

RESURRECTION OPC – ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
Hermeneutics: How to Read the Bible

WEEK 2 | MAY 1, 2016

Introduction & Acknowledgement

In our first session, we looked at an overall approach to reading Scripture modeled on the analogy of a compass. The goal of the compass is that we read Scripture *contextually, grammatically, theologically, and doxologically*.

One of the best, concise resources on reading the Scripture in this way is Louis Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950). Our guide to Berkhof will be Dr. Benjamin Shaw, Professor of Old Testament at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Dr. Shaw used Berkhof's work to develop a series of lectures which he then delivered in a seminary in Seoul from June 28 – July 2, 2015. The remainder of our lessons will draw heavily on Dr. Shaw's work. Any errors remain the sole responsibility of the present author.

History: *How the Bible Has Been Read*

Jewish Rabbis

- 1st century Jews believed that Moses had received *two laws* at Mount Sinai:
 - Written – the Law as recorded in the Pentateuch
 - Oral – an unwritten guide to interpreting the written Law
- Believed to be passed down through the priestly families, the oral tradition was eventually written down and codified in two collections:
 - Mishnah – written in Hebrew in the early 3rd century
 - Talmud – written in Aramaic circa the 5th century
- A famous rabbinical interpreter of Scripture was Hillel (c. 110 BC – AD 10), who developed seven rules for biblical interpretation that were probably in use in the 1st century. These were as follows:
 1. "Light and Heavy": arguing from the lesser to the greater (ex: Prov 11.31, Jer 12.5, Mt 6.26).
 2. 'Equivalence': connecting passages based on common words/expressions. (See how the apostle Peter connects various 'stone' passages in 1Pet 2.1-8.)
 3. Special to General: allowing one clear passage to inform less clear passages.
 4. Inference from Several Passages: similar to rule #3, except relying on *several* clear texts to establish the general principle.
 5. General to Particular: illustrating a general principle using specific examples. (See how the apostle Paul speaks of things which "took place as examples for us" in 1Cor 10.6-10.)
 6. Analogy from Another Passage: a third passage harmonizes two texts that seem to contradict each other.
 7. Explanation from Context: using context to clarify any passage of Scripture.
- "Some of these principles are more valuable than others, but all of them are based on the assumption that the Scriptures, as the word of God, are self-consistent. They do not contradict themselves in any way, and a clear passage may be used to interpret an unclear passage. That is, Scripture is its own best interpreter." (Shaw)
- From this early period, we see the first appearance of the tension between Scripture and tradition.

Early Christians

- In the early Christian period, two major schools of biblical interpretation emerged, centered on two major centers of Christian activity:
 - Antioch – literal, grammatical, historical meaning (Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom)
 - Alexandria – allegorical meaning (Clement of Alexandria, Origen):
"The meaning of the Holy Spirit is always simple and clear and worthy of God. All that seems dark and immoral and unbecoming in the Bible simply serves as an incentive to transcend or pass beyond the literal sense." (Berkhof, 20)
- As a somewhat mediating position between these two poles, there arose a 'Western' school epitomized by Augustine and Jerome. The key contribution of this school was to *introduce the tradition of the church as a guide to exegesis*. "In cases where the sense of Scripture was doubtful, he [Augustine] gave a deciding voice to the *regula fidei* by which he meant a compendious statement of the faith of the Church," (Berkhof, 22).

The Medieval Church

- The medieval church developed a fourfold sense (*quadriga*) based on allegory:
 - “This approach is summarized in the Latin poem: *Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia...* The letter shows us what God and our father did; the allegory shows us where our faith is hid; the moral meaning gives us rules of daily life; the anagogy shows us where we end our strife. This brief explanation may be expanded, and illustrated, as follows: The literal sense is the plain meaning. So, in a passage referring to Jerusalem, the literal sense would be the city in Palestine. The moral sense directs us how we are to live. So Jerusalem refers to the human soul. The allegorical sense teaches us what we are to believe, and Jerusalem then refers to the church. The anagogical sense refers to our future hope, so that Jerusalem would refer to heaven. To some extent, the three senses beyond the literal were applications of the literal sense. But the fact was that it was more interesting for interpreters to seek various non-literal meanings than it was to stick to the letter of the text.” (Shaw)
- Moreover, all interpretation had to conform to the church’s tradition: “Learn first what you should believe, and then go to the Bible to find it there.” (Hugo of St. Victor)

The Reformation

Though not discarding the use of tradition (Calvin’s *Institutes* are modeled as an exposition of the Apostles’ Creed and heavily cite men such as Augustine and Chrysostom), the Protestant Reformers called for a return to the original languages and intent of the biblical text.

Post-Reformation Faith & Skepticism – Historical-Critical or Redemptive-Historical?

- The coming of Enlightenment skepticism and the further development of Reformation hermeneutics have given rise to two different views of the Bible:
 - Historical-Critical
 - assumes the Bible contains thoughts *about* God written *by* men, *edited and modified* through history
 - Grammatical-Historical-Redemptive
 - assumes the Bible is the Word *of* God written *through* men, *unfolded and clarified* through history

Three Principles of Grammatical-Historical-Redemptive Interpretation (Shaw)

1. Grammar: “The meaning of a passage is determined in part on the grammar and syntax of the passage.”
2. History: “The historical context is the other key to the proper understanding of a passage. Thus it is important not only to know the grammar of the original languages, it is also important to be fairly knowledgeable about the historical settings of the various biblical books.”
3. Redemption: “[It] takes into account, along with the grammar and the historical context of the material being studied, where the passage comes in the history of redemption. The history of redemption began, of course, with Adam, and will conclude with the new heavens and the new earth. But that story of redemption developed over time, and additional revelation was given at particular points in that development. The revelation to Moses was one of those points. Revelation that occurred after the Mosaic period could be presumed to have a knowledge of the Mosaic revelation as a background to its own revelation. Thus the material in Joshua, Judges, and Samuel has the Mosaic revelation in view. The material in Kings and Chronicles would be presumed to have the Davidic revelation in its background. Taking this into account in interpreting a passage gives a fuller depth of understanding to the passage being studied.”

Words → Context → Progress ← Gospel

“The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.” (Augustine)

Summary: *the Lessons of History*

What big lessons can we learn from the history of biblical interpretation?

- Of the errors we discern, did any of them originally stem from evil intentions?
- What does this teach about the necessity of written Scripture (WCF 1.1-3)?
- What does it teach us about the need for a proper heart in studying Scripture (WCF 1.4-5)?
- What does it teach us about the proper interpretation of Scripture (WCF 1.6-9)?
- What does it teach us about the place of tradition (WCF 1.10)?