Bible.

Unfortunately, up to this time in church history literacy rates were low, and the Bible and other books weren't widely available. So, only a privileged few could actually study the Scriptures. As a result, church authorities controlled how the general population understood the Bible. But in this context, many scholars began to interpret Scripture through even more sophisticated scientific analysis, apart from the dominance of the church.

One of the earliest steps in this direction took place during the Renaissance. After the capture of Constantinople in the fourth Crusade in 1204, many of the classical and biblical manuscripts stored there were brought to the West. But instead of interpreting the significance of these ancient texts through the lenses of church dogma, Renaissance scholars devoted themselves to understanding these texts by meticulously analyzing their grammar and ancient historical contexts. With the aid of Gutenberg's movable type printing press, which came into use around 1450, it wasn't long before Renaissance research became widely available. And as a result, influential figures like Erasmus, who lived from 1466 to 1536, led many in their day toward increasingly scientific approaches to biblical interpretation.

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century took scientific biblical hermeneutics even further. Following the path of the Renaissance, early protestant leaders like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin strongly rejected the

dominance of church dogma over biblical interpretation. Instead, they emphasized that the meaning of Scripture should be determined through analysis of the Bible's grammar and historical contexts.

It's important to keep in mind that early Protestants coupled this emphasis with the well-known doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, "Scripture alone." Protestants understood that the Bible was the only unquestionable authority, the highest authority by which all others were to be judged. This commitment to the supremacy of biblical authority meant that the only infallible interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. So, nothing was more important to early Protestants than understanding the Bible through meticulous, rational analysis of its grammar within its ancient historical context.

The Enlightenment in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took scientific biblical hermeneutics even further by emphasizing modern, factual and rational scientific standards for judging all truth claims, including those of Scripture. Similar to geologists, archeologists, and other modern scientists, biblical scholars carefully applied scientific standards to the study of Scripture.

This approach to the Bible has developed in a number of ways over the centuries. But to one degree or another, modern biblical scholars have followed two main paths. On the one side, the majority of interpreters in leading academic institutions have followed a direction that is often called critical biblical studies. Broadly speaking, critical biblical scholars are those who have rejected the traditional Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and consider only reason and scientific analysis as the supreme standard for discerning truth. By and large, critical interpreters have concluded that the Scriptures represent ancient, primitive, and unreliable views of God, humanity, and the world. In this view, modern people may benefit from the Scriptures in some ways, but any judgments about the Scriptures must rely on scientific investigation rather than on the teachings of the Bible.

On the other side, other experts have followed a path that we may call modern evangelical biblical studies. Evangelical scholars affirm that the Bible is the only unquestionable rule of faith and life. They don't reject factual and rational scientific reflection on Scripture; they fully endorse the rigorous application of scientific analysis to the Bible. Yet, when such analysis clearly contradicts the teachings of the Bible itself, evangelical scholars wholeheartedly submit to the Scriptures as their authority. As we'll see throughout these lessons, this series follows the evangelical path.

**It is a very important matter for a Christian, especially Protestant Christian, to submit to the authority of Scripture... True authority is the right and power to compel assent, and Scripture is uniquely qualified to function as authority in the Christian's life. One of the reasons for this is that the Scriptures contain wisdom and insight that would be otherwise unobtainable for us. That's why it's called revelation... The other reason is that while there's truth in many places, the truth that is embedded in Scripture has been supernaturally superintended in its composition and final form so that it has a degree of trustworthiness and infallibility that is unique among all the sources of truth that we have access to in this world. Now we know that the reason why it obtained that unique reliability,**

**that infallibility, that inability to fail, is because it was God-breathed. It is the Word of God, so that when we speak of the authority of Scripture we're really speaking of the authority of God. And so to submit to it is an acknowledgment that we are creatures, we are derivative and dependent beings. And here's the paradox: rather than having this act of submission demean us or make us less powerful, so to speak, it's actually the most empowering thing we could possibly do, for it sets us in the direction of truth, puts us firmly on the path to life and to flourishing.**

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

Having mentioned the biblical roots of scientific hermeneutics and looked at some historical examples, we should now turn to a third issue: the priorities of this approach to the Scriptures.

## PRIORITIES

By and large, modern evangelical biblical scholars around the world have been strongly committed to scientific hermeneutics. This commitment has led to certain priorities for the processes of preparation, investigation and application. Let's see how this is true, starting with their typical priorities for preparation.

### Preparation

As we said earlier, preparation is inescapable whenever we begin to interpret Scripture. But academic biblical interpreters have developed priorities for preparation that are more or less in line with the intellectual priorities found in many other academic disciplines. Imagine you're about to study biology at a university and you want to prepare yourself as well as you can. So, you ask several biology professors, "How should I get ready for my studies?" They'd probably tell you things like these: "Memorize as many biological facts as you can." And, "Learn all you can about the scientific procedures we use in biology."

Well, in much the same way, if you were to ask most professors in most evangelical theological institutions today how you should prepare to study the Bible at their schools, most of them would give similar advice. They might say, "Learn Hebrew and Greek." "Learn as many facts as possible about the Bible." "Learn sound methods of interpretation." After all, most biblical scholars today emphasize rational and scientific approaches to the Bible in their own careers. And they believe that the success of their students depends on them doing the same.

Of course, preparing ourselves with factual and methodological understanding is important. There's no substitute for learning facts about the Bible. And we should do our best to learn the principles needed for biblical interpretation. But as we'll see in a

moment, focusing exclusively on intellectual preparation overlooks some of the most important ways we should get ourselves ready for interpreting the Bible.

Having seen a few priorities for preparation, let's look at the priorities for investigation in scientific hermeneutics.

## Investigation

In general, biblical interpreters distinguish two ways of investigating Scripture: exegesis and eisegesis. Exegesis comes from a Greek term meaning “led out of” or “derived from” and means to pull out or derive meaning from a text. By contrast, eisegesis has the connotations of “led into” or “put into.” It means to read meaning into a passage. Scientifically-oriented biblical interpreters work very hard to avoid eisegesis. Instead, they employ principles of interpretation that they believe will ensure them of exegetical, not eisegetical, understandings of Scripture.

In this view then, investigation largely amounts to putting our intellectual preparations into action to discover the facts of Scripture. We investigate the original meaning of biblical texts by meticulously implementing carefully conceived methods or principles of interpretation to discern the actual original meaning — not just someone's opinion or agenda.

As we'll see throughout this series, implementing scientific methods in this way is a very important dimension of biblical interpretation. But we'll also see that it hardly covers everything necessary for sound investigation of the original meaning of Scripture.

We've looked at certain priorities for scholarly, scientific hermeneutics in the processes of preparation and investigation. Now we're ready to ask about the process of application. How do the majority of evangelical scholars apply the Bible today?

## Application

When I was a theological student, a particular classmate would frequently interrupt professors while they were lecturing. His questions were always the same. “Professor, what are the implications of your exegesis for us today?” “How should I apply what you're saying about this biblical passage to my life?” With rare exception, the response was always the same. The professor would smile and say, “That's a great question. Not for me, but for the practical theology professors.”

As this experience illustrates, all too often, scientific, scholarly interpretation of the Bible has little room for the practical application of Scripture. At best, it leads to factually-oriented modern application. In other words, application primarily amounts to establishing the kinds of facts that the Bible teaches modern followers of Christ to believe. We call for the faithful to believe that the theological and moral factual claims of the Bible are true. To be sure, this type of application is of great value. But it neglects a number of crucial ways that Scripture should be applied to our lives today.

**Bible study methods are crucial, but we can overemphasize them at times because we can make it too mechanical, as if it's automatic, so that it's just a matter of, "Well, I've used these methods; here is my logical conclusion," and it becomes a purely intellectual exercise rather than something that our whole person embraces and gets into. I found over the years as I... For example, one of the places where I've emphasized a lot of my own research has been in cultural background, the world, the ancient world, because that was a need. A lot of people don't have access to that, so as a scholar I could bring that to bear. And I found that, as I did that, as it would come back to the biblical texts, it would open whole new worlds to me of understanding those texts. At the same time, there was no spiritual life in the background by itself. I took intellectual pleasure in it, but the real spiritual life was in the biblical text, and coming back to it and hearing what God is actually saying to us, submitting our lives to it, that's something that can't be just a mechanical procedure. That's something that comes only by devoting our hearts to the one who loved us and gave himself for us.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Now that we've looked at some important terminology used in biblical hermeneutics, and the longstanding tradition of scientific hermeneutics, we should turn to our third main topic in this lesson, how scientific interpretation should be coupled with devotional hermeneutics, the Christian tradition of emphasizing our need to draw near to God as we interpret the Scriptures.

## **DEVOTIONAL HERMENEUTICS**

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Followers of Christ adopted scientific hermeneutics that resemble many facets of general hermeneutics because human beings wrote the Scriptures. But devotional hermeneutics focuses primarily on the divine authorship of Scripture.

Christians have always acknowledged that the human words of Scripture are also the Word of God. As 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us, the Scriptures were inspired by God, or more literally were "God-breathed." This fact makes biblical hermeneutics distinct from other facets of general hermeneutics because we must interpret the Scriptures devotionally, as the living word of God himself.

**As we interpret Scripture it's so important that we remember that we're not just handling the words of human authors, that the Holy Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity, has breathed out these words through the distinctive personalities, styles, experiences of those human authors. As we go to Scripture, that means because the Spirit**

**who breathed these words out is also resident and at work within us as believers, in a sense we have access to the author of Scripture. And we need that desperately; we need as we approach Scripture to come prayerfully, dependent upon the Spirit to open our minds as well as to open the Scriptures to our minds.**

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

To see what we mean, we'll look at devotional hermeneutics in ways that parallel our earlier discussion. First, we'll see that this kind of scriptural interpretation has biblical roots. Second, we'll sketch some historical examples of biblical scholars who practiced devotional hermeneutics. And third, we'll see how following this approach to Scripture shapes our priorities for the processes of interpretation. Let's turn first to the biblical roots of devotional hermeneutics.

## BIBLICAL ROOTS

Even though biblical authors often examined the Scriptures in more or less scientific ways, it's just as important to see that they also approached the Scriptures devotionally. Time and again, they indicated that followers of Christ are to read the Scriptures as the word of God, in the presence of God, in ways that bring about extraordinary, even supernatural experiences of God.

Biblical authors pointed to this dimension of interpretation many times, but for now we'll mention just one passage as an example. In Hebrews 4:12 we read:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).*

In this passage, the author of Hebrews referred to a portion of Psalm 95 that he had quoted in the preceding verses, calling it "the word of God." Earlier in Hebrews 4:7 he quoted the same Psalm saying that God himself "spoke through David." And prior to this, in Hebrews 3:7, he introduced Psalm 95 with the words, "as the Holy Spirit says."

Now, notice how after acknowledging the divine authorship of the Psalm, the writer of Hebrews described the experience of reading Scripture. He said that Scripture itself is "living and active." It "penetrates" the depths of our inmost being and "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" with a blade that is "sharper than any double-edged sword." In scientific hermeneutics we view the Bible as an object that we dissect and analyze. But in this passage, the writer of Hebrews indicated that Scripture actually dissects and analyzes us.

This passage is particularly important for our discussion because the author of Hebrews was a very sophisticated biblical scholar. Time and again, he treated Old Testament Scriptures with a depth of insight that exceeds many other New Testament authors. Still, his highly intellectual analyses of Scripture didn't turn him away from devotional hermeneutics. On the contrary, his intellectual interpretations enhanced his

ability to approach the Scriptures in ways that brought him into highly emotive, compelling, and deeply transformative encounters with God. And as such, he shows us that scientific and devotional hermeneutics must work together.

Having seen the biblical roots of devotional hermeneutics, we should mention a few historical examples to illustrate the way followers of Christ have combined scientific and devotional approaches to interpretation.

## EXAMPLES

Devotional interpretation of the Bible was particularly important in the Patristic period of church history. We mentioned earlier that Origen of Alexandria was a meticulous, scientific biblical scholar. Yet, listen to the way Origen encouraged Gregory of Neocaesarea in the *Letter of Origen to Gregory*:

**When you devote yourself to the divine reading, uprightly and with a faith fixed firmly on God, seek the meaning of the divine words which is hidden from most people. Do not stop at knocking and seeking, for the most necessary element is praying to understand the divine words.**

Here, Origen told Gregory to “devote [himself] to the divine reading.” The terminology “divine reading” was later expressed in the Latin phrase *Lectio Divina*, a tradition of devotional hermeneutics that continues in various forms even today.

Now, Origen’s approach to Scripture was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, especially as it had been expressed earlier in the works of the Jewish Old Testament interpreter Philo of Alexandria. From this point of view, beneath the surface of the Bible were heavenly, spiritual truths that were “hidden from most people.” Believers needed a “faith fixed firmly on God” if they wanted to discover the Bible’s hidden truths. That is to say, they must “seek the meaning of the [Bible as] divine words.” So, biblical interpreters must “not stop at knocking and seeking” for personal enlightenment from God. In fact, according to Origen, “the most necessary element” for comprehending Scripture is “praying to understand the divine words.” Although we should reject Origen’s Neoplatonic orientation toward these matters, he recognized something that is certainly true about Scripture. When the faithful seek God through prayerful contemplation as they read Scripture, God grants them insights that otherwise often remain hidden.

**People like Origen emphasized the fact that when you read the Bible, it’s really important that you gain the spiritual meaning of the text. Now I would want to say that is a really healthy thing, because the Bible is not just a history book, it’s not just an academic textbook to titillate our theological imagination. There is spiritual significance ... In fact, we believe that the two belong together, that as we improve our ability to understand the meaning of the biblical words, the context in which they’re set in the passage, the historical details, etc.,**

**etc., that also helps us gain spiritual insight into what the text meant, both for the first readers of the text, but also for us subsequently.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Throughout the medieval period, nearly every leading interpreter of Scripture practiced some form of divine reading, or *Lectio Divina*, including important scientific interpreters like Augustine and Aquinas.

By and large, *Lectio Divina* came to be practiced in four well-known steps or movements: *lectio*, reading of Scripture; *meditatio*, silent pondering of the content of what is read; *oratio*, earnest prayer for God to grant enlightenment; and *contemplatio*, quietly waiting for the Spirit of God to grant highly intuitive, deeply emotional and transforming convictions of a passage's significance.

By the time of the Reformation, the Church of Rome used the practice of *Lectio Divina* to justify all kinds of false teachings. Church authorities claimed that their teachings derived from supernatural insights from God, but these "insights" actually contradicted the teachings of Scripture in some very important ways. In response, most Protestant scholars rightly placed a high premium on scientific hermeneutics. But they didn't forsake reading the Bible devotionally. On the contrary, they insisted that devotional hermeneutics be tied to sound exegetical analysis of Scripture.

This feature of Protestant biblical scholarship isn't widely acknowledged, so it will help to mention just two well-known examples: John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards.

John Calvin has rightly been called the most rational and logical biblical interpreter of the early Reformation. His training as a lawyer and Renaissance humanist equipped him well for this role. But throughout his commentaries, we find that he vigorously pursued not only scientific but also devotional hermeneutics. As just one example, in his *Commentary on Haggai*, part 2, he wrote:

**The glory of God so shines in his word, that we ought to be so affected by it ... as though he were near to us, face to face.**

Far from treating the interpretation of Scripture as a detached, impersonal scientific activity, Calvin insisted that "the glory of God so shines in his word" that when we read the Scriptures "we ought to be so affected," as though God himself were "face to face" with us. As this passage indicates, Calvin called his followers to read Scripture as an all-consuming, intensely emotional and humbling experience of God's presence.

In much the same way, the early American theologian Jonathan Edwards, who lived from 1703 to 1758, frequently displayed his meticulously rational and logical analyses of Scripture. But listen to these words from his essay, *Personal Narrative*:

**As I read the words [of 1 Timothy], there came into my soul ... a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God ... for ever!**

Here we see that Edwards delighted in a “sense of the glory of the Divine Being” as he read Scripture. And this experience of the Spirit of God was so powerful that Edwards desired to “enjoy that God ... for ever!” Edwards is well-known for being strongly influenced by Enlightenment rationalism, and he rightly believed that biblical interpretation had to be deeply scientific. But even Edwards wasn’t satisfied with mere rational reflection on the Bible. He knew that Scripture must also be read with a deeply intuitive sense of the wondrous presence of God.

In our day, devotional approaches to hermeneutics have nearly disappeared from scholarly biblical interpretation. While early Protestants moved toward scientific hermeneutics in response to the machinations of Roman Catholic interpreters, today many biblical scholars consider devotional hermeneutics beneath their intellectual prowess. They give nearly all of their scholarly attention to careful, rational exegesis, as if this approach will provide all that we need from the Bible. Seeking illumination from God through intense prayer, fasting, and contemplation has all but vanished from evangelical scholarship. But it’s crucial that we pursue both scientific and devotional hermeneutics when we approach formal, academic interpretation. We need to be careful not to go to extremes, but many Protestant interpreters have done this well in the past, and we would be wise to follow their example.

Keeping in mind the biblical roots of devotional hermeneutics and some historical examples of theologians who combined scientific and devotional approaches to biblical interpretation, let’s look briefly at the priorities of this kind of hermeneutics.

## PRIORITIES

Most followers of Christ begin to read the Scriptures with a devotional spirit. But when they become more adept at scholarly biblical interpretation, they often lose sight of the importance of devotional hermeneutics. But scientific interpretation of the Bible is often so highly intellectual and analytical that we actually forget something that was once crucial to our walk with Christ — the personal and powerfully transformative experience of God through his Word. For this reason, we should see how a devotional approach to the Scriptures should adjust the priorities that we have as we pursue all three hermeneutical processes.

We’ll examine the priorities of devotional hermeneutics in the same way that we looked at scientific hermeneutical priorities. First, we’ll determine the priorities for preparation. Next, we’ll focus on the process of investigation in devotional hermeneutics. And finally, we’ll give some thought to the modern application of this type of interpretation. Let’s start with the priorities for preparation.

### Preparation

Unfortunately, many sincere followers of Christ believe that when we read Scripture we have absolutely no control over the experience of God’s special presence. It

either does or does not happen. And there's no way we can prepare ourselves for it. But listen to the way James addressed this misconception in James 4:8:

*Draw near to God and he will draw near to you (James 4:8, ESV).*

The expression “draw near to God” comes from the Old Testament. Faithful worshippers would “draw near” to God’s special presence in the tabernacle and temple. Of course, God is everywhere and he can make himself known in dramatic ways anytime he wishes. But James’ words reflect the biblical emphasis on human responsibility. If we want to experience the special presence of God, then we must draw near to him. And God will reciprocate by drawing near to us.

In general terms, preparation for devotional hermeneutics involves sanctification or holy consecration to God. As the Scriptures teach, we have to rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way of communion with God and pursue everything that enhances it. Needless to say, this kind of preparation entails far too many things for us to mention them all, but it helps to gain a sense of their breadth by speaking of three general categories: conceptual, behavioral and emotional preparations.

First, we get ready for God’s presence in Scripture through conceptual preparation. By this we mean that we do our best to conform our beliefs to God’s true word. Believing false concepts about God, the human race, and the world erects obstacles to communion with God. As we’ve seen, biblical scholars have tended to focus on a relatively narrow set of concepts that fit with their academic emphases. But sanctification by God’s Spirit brings a longing to have all of our thoughts conform to the mind of God, and this desire prepares us for entering his presence as we interpret the Scriptures.

Second, we also draw near to God as we read the Scriptures through behavioral preparation. In the Scriptures, doing things that are contrary to God’s will is one of the greatest barriers to experiencing the favorable presence of God. Preparation for devotional hermeneutics must entail repentance over our failures and a sincere desire to behave in ways that please God.

Third, we must get ready for seeking God’s nearness through emotional preparation. Emotional preparation involves all of our attitudes — from passing passions to our enduring feelings about God, human beings and the rest of creation. The Scriptures frequently warn against pride, hatred and hardness of heart. These and similar emotions are obstacles to entering God’s special presence. But humility, love, tenderness of heart and the like open the way for communion with God. For this reason, preparation for devotional hermeneutics must address not only our concepts and behaviors, but also the full range of our emotions.

**Interpreting the Bible wisely and faithfully isn’t just a matter of the mind. It’s really a matter of the heart, of the whole person. And that means — and this is, I think, a challenge for anyone who has a responsibility to interpret and then teach God’s Word — that means that the condition of our heart, our relationship with Christ, really has an influence on the effectiveness of our understanding of the Bible. And so that’s why it’s very important to be faithful in confessing our sins, holding onto the gospel every day. And when we**

**start to wander spiritually, and particularly if we wander into sin in various areas of life, that can have a very negative effect. I think it does have a negative effect on our ability truly to understand God's Word. And one thing it particularly does is it causes us to back away from the really strong commands that we have in Scripture and we don't hold them in their full integrity because we're trying to wiggle out of those commands. It's very important — the condition of the heart is essential to faithful biblical interpretation.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

With these priorities for preparation in mind, we should turn to the second hermeneutical process, the investigation of original meaning in devotional hermeneutics.

## Investigation

Devotional hermeneutics entails shaping our investigation of Scripture's original meaning in ways that bring us near to God. In devotional investigation we look at original meaning in terms of biblical authors' experience of God's nearness and how they intended to bring their original audiences near to God as well. There are many ways to do this, but for the sake of simplicity, we'll speak, once again, in terms of the conceptual, behavioral and emotional dimensions of investigation.

In the first place, devotional hermeneutics requires conceptual investigation — paying attention to the concepts that God and his inspired authors intended to communicate to their original audiences. As we've seen, devotional hermeneutics must be closely tied to the facts of Scripture so that it doesn't venture into speculation or error. We've already noted that scientific hermeneutics is well designed for this task. But in devotional hermeneutics we ask certain conceptual questions that aren't commonly addressed in scientific hermeneutics. How does this text reveal the author's experience of God? How does it indicate how the author intended for his audience to experience the nearness of God?

In the second place, devotional investigation should also focus on the behavioral dimensions of Scripture's original meaning. We said earlier that human behavior either furthers or hinders our ability to come into the special presence of God. For this reason, as biblical authors wrote they also revealed how their own actions and the actions of their audiences affected their experience of God's nearness.

In the third place, devotional investigation should also draw out the emotional dimensions of original meaning as they relate to the nearness of God. Although scientific interpretation often overlooks this, biblical authors expressed their own emotions and sought to impact the emotions of their original audiences. The joys, doubts, sorrows, and fears of biblical authors and their audiences appear at every turn. And as we've already suggested, intense experiences of God's nearness involve heightened emotions. So, we always need to pay attention to what biblical texts reveal about the emotions of the authors and their audiences and how they related to their experiences of the presence of God.

Having touched on the priorities of preparation and investigation, we should also mention the priorities of application in devotional hermeneutics.

## Application

When we read the Scriptures in the presence of God, we're particularly devoted to applying the Word of God as God intended. We don't treat the Bible as a lifeless object that mere mortals wrote thousands of years ago. On the contrary, we handle the Scriptures as God's Word living for us today. To help us gain a better sense of how we accomplish this, we'll speak once more of the conceptual, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of application.

On a conceptual level, devotional application focuses on how God is impacting our concepts of himself, humanity and the rest of creation through the Scriptures. As we seek the illumination of God's Spirit through intense prayer and contemplation of his Word, we'll find that the Spirit of God confirms, enhances and corrects our concepts of him, humanity and the rest of creation. And when we embrace these corrections with our whole hearts we'll find ourselves drawn ever further into the blessing of God's presence. On a behavioral level, devotional application focuses on how our behaviors are affected by the presence of God as we contemplate the Scriptures.

When we come to Scripture, we must humbly lay bare everything we've done. And as we prayerfully draw near to God, his Spirit confirms and enhances our actions for future service to God. And beyond this, as we reflect on Scripture in conscious dependence on the Spirit, we find that he corrects and empowers us to turn to actions that are pleasing to God.

Finally, on an emotional level, devotional application of Scripture entails how our attitudes and feelings are affected by reading the Scriptures in the special presence of God. In his wisdom, God's Spirit brings regret, grief and sorrow when they are appropriate. God's Spirit also fills our hearts with joy, peace, and love. When we approach the Scriptures as the living Word of God, our emotions toward him, other people and the rest of creation can come upon us quietly. Or, as the Spirit wills, they can also fill our hearts so that we're overwhelmed by God's presence. Whatever the case, as we learn how to interpret the Scriptures in the light of God's nearness, we'll find that the Scriptures come alive and transform us, not only in our concepts and behaviors, but also in the depths of our emotions.

**We have to recognize that when we study the Bible that the Bible is not asking us just simply to change our thinking. It's asking us to change our lives. And so, one of the things I like to use when I encourage people to study the Bible is to think of the application of Scripture in three parts: think, feel, do. Intellectualism is when we only apply the Bible to one of those places — how we think. But God does want us to love him with all our minds, so thinking matters to God. But also, how we feel matters to God — our emotional life, our disposition throughout the day. It matters to God what our feelings are. And feelings can be faithful to God, and feelings can *not* be**

**faithful to God. There's no such thing as neutral feelings. But there's also the "do" aspect. When we apply the Scripture, God doesn't only want us to think about how it affects our emotions or affects our mind, but also how it affects our actions. And so, if we use that grid — think, feel, do — it really provides a balance for how we think about the Bible.**

**— Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

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## CONCLUSION

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In this introduction to biblical hermeneutics, we've focused on three main concepts. First, we explored some of the basic terminology we need to orient ourselves to this subject. Second, we saw that scientific hermeneutics are important for their rigor and their logical consistency. And third, we saw that devotional hermeneutics — reading Scripture in God's presence — is a critical counterbalance to scientific hermeneutics.

Learning more about interpreting the Scriptures opens the way for all kinds of new insights and blessings from God. The Old and New Testaments set the standards for everything we believe, everything we do and everything we feel as God's faithful people. And as we look into many more details in lessons to come, we'll come to see how essential it is to give ourselves both to scientific and devotional hermeneutics. As we do, we'll discover new paths of faithful service to God in every dimension of our lives.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## GLOSSARY

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**Aquinas, Thomas** – (ca. 1225-1274) Italian theologian and Dominican friar who wrote *Summa Theologica*

**Aristotle** – (ca. 384-322 B.C.) Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist who studied under Plato and founded the Lyceum in Athens

**Augustine** – (A.D. 354-430) Bishop of Hippo who believed in the Scriptures as our final authority in doctrine and considered the creeds of the church to be helpful summaries of scriptural teaching; wrote numerous works that continue to influence the church today

**Calvin, John** – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

**contemplatio** – Latin term meaning "contemplation"; fourth step of the four-step process known as *Lectio Divina* in which a person quietly waits for the Spirit of God to grant highly intuitive, deeply emotional and transforming convictions of a biblical passage's significance

**Crusades** – Series of military campaigns waged primarily between 1095 and 1270; organized and promoted by European Christians to stop Muslim expansion and recover the Holy Land from Muslim rule

**Edwards, Jonathan** – (1703-1758) Early American theologian known for his meticulously rational and logical analysis of Scripture and for being strongly influenced by Enlightenment rationalism

**eisegesis** – From a Greek term meaning "led into" or "put into"; a faulty method of interpretation where one reads his or her own ideas into the meaning of a passage of Scripture

**Enlightenment, the** – A philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized human reason over religious, social, and political traditions

**Erasmus, Desiderius** – (ca. 1466-1536) Dutch theologian and author during the time of the Renaissance whose writings and ideas contributed to the Reformation

**exegesis** – From a Greek term meaning "led out of" or "derived from"; the process of drawing out the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture

**Gutenberg, Johannes** – (ca. 1395-ca. 1468) German metalworker, printer, and publisher who, in the 15th century, invented the first-known mechanized printing press in Europe; revolutionized the distribution of written material, especially the Bible

**hermeneuo** – Greek word (transliteration) meaning "interpret" or "explain"

**hermeneutics** – The study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture

**Hexapla** – A work of more than 50 volumes written by Origen of Alexandria that compared the words of various Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament

**lectio** – Latin word meaning "reading"; first step of the four-step process known as *Lectio Divina* in which a person carefully reads a passage of Scripture, often slowly and repeatedly

**Lectio Divina** – Latin term meaning "divine reading"; ancient tradition of devotional hermeneutics that entails prayerfully reading through passages of Scripture; commonly practiced in four steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation)

**logizomai** – Greek verb (transliteration) meaning "to take into account," "estimate" or "conclude"; often translated as "reason," "credit," "impute," "reckon" or "count"

**Luther, Martin** – (1483-1546) Sixteenth century German monk and Protestant reformer who initiated the Reformation when he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517

**meditatio** – Latin word meaning "meditation"; second step of the four-step process known as *Lectio Divina* in which a person silently ponders the content of a passage of Scripture

**Neoplatonism** – A philosophical school of thought rooted in Plato; begun by Plotinus (A.D. 205-270); idealistic, spiritualistic teaching bordering on mysticism; taught that all existence comes from the "One," the "Absolute"

**oratio** – Latin word meaning "prayer"; third step of the four-step process known as *Lectio Divina* in which a person prays earnestly for God to grant enlightenment in response to a passage of Scripture

**Origen** – (ca. A.D. 185 - 254) Early Christian theologian from Alexandria; his works include: *On First Principles*, in which he defended the Scriptures as our final authority for Christian doctrine, and the *Hexapla*, a comparative study of various translations of the Old Testament

**Renaissance** – A period of "rebirth" between the middle ages and the modern era (from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) that stimulated a renewed interest in classical Roman and Greek literature, art, and culture

**Schleiermacher, Friedrich** – (1768-1834) German philosopher, theologian and linguist, often called the father of modern hermeneutics

***Sola Scriptura*** – Latin phrase meaning "Scripture alone"; the belief that the Scriptures stand as the supreme and final judge of all theological questions; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

***tabula rasa*** – Latin term meaning "blank slate" or "erased tablet"; the state of being entirely without preconceived notions or thoughts

**Zwingli, Ulrich** – (1484-1531) Influential Swiss Reformer and priest who is regarded as the founder of Swiss Protestantism