

“The great merit of Köstenberger’s and Patterson’s volume is its three-dimension account of biblical interpretation. The authors rightly focus on the history, literature, and theology of the Bible—what they call the hermeneutical triad. Call it hermeneutics in real 3-D. A three-stranded hermeneutical cord may not be easily broken, but it’s easy to grasp by following this introductory textbook. Another merit is the authors’ reminder that biblical interpretation is not only about method but about virtue: a heart-felt humility before the divine text is as important as any heady procedure.”

—Kevin J. Vanhoozer,  
Blanchard Professor of Theology, Wheaton College Graduate School

“I am filled with admiration. I learned much from this vigorous book. It is a work of great clarity that summarizes the best principles of general hermeneutics with the best principles of biblical interpretation. Professor Köstenberger’s and Patterson’s students are lucky to have such a trenchant and learned guide—and so are the readers of this fine book.”

—E. D. Hirsch, Jr.,  
Professor Emeritus of Education & Humanities,  
University of Virginia and Founder, Core Knowledge Foundation

“There are certain topics of must-reading for serious Bible students—hermeneutics is at the top. There are certain books of must-reading for a topic—Andreas Köstenberger’s work on hermeneutics is one of them. It is clear, concise, and yet deep, and manages to cover most of the needed areas. Thus it becomes an invaluable guide for the student working through the labyrinth of issues that make up the task of biblical interpretation. It will enable the reader to bridge the gap from understanding biblical portions in their original cultural context and from showing their relevance to a modern audience. I recommend it very highly.”

—Grant Osborne,  
Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“*Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* is destined to become the standard textbook for colleges and seminaries for the foreseeable future. It is simply the best work available in the field of biblical hermeneutics. It is comprehensive in its breadth and in depth at all the right places. And it is

well written! I will be certain to make it my anchor text as I teach biblical hermeneutics.”

—Daniel L. Akin, President,  
Professor of Preaching and Theology,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson, two brilliant and experienced interpreters of Holy Scripture, have produced a first-rate volume on biblical hermeneutics. Distinctive in its approach, with a focus on the “hermeneutical triad,” this monumental publication is encyclopedic in its thoroughness, masterful in its organizational design, and skillful in its pedagogical emphasis. The clear discussions in each chapter, followed by helpful and informative bibliographies, will make this book a rich resource for students, scholars, and pastors for years to come. I am truly excited about the publication of *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*.”

—David S. Dockery,  
President, Professor of Christian Thought & Tradition, Union University

“I am truly impressed. This introduction to hermeneutics covers all the bases, and I mean all of them. Read this book and you will be well prepared for the task of serious interpretation.”

—Tremper Longman,  
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“This introduction to hermeneutics is outstanding in several ways: It takes full account of the unique divine authorship of the Bible; it is clear, readable, and doctrinally sound; it attends to the spiritual state of the interpreter; it provides detailed guidance for understanding the historical background, literary and linguistic features, and theological significance of each text; it is coauthored by an Old Testament and a New Testament professor; and it insists that right interpretation must end in application to life. It is an excellent book that will be widely used as a standard textbook for years to come.”

—Wayne Grudem,  
Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“This book on biblical interpretation combines training in exegesis with a basic knowledge of hermeneutics. It urges careful consideration of

historical, literary, and theological issues. Thus, historically, it includes helpful chronological charts, and much on cultural history. Its literary focus includes canon, genre, and language. Its theological dimension includes application. Genre is crucial: thus narrative, poetry and wisdom are distinguished in the Old Testament; and parable, epistles, and apocalyptic, in the New. Why responsible interpretation requires toil and labor receives careful explanation. This book contains plenty of common sense, sanity, and love of Scripture. I commend it especially to students, teachers, and even pastors, as helping all of us to use the Bible responsibly and fruitfully.”

—Anthony C. Thiselton,

Professor of Christian Theology, University of Nottingham

“A major task—perhaps *the* major task—of hermeneutics is to clarify the meaning of texts. This work by Köstenberger and Patterson not only succeeds brilliantly in elucidating the fundamental principles and processes of biblical hermeneutics but itself is a model of how a book ought to be written. Its conception, organization, systematic development, and applications—all work together to make this the finest contribution of its kind to biblical scholarship. There is no stodginess or impenetrable “academese” here. Layman and scholar alike will find it to be a virtual treasure house of sane and sensible hermeneutical practice.”

—Eugene H. Merrill,

Distinguished Professor of Old Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“Don’t be misled by the title; this is no typical hermeneutics primer. Here, in considerable detail, covering both introductory and more advanced topics, and interacting with the most current and classic scholarship, is a one-stop shopping resource for the entire exegetical process for the most capable seminary students, pastors, and teachers. Particularly distinctive and/or helpful are the discussions of Old Testament chronology, interpreting Revelation, discourse analysis, grammatical fallacies, biblical theology, and homiletical method. Warmly recommended.”

—Craig L. Blomberg,

Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

“This is a well-written, clear, and thorough book on the principles of biblical interpretation for the whole Bible. It would be an excellent book for

an upper-level hermeneutics course at the college level or an introductory hermeneutics course at the seminary level. Pastors will also find this a useful book to get an overview of the interpretative principles for different parts of the Bible from which they are preparing to preach. Seminary students and pastors will also benefit from the concluding chapter that applies the interpretative approach of the book to the task of preaching. The authors rightly contend that hermeneutics is to be viewed through the triadic lens of history, literature, and theology. This is not so much a theoretical approach to hermeneutics but a competent hands-on guide for interpreting the different kinds of literature that one encounters in the Bible. In this respect, each chapter helpfully concludes with a sample passage in which the principles discussed in the chapter are applied and illustrated, followed by study questions for the student and important bibliographical resources pertaining to the chapter. This is one of the best general and most thorough introductions to interpreting the English Bible that I have read. While paying attention to the details of interpretative method, it reflects a robust view of the absolute truth of Scripture.”

—Gregory K. Beale,  
Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology,  
Westminster Theological Seminary

“Köstenberger’s *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* is just that, a rich invitation to engage Scripture as God’s Word, making appropriate use of all available tools. His triadic approach is fresh and helpfully non-reductive. This work is wide-ranging and in touch with contemporary scholarly trends while written and produced in a thoroughly accessible way for student, pastor, and professor. Highly recommended.”

—Craig Bartholomew,  
Professor of Religion and Theology, Redeemer University College

“In this triad dance of history, literature, and theology, as they move across the floor of biblical interpretation, Köstenberger and Patterson excel at sorting through and clearly presenting massive amounts of material across a wide spectrum of cognate disciplines. Written in a down-to-earth style, the book is as accessible as it is broad, as practical as it is informed on contemporary discussions of these difficult matters. From the particulars of Greek grammar and discourse analysis to helpful introductions on

canon, biblical theology, and appropriate application, here one again and again finds a welcome orientation to the bread-and-butter concepts, sound practices, and tools needed for handling the biblical text responsibly and the spiritual posture for approaching it reverently. I am impressed and looking forward to putting this book in the hands of my students, who will find here a rich, expansive resource from which to draw guidance for years to come.”

—George H. Guthrie,  
Benjamin W. Perry Professor of Bible, Union University

*“Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* offers a thorough, scholarly, Scripture-honoring approach to biblical hermeneutics that lays the foundations for genuine expository preaching. Under its “hermeneutical triad” of the preaching text’s historical setting, literary dimensions, and theological message, the book provides a balanced approach even as it explores most of the topics discussed in contemporary biblical hermeneutics. It is well researched and documented and clearly written and illustrated. This student-friendly book is not only an excellent text for a seminary course in biblical hermeneutics but is equally useful for independent study. I highly recommend this book for all who desire to preach and teach the Word faithfully and accurately.”

—Sidney Greidanus,  
Professor of Preaching Emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary

“This is indeed a warm invitation to interpret the Bible responsibly, passionately, and practically. Showing readers how to explore the context, literature, and theology of the biblical books, the authors provide a guide to all phases of interpretation. The work climaxes in particularly helpful instructions on how to move from study of the text to crafting of the sermon. Novices should not be put off by the size of the volume. Although comprehensive in scope and breadth, the style of writing and the practical helps at the end of each chapter ensure that the concepts conveyed will be readily grasped even by non-professionals. If students of Scripture are seeking a single volume to which they can turn for practical assistance in interpretation, this is the book to get. Thank you, Kregel Publishers, for making their work available to us.”

—Daniel I. Block,  
Gunther H. Knoedler Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College

“This book distills a wealth of wisdom from two seasoned scholars whose expertise spans both Testaments. Chapters are up to date without succumbing to the trendy. There is attention to both the theory and practice of interpreting Scripture, obligatory given the title. But the novel element of this volume is at least twofold. (1) It unabashedly privileges Scripture as recording a *history* that produced *literature* which conveys *theology* of eternal redemptive importance. (2) It strikes a balance between these three elements in a readable and engrossing style. No book on this subject can do everything. But this one is without peer as a classroom resource supporting the triadic reading it calls for at a level that is neither brutally rudimentary nor unrealistically advanced. It will enhance the teaching of this subject and draw students into the excitement of navigating hermeneutical frontiers.”

— Robert W. Yarbrough,  
Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“The field of biblical interpretation and hermeneutics is vast and complicated, and those outside of the field might be forgiven for thinking that it renders any aspiration to reading, understanding, and preaching the Bible to be little more than a fool’s errand. That is why it is great, as one such amateur, to be able to recommend this new book by Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson. In clear, thoughtful chapters, the authors guide the reader through the dense thickets of theory, and yet never stray from the principal task of imparting the knowledge and techniques which will make the Bible more understandable and, above all, more preachable. Everyone—from the humblest Bible reader to the most accomplished preacher—will find something here to benefit them and to unlock yet more of the riches of God’s Word for their lives and ministries. A book for both teachers and students.”

—Carl Trueman,  
Dean, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Laid out as a seminary class book, this is a thoroughly researched, up-to-the-minute didactic treatise on the method and disciplines—historical and canonical, literary and linguistic, theological and applicatory—of biblically valid biblical interpretation. It is a superb resource that deserves a place on every preacher’s shelf.”

—J. I. Packer,  
Lord of Governors Professor of Theology, Regent College

“Here is the answer for the student who wants the results of sound scholarship in the field of hermeneutics without having to negotiate all the philosophical debates that have so come to dominate the subject. For the theological student (and the serious Bible reader) Köstenberger and Patterson have assembled a logically organized, comprehensive yet uncomplicated, guide to interpreting the Bible. This book not only provides an excellent basic course in hermeneutics, but it will serve students and those who preach and teach the Bible as an invaluable and practical reference handbook.”

—Graeme Goldsworthy,  
Visiting Lecturer in Hermeneutics, Moore College

“Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson have produced a comprehensive yet accessible introduction to biblical hermeneutics, chock full of helpful examples of the exegetical process. Approaching the Bible through the hermeneutical “triad” of history, literature, and theology, the authors take into account the nature of Scripture as divine discourse delivered through human authors in diverse genres and historically-embedded cultures, contexts, and languages. The volume is well researched, well organized, and clearly written, an excellent text for seminary or college level courses on biblical interpretation.”

—Mark L. Strauss,  
Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary San Diego

“Since the Scriptures are the Word of God, it is imperative that we interpret them accurately. Köstenberger and Patterson have provided a comprehensive work, full of wisdom and good sense, which will enable readers to be skilled interpreters of Scripture. The authors do not merely explain the rules of hermeneutics, but they also provide many helpful examples, so that the reader also learns a significant amount of biblical theology in this invaluable textbook.”

— Thomas R. Schreiner,  
James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“It is important to understand what this book is not. Despite its size, it is not a comprehensive guide to advanced hermeneutics. Rather, its size stems from the fact that it is a thorough introduction to (mostly) common

sense elements that go into faithful biblical interpretation, diligently worked out with many examples. The step-by-step approach will be too mechanical if anyone thinks that in real life such sequences guarantee an accurate and mature grasp of what the Bible says, but it will be an enormous help to those who are taking their first steps toward recognizing the many elements that go into sound interpretive judgment.”

—D. A. Carson,  
Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Biblical interpretation is a delicately balanced and widely expansive field of study. This volume, replete with explanations, charts, diagrams, study questions, assignments, and sample texts, reflects this reality. Köstenberger and Patterson structure their approach on the belief that Scripture is meant for our instruction, and their hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology provides the functional structure for achieving this goal. Obviously designed out of the authors’ many years of classroom teaching, teachers and preachers and serious students of Scripture will find this volume to be indeed an *Invitation* to a lavish feast of biblical understanding.”

—C. Hassell Bullock,  
Franklin S. Dyrness Professor of Biblical Studies *Emeritus*, Wheaton College

“Köstenberger and Patterson have put together a significant volume on biblical interpretation. It covers three important areas of interpretation: the historical context of God’s revelation, the literary dimensions of the text, and the theological nature of God’s communication to us. Attention to these three dimensions opens up the world of Scripture. The authors provide ample examples and encouragements to enter the world of the text. This is a book all students of the Bible will want to read in order to meet God afresh through his written Word.”

—Willem A. VanGemenen,  
Professor of Old Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“This book is yet another gift from one of my favorite biblical scholars. Can there be anything more important than learning how to correctly interpret and apply the Bible?”

—Pastor Mark Driscoll,  
Mars Hill Church, The Resurgence, The Acts 29 Church Planting Network

“The task of interpreting the word of the Lord is fraught with peril, and it has been since our primeval ancestors took hermeneutical direction from a demon. This book, written by two of the most significant biblical scholars in Christianity today, is a sure and steady pathfinder through the most difficult aspects of reading, interpreting, and communicating the Bible. Read this book and prepare yourself to hear afresh the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.”

—Russell D. Moore,  
Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Here is a hermeneutics textbook aimed squarely at instructing students in the essentials of how to interpret the Bible. It avoids jargon-laden, philosophical discussion on the relationship between the reader and the text, but instead gives the student an objective method for finding what a text means. Yet it is not simply a “how-to” book; it demonstrates that each biblical text must be read as a representative of the biblical world and not just as words and sentences to be analyzed. A text should be interpreted by a kind of triangulation, seeing it from its historical, literary, and theological *context*. This in turn allows the student to grasp that text’s historical, literary, and theological *meaning*. Along the way, Köstenberger and Patterson give students a complete but concise introduction to the concepts that make up the world of biblical hermeneutics.”

— Duane Garrett,  
John R. Sampey Professor of Old Testament Interpretation,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

*“Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* may easily become the new standard hermeneutics textbook for seminaries and evangelical universities. Köstenberger and Patterson faithfully guide readers across the vast and diverse terrain of the biblical canon. They expertly provide readers with all the necessary historical, literary, and theological tools for the task of exegesis as part of the interpretive journey. Along the way, they point out relevant signposts and occasionally stop to dig deeply into the text with probing insights. They begin with the broad scope of the canon and brilliantly interweave matters of general and special hermeneutics while managing to present a robust hermeneutical theory. This comprehensive

hermeneutics textbook rivals, and may even surpass, the well-respected works by Fee and Stuart or Duvall and Hays.”

— Alan S. Bandy,  
Rowena R. Strickland Assistant Professor of New Testament,  
Oklahoma Baptist University

“The authors have provided a treasure trove of information, methods, procedures, and insights that will benefit anyone who wants to read the Bible seriously and delve deeply into its riches. Fully equipped with examples and cautions, the book will guide readers judiciously under the careful tutelage that Köstenberger and Patterson bring to the task of interpretation informed by their long years of experience.”

—John H. Walton,  
Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College

“Hermeneutics is without a doubt a difficult course to teach. Köstenberger and Patterson have made that task a little easier now with their impressive textbook on the subject. Their clear, objective method for interpreting the Bible is built around the “hermeneutical triad,” studying Scripture in terms of its historical setting, literary and linguistic features, and theological message. User friendly and example rich, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* will help theological students to become better interpreters of the Bible. A fine work!”

— Terry L. Wilder,  
Professor of New Testament, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This volume is well conceived and well written. It presents introductory and advanced concepts in a systematic way that makes it suitable for college or seminary use. Its authors are trustworthy veteran scholars and master teachers. I recommend it highly to teachers, students, pastors, and lay teachers.”

—Paul House,  
Professor of Divinity and Old Testament, Beeson Divinity School

“*Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* is a welcome addition for those who seek to move beyond the hermeneutical “basics” to even more serious consideration of the biblical text. Its emphasis on the “hermeneutical triad”

of history, literature, and theology results in a comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation that leaves few, if any, stones unturned. It provides ample bibliography and guides students in developing their own personal biblical and theological libraries. Finally, Köstenberger and Patterson insist the exegete move beyond interpretation to application and proclamation—a good reminder that hermeneutics should never become an end in itself, but a tool to life change.”

—Bryan Beyer,  
Professor of Old Testament, Columbia International University

“In *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson condense their many years of teaching hermeneutics into an engaging and faithful interpretive guide. Much thought has gone into designing a textbook with maximum utility for the classroom. I highly commend this fine new book.”

—Robert L. Plummer,  
Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Hermeneutics textbooks can sometimes occlude rather than reveal the meaning of the Bible. *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* brilliantly illuminates the Scriptures by rightly paying attention to their historical, literary and theological horizons. It is insightful, lucidly written, and thorough. I am certain this resource will become a standard text for many universities, seminaries, and theological colleges.”

—Heath Thomas,  
Assistant Professor of Old Testament & Hebrew,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Fellow in Old Testament Studies, The Paideia Centre for Public Theology

“Greek and Hebrew are invaluable tools for exegesis. However, without a consistent, informed, balanced approach to interpreting Scripture, their use can become a pretext for eisegesis instead of exegesis. The text then becomes whatever the reader wants it to mean and the biblical languages can be sorely abused. Köstenberger and Patterson have crafted an extraordinary volume that takes scholarly concepts from advanced hermeneutics books and simplifies them for the striving seminary student (and even the

undergraduate student) to understand. They delineate difficult concepts in tangible ways for sound and effective exegesis. This book should get widespread use in classes among seminary and undergraduate biblical interpretation courses. I highly recommend it.”

— David A. Croteau,  
Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Liberty University

“Köstenberger and Patterson have provided us a well-rounded and sound hermeneutical method, clearly explaining the historical, literary, and theological dimensions. It is evident that this volume is the result of years of in-depth and careful study. Students and pastors alike will gain a wealth of knowledge and insight from this book. Köstenberger and Patterson have given us an invitation to study the Bible and we would do well to accept their offer.”

— Benjamin L. Merkle,  
Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Wedding clarity with grace, precision with pastoral sensitivity, Köstenberger and Patterson have provided us with an introduction to biblical interpretation that is firm in conviction without being strident in tone. The hermeneutical triad of history, text, and theology, presented in a way that moves from the big picture (canon) to the specifics (words) and thus assumes from the start a coherent, unified, and divinely governed narrative, will achieve its goal—producing workers who need not be ashamed but rightly handle the word of truth.”

— Dane Ortlund,  
Senior Editor, Crossway Books

“Between the covers of this book you’ll find impressive coverage of primary and secondary sources related to the interpretation of the Bible, competent engagement with topics relevant to the hermeneutical task, and a student-friendly package made easy for teachers to deploy. This faithful exploration of the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology deserves wide reading and heavy use.”

— Jim Hamilton,  
Associate Professor of New Testament,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

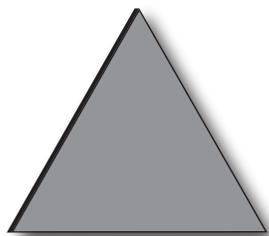
“Part biblical history, part OT and NT introduction, part genre, form, and literary analysis, part linguistic method, part biblical theology, and part contemporary application—Köstenberger and Patterson provide for the beginning evangelical student a one-stop textbook that is competent, conservative, and contextually oriented at every turn. Showing the crucial interrelationship of history, text, and theology, their work provides a solid place for the new student to stand in order to reach for the Scriptures for the first time!”

—Scott Hafemann,  
Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of NT,  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

INVITATION TO THEOLOGICAL STUDIES SERIES

# INVITATION TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

*Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of  
History, Literature, and Theology*



ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER  
RICHARD D. PATTERSON

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*Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*

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*To all faithful interpreters of God's Word,  
Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Schlatter,  
and to our colleagues and students  
who strive to do their best to study  
to show themselves approved by God,  
correctly handling the word of truth  
(2 Tim. 2:15)*

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- H. Use of the Old Testament in the New
- I. Sample Exegesis: John 12:37–41
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    - b. Preaching New Testament Narratives
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Appendix: Building a Biblical Studies Library

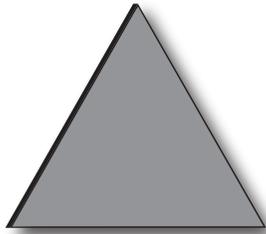
Glossary

Scripture Index

Subject Index

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**PREPARATION:**  
**The Who, Why, and How of**  
**Interpretation**



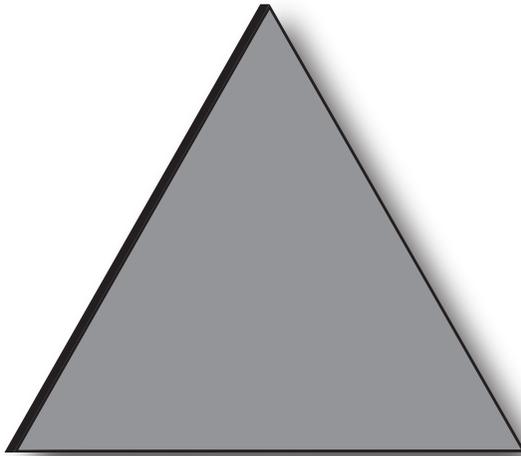
## **CHAPTER 1 OBJECTIVES**

1. To convince the reader of the need for, and the rewards of, skilled interpretation.
2. To persuade the reader of the cost of failed biblical interpretation.
3. To set forth the essential characteristics of the biblical interpreter.
4. To preview the purpose and plan of this book.
5. To review briefly the history of biblical interpretation.
6. To introduce the student to the hermeneutical triad of interpreting Scripture.

## **CHAPTER 1 OUTLINE**

- A. Chapter 1 Objectives
- B. Chapter 1 Outline
- C. Introduction
- D. Need for Skilled Biblical Interpretation
- E. Cost of Failed Biblical Interpretation
- F. Characteristics of the Biblical Interpreter
- G. Purpose and Plan of This Book
- H. History of Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutical Triad
- I. The Hermeneutical Triad
- J. Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation: Overall Method
- K. Key Words
- L. Study Questions
- M. Assignments
- N. Chapter Bibliography

**THEOLOGY**



**HISTORY**

**LITERATURE**

## Chapter 1

# WELCOME TO THE HERMENEUTICAL TRIAD: HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND THEOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

**C**OME ON IN, AND STAY for a while! Make yourself at home, and acquire vital skills in understanding the most important book ever written—the Holy Scriptures. The volume you are holding in your hands invites you to embark on the quest of sound biblical interpretation or as it is also called, “hermeneutics.”<sup>1</sup> As in Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast, the invitation goes out to all who care to listen. And as in Jesus’ parable, the terms are not set by those invited but by the one who issues the invitation and by the book to be interpreted.

In our quest to understand the Bible, *author*, *text*, and *reader* each have an important part to play.<sup>2</sup> Every document has an author, and the resulting

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1. “Hermeneutics” refers to the study of the methodological principles of interpretation, in particular, in the Bible. The term originates from the Greek god Hermes, who served as herald and messenger of the other gods and whose portfolio included commerce, travel, invention, and eloquence. The term “hermeneutics” was used by the important Greek philosopher Aristotle in his work *Peri Hermeneias*, one of the earliest surviving philosophical works in the Western tradition to deal with the relationship between language and logic.
  2. See esp. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), Appendices 1 and 2.

text is shaped by his or her intention. It is this authorial intention the interpreter must aim to recover. The text is not “just there,” left to be interpreted any way a given reader chooses. When my wife talks to me, I dare not give her words my own preferred meaning. The rules of proper communication demand that I seek to understand the meaning *she* intended to convey.

It follows that the text of Scripture, likewise, is not neutral, that is, malleable to a great variety of interpretations that lay equal claim to represent valid readings of a given passage (as is common in various post-modern, reader-response approaches to biblical interpretation).<sup>3</sup> Nor is the text autonomous, that is, a law unto itself, as if it existed apart from the author who willed and wrote it into being (as is held by various narrative or literary approaches).<sup>4</sup> It is an authorially shaped and designed product that requires careful and respectful interpretation.

There is therefore an important ethical dimension in interpretation. We should engage in interpretation responsibly, displaying respect for the text and its author.<sup>5</sup> There is no excuse for interpretive arrogance that elevates the reader above text and author. The “golden rule” of interpretation requires that we extend the same courtesy to any text or author that we would want others to extend to our statements and writings. This calls for respect not only for the intentions of the human authors of Scripture but ultimately for God who chose to reveal himself through the Bible by his Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

This volume is based on such respect both for the ultimate author of Scripture and for its human authors. We are committed to taking the text of Scripture seriously and to practicing a hermeneutic of listening and perception.<sup>7</sup> We aim to take into account the relevant historical setting of a given passage and to pay close attention to the words, sentences, and discourses of a particular book. We purpose to give careful consideration

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3. The classic treatment of validity in interpretation in the context of affirming the primacy of authorial intention is E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1973).
  4. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of ‘Aesthetic Theology,’” *TJ* 8 (1987): 25–56.
  5. See esp. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).
  6. For an introductory treatment, see “The Nature and Scope of Scripture,” Chap. 1 in Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2009).
  7. A dictum posited by the theologian Adolf Schlatter (see further below).

to the theology of the Bible itself and to interpret the parts in light of the canonical whole.<sup>8</sup> Last but not least, we seek to operate within the proper framework of the respective genres of Scripture.

Why would we want to take the time and exert the effort to learn to interpret Scripture correctly? First of all, we will want to do so because we are seekers of *truth* and because we realize that truth sets free while error enslaves.<sup>9</sup> Many cults have arisen because of their flawed interpretation of Scripture.<sup>10</sup> There is an even more powerful motivation, however: embarking on the quest for accurate biblical interpretation out of our *love* for God, his Word, and his people.<sup>11</sup> If you and I truly love God, we will want to get him know him better, and this involves serious study of his Word.

As seekers of truth and as lovers of God and others, then, we set out to discover revealed truth and to acquire biblical wisdom as one sets out to mine gold and precious stones.<sup>12</sup> Our conviction that God's Word is the most precious commodity there is fuels a desire to extract even the last ounce of meaning from the biblical text no matter how much effort or learning it takes to recover it. In our quest for revealed divine truth, we will be prepared to pay whatever price it takes to hear God speak to us in and through his Word and to proclaim his life-giving message authentically and accurately to others.

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8. These component parts of proper biblical interpretation form the backbone of the present volume.
  9. As Jesus told his would-be followers, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, *and the truth will set you free*" (John 8:31–32).
  10. A great recent tool in this regard is *The Apologetics Study Bible*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville: B&H, 2007). See also Gleason L. Archer, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996); and the forthcoming *Holman Apologetics Bible Commentary* (Nashville: B&H).
  11. See in this context N. T. Wright's advocacy of a "hermeneutic of love" (*The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992]). Just as love "affirms the reality and otherness of the beloved" rather than attempt to "collapse the beloved into terms of itself," a hermeneutic of love "means that the text can be listened to on its own terms, without being reduced to the scale of what the reader can or cannot understand at the moment" (p. 64).
  12. See Jesus' parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl (Matt. 13:44–46) and his statement, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matt. 13:52). See also Psalms 9 and 119 and the depiction of wisdom in Proverbs 1–9.

## NEED FOR SKILLED BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

“Do your best,” Paul wrote in his final missive to his foremost disciple, “to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). In a day when people are confronted with a flood of information and are struggling to keep up and set priorities, Paul’s words bring into sharp focus what ought to be our primary object of study: Scripture, “the word of truth.” Like Peter, we ought to say, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). We ought to be driven by a hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6); we ought to be longing for the life-transforming, “living and active” word of God (Heb. 4:12).

To unpack Paul’s above-cited words yet further, we need to work hard at interpreting Scripture. We must “do our best” as “a worker.” Biblical interpretation is even *hard* work. The one who wants to master the handling of God’s Word must be like the apprentice of a master crafts person. Over time, and through practice, that apprentice will learn to skillfully use many tools. Likewise, the biblical interpreter must know what interpretive tools to use and how to use them. This is what it means to “correctly handle” the word of truth.

While the analogy holds well between the realm of craftsmanship and biblical interpretation, the argument nonetheless is clearly from the lesser to the greater. If it is important for crafts people to wield their tools skillfully, how much more important it is for those who are called to handle God’s “word of truth” with utmost care and expertise. No sloppy or shoddy work will do. Everything must be done in proper sequence, appropriate proportion, and with the purpose of producing an end product that pleases the one who commissioned the work. Background information, word meanings, the context of a given passage, and many other factors must be judiciously assessed if a valid interpretation is to be attained.

Also, no worker labors without regard for the approval of the one who assigned a particular task. Once again, the argument is from the lesser to the greater: for in the case of biblical interpretation, the one to whom we have to give an account is none other than God himself. It is *his* approval we are seeking, for if God approves, no one else’s approval, or disapproval, ultimately matters. Our love for God and our conviction that God’s Word is so precious that we ought to spare no effort to comprehend it as precisely

as possible will be powerful motivators as we embark on our interpretive journey. In so doing, we will long to hear God's words of approval, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter the joy of your master."

### **COST OF FAILED BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

Not only are there great rewards for faithful biblical interpretation, there is also a considerable cost if we fail in this effort. This cost, too, is mentioned in 2 Timothy 2:15. It is shrinking back in shame at God's judgment by the one who is unwilling to acquire the skills needed to interpret Scripture accurately. The equivalent of improper biblical interpretation is shoddy workmanship, due either to the lack of skill or carelessness. In the area of hermeneutics, this translates into fallacies arising from neglect of the context, proof texting, *eisegesis* (reading one's preferred meaning *into* the text rather than deriving it by careful study *from* the text), improper use of background information, and other similar shortcomings.<sup>13</sup>

Scripture is replete with examples of those who failed in the task of biblical interpretation and were severely chastised, because their failure did not merely bring ruin on these individuals themselves but also on those they taught and influenced. In the verses immediately following 2 Timothy 2:15, the apostle makes reference to two such individuals by the name of Hymenaeus and Philetus. According to Paul, these men "have wandered away from the truth,"<sup>14</sup> "say[ing] that the resurrection has already taken place" (2 Tim. 2:17–18). As Paul pointed out, these false teachers were "destroy[ing] the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:18). Interestingly, Hymenaeus is already mentioned in Paul's first letter to Timothy, where the apostle wrote that he had handed this man over to Satan so that he might learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20). Yet, sadly, Hymenaeus persisted in twisting and distorting the word of truth.

From this we learn, among other things, that biblical interpretation is not an individualistic enterprise. Rather, it takes place in the community of believers, and the failure or success of the interpretative task affects not merely the interpreter but other believers as well. Note also that, as is often the case with cults—ultimately inspired by Satan, the master distorter and

13. See the discussion of exegetical fallacies in chapter 13 below.

14. Compare the reference to "the word of truth" in 2 Timothy 2:15.

twister of Scripture (see Gen. 3:1–5)—there is a kernel of truth in the assertion that “the resurrection has already taken place.” Christ did in fact rise from the dead as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20), and all believers can expect to be raised in the future (1 Cor. 15:51–53; 1 Thess. 4:14–18).

But Scripture makes clear that this resurrection is still future, and to say that “the resurrection has already taken place” suggests that rising from the dead is spiritualized and transferred completely into the present. Yet this resembles more closely the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul than the biblical teaching of the resurrection of the body. The problem of Hymenaeus and Philetus, therefore, seems to have been that they improperly imposed their Hellenistic philosophical and cultural conceptions onto Scripture, resulting in an “over-realized eschatology” that failed to acknowledge the future reality of believers’ bodily resurrection according to the pattern of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

This brief example shows that biblical interpreters are charged with a sacred task: handling Scripture with accuracy. They are entrusted with a sacred object, God’s Word of truth, and their faithfulness or lack thereof will result in God’s approval or in personal shame. God’s Word commands our very best because, in the ultimate analysis, it is not a human word, but the Word of God. This means that our interpretive enterprise must rest on a robust doctrine of biblical revelation and a high view of Scripture—as Jesus taught, Scripture is “the word of God” and thus “cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Though conveyed through human means, using human language and thought forms, Scripture is ultimately the product of divine inspiration and therefore completely trustworthy.

### **CHARACTERISTICS REQUIRED OF THE BIBLICAL INTERPRETER**

Rather than adopting a critical stance toward Scripture, we should

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15. The presentation above is admittedly rather basic. For detailed discussions of the rather complex issues involved in the interpretation of 2 Timothy 2:17–18 and the heresy in view, see especially George W. Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 413–14; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 527–28; and I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 750–54 (with further bibliographic references).

rather submit to it as our final authority in all areas of life. An essential quality required of the biblical interpreter is therefore *humility*. As Adolf Schlatter pointed out decades ago, we must stand “below” Scripture rather than arrogantly asserting our right to critique Scripture in light of our modern or postmodern presuppositions and preferences.<sup>16</sup> Instead of accepting only the teachings we find acceptable in keeping with contemporary sensibilities, we should be prepared to conform our presuppositions and preferences to the teachings of Scripture and to act accordingly. We must come to Scripture willing to obey what it says.

Part of this humility is acknowledging our finiteness and need for instruction and correction. As Paul wrote in his final letter to Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Proper instruction and, if necessary, correction are therefore a function of Scripture itself, though God may choose to administer these through those who rightly interpret the Bible and teach it to others (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2).

Note also that biblical interpretation is not an end in itself but interpretive competence equips the interpreter for “every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17; cf. Eph. 2:10). Rather than being exclusively, or even primarily, a scholarly pursuit, interpretation is required of every believer. While it is true that God has given to the church certain individuals who are to serve as teachers and pastors (Eph. 4:11), he expects *every* believer to progress toward spiritual maturity (Col. 1:28–29). For this reason, we all should assume responsibility for our spiritual growth and make every effort to grow in our ability to handle God’s Word accurately and with increasing skill (2 Pet. 3:17–18).

Another quality that is essential for the biblical interpreter is to *listen carefully* to the Word and to study it *perceptively*. This is what Adolf Schlatter called a “hermeneutic of perception.” In a time when listening is largely a lost art and many are approaching Scripture primarily for the purpose of validating their own predetermined conclusions, this is a much-needed reminder. Schlatter observed that “it is not the interpreter’s

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16. See the anecdote recounted in Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 52.

own theology or that of his church and times that is examined but rather the theology expressed by the New Testament itself.”<sup>17</sup> He continued:

It is the historical objective that should govern our conceptual work exclusively and completely, stretching our perceptive faculties to the limit. We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being. Our main interest should be the thought as it was conceived *by them* and the truth that was valid *for them*. We want to see and obtain a thorough grasp of what happened historically and existed in another time. This is the internal disposition upon which the success of the work depends, the commitment which must consistently be renewed as the work proceeds.<sup>18</sup>

In James’ words, and in keeping with Old Testament wisdom, interpreters should be “quick to listen” and “slow to speak” (Jas. 1:19). As the ancient preacher pointed out, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools . . . Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (Eccl. 5:1–2). Deplorably, the opposite is far more common: people are often quick to air their opinions but slow to hear the actual Word of God. Listening to Scripture requires discipline, self-restraint, wisdom, and love for God.

One final set of desirable (in fact, essential) attributes for biblical interpreters: they should be *regenerate* (that is, have experienced spiritual rebirth) and be *Spirit-filled and led*.<sup>19</sup> The role of the Spirit in biblical interpretation warrants extended treatment,<sup>20</sup> but for a start read Paul’s concise treatment in 1 Corinthians 2:10b–16:

17. Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 18 (emphasis original).

18. *Ibid.*

19. On the role of faith in interpretation, see Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (trans. Robert W. Yarbrough; Wheaton: Crossway, 1995), chap. 11.

20. For a representative treatment, see Daniel P. Fuller, “The Holy Spirit’s Role in Biblical Interpretation,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (ed. W. Ward Gasque and William LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 189–98. See also Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991), 22–26.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. . . . The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment . . .

While Paul wrote these words in order to address a specific issue in the Corinthian church that we cannot fully address here,<sup>21</sup> his remarks are also highly relevant for all of us who embark on our interpretive journey. If we do not have the Spirit—or if we have the Spirit but do not listen to him and depend on him for spiritual insight from God's Word—our interpretations will invariably fall short. Only the interpreter who depends on the Holy Spirit in his interpretive quest will likely be successful in discerning God's special, Spirit-appraised revelation.

While a given interpreter may indeed be devoid of faith and the Holy Spirit and still understand some of the words in Scripture, he will lack the spiritual framework, motivation, and understanding to grasp a given passage in its whole-Bible context. What is more, he will not be able to carry out what Scripture asks of him, because it is only regeneration and the Holy Spirit that enable him to do so. For this reason, anyone who has a sincere desire to understand the Bible will want to make sure that he or she is the kind of person who can receive God's words of truth.<sup>22</sup>

## PURPOSE AND PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Foundational to the plan of this book is the conviction that those who want to succeed in the task of biblical interpretation need to proceed within a proper interpretive framework, that is, the hermeneutical triad, which consists of the three elements interpreters must address in studying any given biblical passage regardless of its genre: a book's *historical setting*

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21. For competent, representative treatments see David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 90–103; and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 97–120.

22. To prepare your heart for the sacred task of interpreting Scripture, you may want to meditate on passages such as Psalms 1, 8, 9, 19, 139, or Isaiah 57:15; 66:1–2.

(chapter 2), its *literary dimension* (chapters 3–14), and its *theological message* (chapter 15).<sup>23</sup> Since Christianity is a historical religion, and all texts are historically and culturally embedded, it is important that we ground our interpretation of Scripture in a careful study of the relevant historical setting. Since Scripture is a text of literature, the bulk of interpretive work entails coming to grips with the various literary and linguistic aspects of the biblical material. Finally, since Scripture is not merely a work of literature but inspired and authoritative revelation from God, the goal and end of interpretation is theology. Using the hermeneutical triad as a compass will ensure that Bible students stay on track in their interpretive journey.

As an interpreter sets out to explore a particular biblical text, he will first research its historical setting (studying what is often called “introductory matters”). After grounding his study in the real-life historical and cultural context of the biblical world, he will orient himself to the canonical landscape. This will place a given passage in its proper salvation-historical context. Next, he will consider the literary genre of a passage. He should imagine the different genres found in Scripture as topographical features such as valleys, mountain ranges, or plains, each of which exhibit characteristic features and call for appropriate navigational strategies. Finally, he will take a close look at the specific linguistic features of a text—larger discourse context, important word meanings, and figurative language where appropriate.

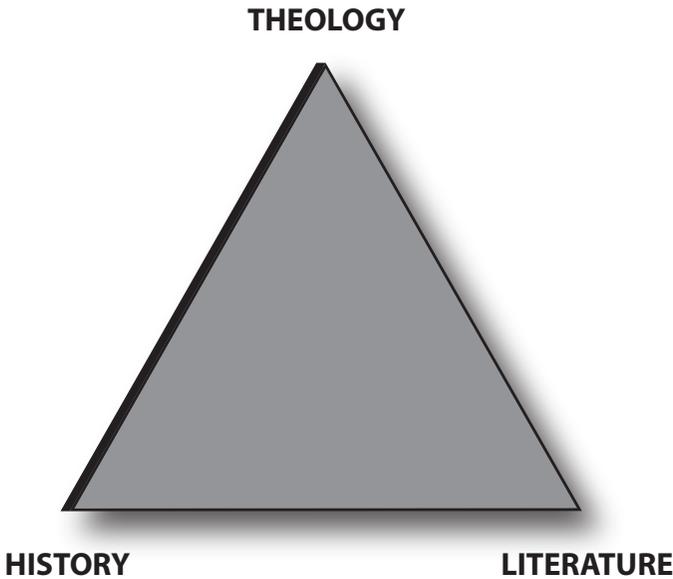
It will be useful to have several road maps on the interpretive journey, depending on the type of terrain encountered: Old Testament historical narrative (chapter 5), poetry and wisdom (chapter 6), prophecy (chapter 7), New Testament narrative (the Gospels and Acts; chapter 8), parables (chapter 9), Epistles (chapter 10), and apocalyptic literature (chapter 11). Using the hermeneutical triad, then, will serve as an overall method for studying any passage of Scripture. As a result, the interpretive apprentice will be well on the way to becoming a skilled worker who does not need to be ashamed, having developed the necessary skills for handling God’s Word. Before we proceed, therefore, we will introduce you to the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology, which will serve as our compass on our interpretive journey throughout this book, and briefly review the history of biblical interpretation.

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23. A “triad” may be defined as a union or group of three, such as a three-tone chord. In our case, the “hermeneutical triad” draws attention to the triadic structure of biblical interpretation consisting of the study of history, language, and theology.

## HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE HERMENEUTICAL TRIAD

Interpreters of Scripture are faced with three inescapable realities in their interpretive practice: (1) the reality of history, or more specifically, salvation history, that is, the fact that God’s revelation to humans, which is conveyed by the biblical texts, took place in a real-life time and space continuum; the writings of Scripture did not come into being in a vacuum; they were written by people with specific beliefs, convictions, and experiences; (2) the existence of texts containing that revelation that require interpretation (literature); and, last but not least, (3) the reality of God and his revelation in Scripture (theology). Each of these realities, in turn, comprises one aspect of the hermeneutical triad.



### 1.1. The Hermeneutical Triad<sup>24</sup>

24. Note that the first letters of “Theology,” “History,” and “Literature”—that is, T, H, and L—form the mnemonic “TheoLogy.” If genre, canon, and language are included as well (see below), the word is “TheoLoGiCaL”—we must give attention to Theology, History, and Literature, which consists of Genre, Canon, and Language.

In essence, therefore, the interpretive task consists of considering each of the three major dimensions of the hermeneutical triad—history, literature, and theology—in proper balance, with the first two elements—history and literature—being foundational and with theology at the apex. While discerning the spiritual message of Scripture—theology—is the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation, an appreciation of the historical-cultural background of a particular text and a proper understanding of its literary features are essential. As the following thumbnail sketch will show, however, the history of interpretation demonstrates that interpreters have not always been successful in giving proper attention to each of the three elements in the hermeneutical triad.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Old Testament, Jesus, and the Early Church***

The earliest instances of biblical hermeneutics are found in Scripture itself. In some cases, later Old Testament authors referred back to and further developed earlier Old Testament themes.<sup>26</sup> There are also abundant examples of Jewish interpretation, including those found in the sectarian literature at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls).<sup>27</sup> The New Testament contains abundant references to Old Testament passages, both in form of explicit quotations and by way of allusions and echoes.<sup>28</sup> While there is some variety in the ways in which later biblical authors appropriated earlier texts, ranging from promise-fulfillment to typology, analogy, and, in rare instances, allegory,<sup>29</sup> what all these instances have in common is es-

25. I also urge you to read chap. 1 in Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, which will provide you with an excellent framework for studying Scripture with regard to the vital matters of canon, textual transmission, translation, and inspiration.

26. See esp. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson, *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

27. This is a vast field of study. For a survey and bibliographic references, see Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, chap. 2. See also Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), chap. 1.

28. See esp. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); and Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*. See also R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971); and Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

29. See David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (3d ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010).

entially two elements: (1) the recognition of dual authorship, that is, the fact that behind any human author of Scripture stands the divine author, God himself; and (2) a respect for the original intention of these authors, both divine and human, in the process of interpretation and application.

The first of these aspects is bound up with important biblical doctrines such as revelation, inspiration, and inerrancy, which flow plainly from Scripture's own self-attestation and underlie the use of Scripture by Jesus, Paul, and the early church.<sup>30</sup> The second aspect involves intricate issues related to discerning the New Testament use of the Old Testament which will occupy us in greater detail in a later chapter.<sup>31</sup>

To this, we may add a third, all-important element: the promised coming of the Messiah in the Old Testament and the hermeneutical axiom undergirding the entire New Testament: that Jesus of Nazareth was that Messiah—Jesus, who was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, and had gathered the Twelve as his new messianic community; Jesus, who died, was buried, and rose from the dead on the third day; Jesus, who was exalted and ascended to the Father, now through his Spirit directs the church's mission, and will one day return to gather his people and judge the unbelieving world, ushering in the eternal state.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists***

The Apostolic Fathers—including Clement of Rome (died A.D. 101), Ignatius (A.D. 35–110), and Polycarp (A.D. 69–155), as well as writings such as the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*—built on these scriptural precedents and affirmed that the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament had now come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>33</sup> The Apologists—Justin Martyr (A.D. 100–165), Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200), and Tertullian (c. 160–c.

30. See Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), esp. the essay by Paul Feinberg; D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), esp. the essay by Wayne Grudem; and D. A. Carson, *Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), with reference to a forthcoming 2-volume edited work, tentatively titled *The Scripture Project*, to be published by Eerdmans.

31. Chapter 15: Making the Connection: Getting Our Theology from the Bible.

32. See esp. the canonical survey in Chapters 3 and 4 below.

33. On patristic exegesis, see esp. Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 2 vols. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004). See also the relevant essays in Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 1: *The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

225)—defended Christianity against pagan Romans, non-messianic Jews, and Christian sects or heretics such as Marcion who sought to pit the God of the Old Testament against that of the New Testament. In essence, these early defenders of the Christian faith maintained that both Testaments were unified around Christ as their center and that all of Scripture must be interpreted within an overarching christological framework. Biblical interpretation in this period exhibited a wide range of approaches from literal to typological (historical correspondence between a type and an anti-type), midrashic (commentary), and allegorical.

### ***Schools of Alexandria and Antioch***

The most noted proponent of the school of Alexandria—a major ancient center of learning located in Egypt—was the church father Origen (A.D. 185–253). As the head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, Origen presided over the flourishing of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation. Origen addressed himself primarily to Gentiles with an interest in philosophy. In an effort to demonstrate the supremacy of Christianity, he attempted to show that Christ was the supreme human and religious source of knowledge. According to Origen, Christ himself had spoken in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament message anticipated the best in Greek philosophy. Another Alexandrian writer, Clement (c. 150–c. 215), distinguished between historical and theological (spiritual) elements (*Stromateis* Book I, chap. 28). While appreciating the historical nature of the Mosaic narratives, he also featured instances of “spiritualizing” interpretations (e.g. *Stromateis* Book I, chap. 21).<sup>34</sup>

The exegetical school of Antioch, represented by Theophilus, who became bishop of Antioch in about A.D. 169, and later John Chrysostom (A.D. 354–407), differed markedly from the Alexandrian approach. In fact, the contrast between the two schools explains some of the most foundational issues in biblical interpretation. At the core, the difference between these two schools hinged on their approach to the biblical writings as *history*. While the Alexandrian school resorted to allegorical readings in which history took second place to an interpreter’s perceived spiritual

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34. See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 38–39, who point out that, like Philo, Clement believed that Scripture had a twofold meaning: “like a human being, it has a body (literal) meaning as well as a soul (spiritual) meaning hidden behind the literal sense” (p. 38).

significance of a given Old Testament character or event, the Antiochenes proceeded in the conviction that the primary level of exegesis was the historical one.

Consequently, while the Alexandrian school set aside the literal historical meaning where it was thought to conflict with an interpreter's moral or intellectual sensibilities, the Antiochene school was committed to interpreting the biblical texts literally wherever possible. At the same time, the Antiochenes did allow for a fuller sense alongside the historical one in the case of messianic psalms and prophecy. In their interpretive restraint and their awarding of primacy to the historical, grammatical level of biblical interpretation, the School of Antioch constitutes an important precursor for the historical-grammatical interpretation propagated during the time of the Reformation.

### ***Jerome and Augustine***

The great scholar Jerome (A.D. 347–420) translated the Bible into Latin, a version commonly called the Vulgate, which reigned supreme as the church's Scripture for the next 1,000 years. Having lived intermittently in Antioch, Jerome spent the last 35 years of his life in Bethlehem (A.D. 386–420). In a sense, Jerome combined the best of both the Alexandrian and the Antiochene schools. On the one hand, "He made it clear to his successors that the Old Testament was an oriental book written in an oriental language and set in the oriental past. At the same time he fervently expressed the belief that the coming of Jesus showed that the Old Testament was a book of illumination and hope for all mankind."<sup>35</sup>

The church father Augustine (A.D. 354–430) is notable especially for his theological masterpiece *The City of God*. In this landmark work, written soon after the sacking of Rome by the Goths in the year 410, Augustine replied to the pagan criticism in his day that the fall of Rome was a result of the city's embrace of Christianity and the abandonment of its pagan set of deities. In his discussion of the earthly and the heavenly city, Augustine maintains utmost respect for the historicity of the events recorded in the Old Testament. As the city of God on the earth, the church

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35. John Rogerson, "The Old Testament," in *The History of Christian Theology*, Volume 2: *The Study and Use of the Bible*, by John Rogerson, Christopher Rowland, and Barnabas Lindars (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 46.

still contains both good and bad, a state of affairs only remedied at the second coming of Christ. While there are instances of spiritualizing interpretation in Augustine, “the impressive thing about *The City of God* is that it is an attempt to take the Old Testament seriously as history and to consider how secular and sacred history are to be regarded in relation to each other.”<sup>36</sup> Jerome and Augustine stand as towering figures in biblical interpretation and remain unsurpassed for at least the next 600 years.

### **Medieval Period**

In the following centuries, which witnessed the contributions of Cyril of Alexandria (archbishop of Alexandria, A.D. 412–444), Gregory the Great (pope, A.D. 590–604), and the Venerable Bede (c. 672–735), among others, the allegorical and mystical interpretations of the Old Testament reached a climax. The remainder of the Middle Ages, however, saw a renewed interest in the historical interpretation of Scripture. This is evident particularly in the school of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris. Proponents of this school include Hugh, who taught at St. Victor from 1125 until his death in 1142, and his student Andrew who taught there until 1147 and again from 1155 until 1163, both of whom pursued primarily the historical, literal sense.

While the method goes back at least as far as John Cassian (A.D. 360–435),<sup>37</sup> medieval exegesis is known primarily for its pursuit of the fourfold sense of Scripture: (1) literal (or historical), (2) allegorical (or spiritual), (3) tropological (or moral), and (4) anagogical (or future; from the Greek *anagogē*, “leading up to”). Nicolas of Lyra (1270–1340) memorably cites the following distich (a unit of verse consisting of two lines) in around 1330:

The letter teaches events; allegory, what you should believe; the moral sense, what you should do, anagogy, what to hope for.<sup>38</sup>

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36. Ibid., 52.

37. “The one Jerusalem can be understood in four different ways, in the historical sense as the city of the Jews, in allegory as the church of Christ, in *anagogē* as the heavenly city of God ‘which is the mother of us all’ (Gal 4:26), in the tropological sense as the human soul.” John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1985), 160. See also, similarly, Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 1.1.

38. In the original Latin, *Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quod tendas anagogia*. Nicholas of Lyra, *In Gal.* 4, 3 (Bible de Douai, 6, Anvers [1634], 506),

The literal sense is the historical-grammatical sense. The allegorical sense (including typology) is the spiritual sense thought to lie beneath the surface of the text. The tropological sense pertains to the moral lessons that can be drawn from Scripture. The anagogical sense is concerned with the end-time implications of a given passage.

Some among medieval interpreters, such as the aforementioned Hugh of St. Victor, stressed the literal sense, while others, such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), favored a more spiritual interpretation. Yet others, such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), sought to hold these aspects in tension.<sup>39</sup> But in many cases, all four senses were affirmed alongside each other and were seen as viable, albeit diverse, ways of grasping the meaning of Scripture. To the extent that authorial intent receded into the background and the interpreter's own way of thinking took over the interpretive enterprise, however, textual meaning was obscured and a proper contextual reading of Scripture gave way to a type of mysticism that used Scripture merely as a springboard for the pursuit of higher, "loftier" goals of progressing in the interpreter's spirituality.

### **Reformation and the Enlightenment**

Biblical interpretation at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the eve of the Reformation, was still largely controlled by the notion of a four-fold sense of Scripture. The literal sense was the historical sense that recounted God's dealings with Israel and the church. The spiritual sense involved relating the message of Scripture to Christ, with interpreters seeking to make moral application to people's everyday lives. The great Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, operated in the wake of the revival of classical learning, epitomized by the scholarship of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/69–1536).<sup>40</sup>

Luther (1483–1546) is well known for insisting on the principle of *sola Scriptura* (Latin for "Scripture alone") over against the Roman Catholic practice of awarding church tradition a role equal to (if not greater than)

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cited in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, Volume 1: *The Four Senses of Scripture* (trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1. The saying is thought to originate with Augustine of Dacia (Denmark) in his *Rotulus pugillaris* (1206).

39. Rogerson, "Old Testament," 70–73.

40. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 47, cite the popular sixteenth-century saying, "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it."

Scripture. He also held that Scripture is its own best interpreter (*Scriptura sui interpres*), which meant that the study of Scripture took precedence over patristic commentary or ecclesiastical authority. Luther also rejected medieval allegorical interpretation and affirmed, with Aquinas, that Scripture had one essential meaning, the historical sense.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in Luther's distinctive approach, the fourfold sense collapsed: "If there was a literal sense that referred to Christ, there was no need for spiritual senses in order to find him in the text."<sup>42</sup> In the Old Testament, Luther discovered a rich history of faith that was able to instruct believers on how to conduct their Christian lives. At the same time, Luther distinguished between law and gospel and held that the Old Testament law, as law, is not normative for Christians today. When interpreting the prophets, Luther affirmed the literal sense in which a given text referred to Christ. Luther also noted that because the Holy Spirit guides the interpreter, the resulting interpretation is a properly "spiritual" interpretation.

Calvin (1509–1564), for his part, was more systematically oriented than Luther. He also showed greater concern to establish the meaning of the text by the aid of secular knowledge. At the same time, as in the case of Luther, Calvin's primary concern lay with the literal, historical sense of the text. Calvin also affirmed a subjective element in interpretation, "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit."<sup>43</sup> Within this framework, his interpretation was christological. The difference between the Testaments Calvin saw primarily as one of administration, in which the Old Testament remained incomplete and contingent on New Testament revelation. The law, especially the Ten Commandments, retained relevance because they were in accordance with natural law.

During the period of the Enlightenment, interpreters became increasingly skeptical toward the supernatural element of Scripture, such as the miracles performed by Moses and Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Increasingly, human reason questioned the very possibility of miracles, and anti-supernaturalism largely prevailed. A new view of science led to an interpretation of the biblical cre-

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41. At the same time, Luther took up the typological interpretation found in the New Testament. See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 47.

42. Rogerson, "Old Testament," 78.

43. For background sources, see Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 48, n. 106.

44. For an excellent account of this development, see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, Vol. One: *From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

ation and miracle stories as “myths.” This included Jesus’ resurrection, even though Paul and other New Testament writers made clear that the resurrection is essential to the Christian faith. This rationalistic mind-set gave rise to a pronounced skepticism toward the scriptural data and led to the development of the historical-critical method with its various criteria for assessing the historicity of biblical texts.<sup>45</sup>

### **Modern Period**

A more detailed treatment would rehearse the rise of historical criticism from Richard Simon (1638–1712), a Roman Catholic priest considered by many the “father of biblical criticism,” to F. C. Baur (1792–1860), the leader of the Tübingen School, to Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), the chief advocate of the documentary hypothesis of the composition of the Pentateuch (positing sources he designated “J” [Jahwist], “E” [Elohist], “D” [Deuteronomist], and “P” [Priestly redactor]), the history-of-religions school, and the various quests for the historical Jesus.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most important figure in the modern period is the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whom many consider to be the father of modern hermeneutics.<sup>47</sup> Grounded in his conviction that religious faith was rooted in a person’s feeling of dependence on God, Schleiermacher contended that interpretation consisted of both an objective and a subjective element, grammatical as well as psychological. The former involved studying the text’s overt message as conveyed by its words, sentence structure, and so forth; the latter entailed an attempt to reconstruct the author’s psyche as he wrote. Schleiermacher’s notion of authorial intention is universally discredited today because the only access to a given author’s state of mind is the text itself. That said, there is much value in seeking to ascertain an author’s intended meaning by careful study

45. See Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). For a critique, see Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977).

46. For the latter, see the concise summary in Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 111–16.

47. See, e.g., Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 468.

of the text. In fact, apart from authorial intent, validity in interpretation is a virtual impossibility.<sup>48</sup>

Following Schleiermacher, modern biblical interpretation of the historical-critical variety has been increasingly characterized by an anti-supernatural bias and historical skepticism on the part of most of its proponents.<sup>49</sup> Deplorably, this negative, critical stance toward Scripture had the effect of undermining the credibility of the biblical record as it tended to blunt the notions of biblical revelation, inspiration, and authority.<sup>50</sup> In most proponents of the historical-critical method, the question of history became detached from the biblical text, and the question of whether or not a given event actually took place became the singular preoccupation of biblical scholars.<sup>51</sup> Thus assessing the historicity of events recorded in Scripture replaced the task of studying the actual text of the Bible, a development trenchantly chronicled in Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.<sup>52</sup> In this the "historical-critical method" became unduly preoccupied with the question of history at the expense of an engagement with the Bible's literary and theological aspects.

In the wake of Frei's work, however, the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Increasingly, historical skepticism regarding the

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48. For helpful discussions, see Robert H. Stein, "The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics," *JETS* 44 (2001): 451–66; and Jerry Vines and David Allen, "Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and Proclamation," *CTR* 1 (1987): 309–34 (both articles are also available online).

49. For surveys of the history of hermeneutics see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); idem, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, chap. 2; and Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, App. 1 and 2 (only the modern period starting with Schleiermacher).

50. But see the able critiques of these trends by North American scholars B. B. Warfield, W. H. Green, W. J. Beecher, and others. See Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 54.

51. In historical Jesus studies, scholars frequently drove a wedge between the "Jesus of history" (i.e. Jesus during his earthly ministry) and the "Christ of faith" (the Jesus in whom the first Christians believed), as if these were of necessity different and in conflict with one another. In this context, scholars often spoke about the "Easter faith" of Jesus' followers and claimed that their faith led them to attribute features to Jesus that he never claimed to possess during his earthly ministry. See, e.g., Martin Kähler, *The so-called historical Jesus and the historic, biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964 [1896]).

52. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974).

historicity of the events depicted in the Bible led to a mere literary study of Scripture as any other book.<sup>53</sup> In this approach, aptly labeled “aesthetic theology” by Kevin Vanhoozer, students of Scripture focused unilaterally on the various literary features of the biblical text while excluding historical questions from the scope of their research.<sup>54</sup> Biblical scholarship was reduced to narrative criticism or various other forms of literary criticism, and while interesting literary insights were gained, Scripture’s historical dimension was unduly neglected, resulting in an imbalanced interpretation once again. Postmodernism has further built on this “aesthetic turn” in biblical studies and questioned the very notion of objective history, viewing the question of truth merely in terms of human convention rather than as correspondence to facts and reality.<sup>55</sup> Reader-response approaches and deconstructionism, likewise, set aside authorial intention and held that textual meaning was determined subjectively by the reader or denied the possibility of a stable notion of meaning altogether, resulting in a plurality of theologies and readings with no objective standard to adjudicate between more or less valid interpretations.<sup>56</sup>

Other approaches set aside the question of historicity while continuing to be concerned with theology, whether in existentialist or other terms.<sup>57</sup> Adherents to this school of thought maintained that theological truth was not contingent on the truthfulness of Scripture in depicting various phenomena and events. The resurrection was redefined as a person’s existential

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53. Again, see Baird, *History of Research*, Vol. 1, for a thorough account of the historical roots of this phenomenon.

54. Vanhoozer, “Lamp in the Labyrinth.” See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Aesthetic Theology—Blessing or Curse? An Assessment of Narrative Hermeneutics,” *Faith & Mission* 15/2 (1998): 27–44.

55. See on this question Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed., *Whatever Happened to Truth?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), in particular the trenchant critique of postmodernism by J. P. Moreland. See also D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

56. See esp. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, App. 1 and 2; Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*.

57. See, e.g., the effort by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) to “demythologize Scripture” in order to salvage an existentialist core of the Christian message that appealed to modern people. See Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth & Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005).

experience of new life through faith apart from the historical resurrection of Jesus. Regeneration following faith in Christ was recast as the result of an existential encounter with God occasioned by the reading of Scripture, and so on. These are examples of a pursuit of theology that is inadequately built on the foundation of the historical dimension of Scripture. While theology, as mentioned, is rightly viewed as the pinnacle of biblical interpretation, it must be built on a proper understanding of the historical, linguistic, and literary aspects of Scripture if a valid, balanced interpretation is to be achieved.<sup>58</sup> This, in turn, brings us back to the hermeneutical triad.

### HERMENEUTICAL TRIAD

Only an approach to the study of Scripture that properly balances history, literature, and theology will be adequate to the task. As Charles Scobie aptly noted, “In much contemporary literary criticism, historical study of the original author of a text has been set aside as irrelevant.” He went on to say that in biblical studies, any total abandonment of historical study “would be a major disaster that would cast the interpreter adrift on a sea of subjectivity.”<sup>59</sup>

For this reason the hermeneutical triad, which includes historical study, will prove to be a useful guide for mastering the general skills required for biblical interpretation and for following the special rules applied to the various genres of Scripture. Rather than being pitted against one another, history, literature, and theology each have a vital place in the study of the sacred Word.

Regardless of the passage of Scripture, the interpreter needs to study (1) the historical setting; (2) the literary context (including matters of canon, genre, and language); and (3) the theological message, that is, what

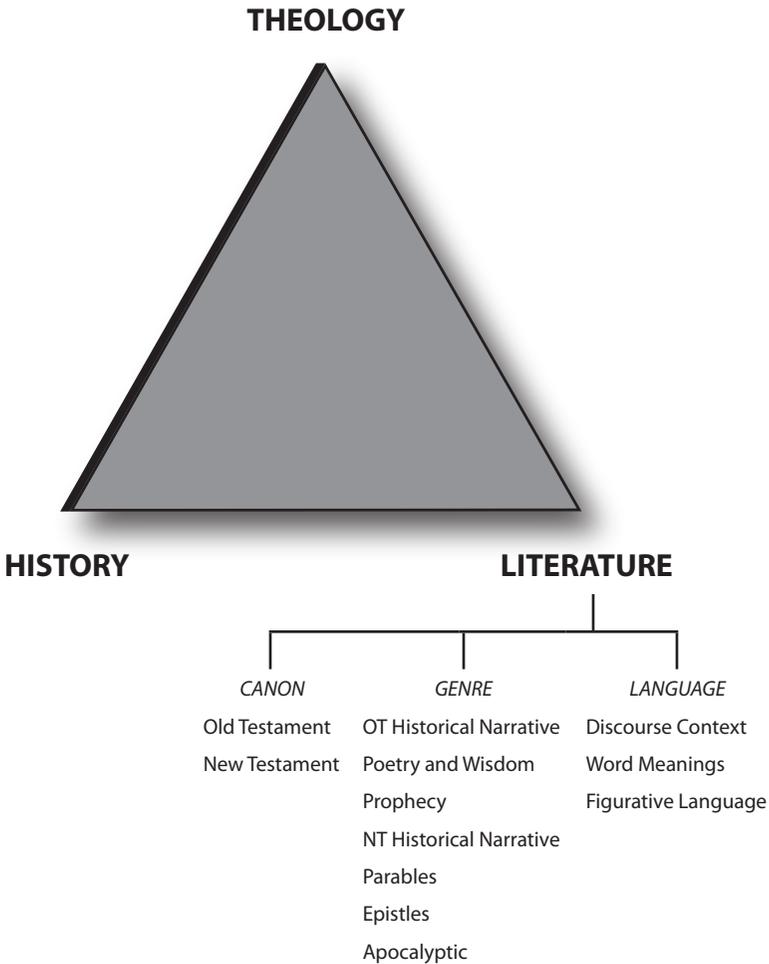
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58. A more promising (though not entirely unproblematic) recent development is the movement advocating a return to the theological interpretation of Scripture. See esp. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). See also the brief initial assessment in the opening section of Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Of Professors and Madmen: Currents in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship,” *Faith & Mission* 23/2 (2006): 3–18.

59. Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 33.

the passage teaches regarding God, Christ, salvation, and the need to respond in faith to the Bible’s teaching.

The interpretation of Scripture, in turn, is not the end in itself but only a means to an end: the application of biblical truth to life. Using proper interpretive tools and resources and finding a path from text to sermon for each biblical genre are important. Thus sound interpretation becomes the solid foundation for the application and proclamation of biblical truth to life.



### 1.2. The Hermeneutical Triad in Detail

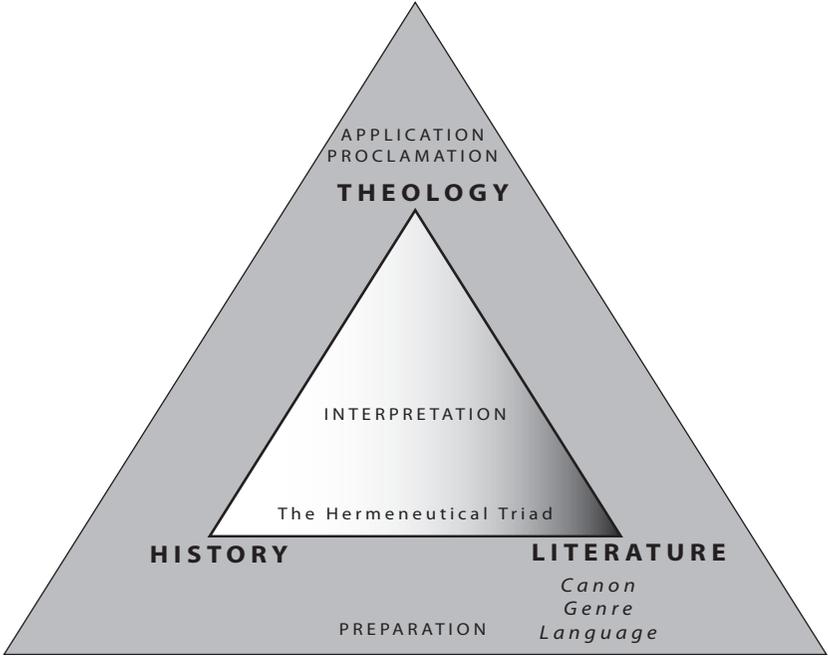
From the above observations, then, flows naturally a method for interpreting and applying any passage of Scripture. Those who hone their understanding of this method will develop several vital skills, including the following set of interpretive and communicative competencies:

1. historical-cultural awareness;
2. canonical consciousness;
3. sensitivity to genre;
4. literary and linguistic competence;
5. a firm and growing grasp of biblical theology; and
6. an ability to apply and proclaim passages from every biblical genre to life.

Acquiring and polishing these skills will be well worth the effort. Doing so will bring glory to God and great blessing to the Bible student and through him or her to God's people. To this end, the "Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation: Overall Method," depicted below in both a chart and step-by-step listing, will be followed throughout this volume.<sup>60</sup>

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60. For an excellent work that grounds biblical preaching in the three component parts of the hermeneutical triad (history, literature, and theology), see Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).



**1.3. Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation: Overall Method**

## **GUIDELINES FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: OVERALL METHOD**

### **I. PREPARATION:**

Prepare yourself for the interpretive task by recognizing your own presuppositions. Pray for God to open your mind to understand the Scriptures. Approach your task with a proper method for biblical interpretation—the hermeneutical triad.

### **II. INTERPRETATION:**

1. Determine the historical setting of the passage and identify relevant cultural background issues (history).
2. Locate your passage in the larger canonical context of Scripture (literature/canon).
3. Determine your passage's literary genre and use appropriate interpretive principles for interpreting each given genre (literature/genre).
4. Read carefully and seek to understand an entire passage in its larger discourse context, conducting a full-fledged discourse analysis if possible (literature/language/discourse context).
5. Conduct a semantic field study of any significant terms in a passage (literature/language/word meanings).
6. Identify any figurative language in a passage and interpret figures of speech in keeping with proper principles of interpretation (literature/figurative language).
7. Identify the major theological theme(s) in a passage and determine the passage's contribution to the understanding of the character and plan of God in dealing with his people (theology).

### **III. APPLICATION & PROCLAMATION:**

Assess the contemporary relevance of a passage and make proper application to your life and to the life of the church today.

## KEY WORDS

**Aesthetic theology:** mere literary study of Scripture

**Alexandrian School:** interpretive approach that preferred allegorical to historical interpretation

**Antiochene School:** interpretive approach that preferred historical to allegorical interpretation

**Dual authorship:** human and divine authorship of Scripture

**Eisegesis:** reading one's preferred meaning into the text

**Exegesis:** deriving one's interpretation from the text

**Fourfold sense of Scripture:** method of medieval exegesis that pursued the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical sense of Scripture

**Hermeneutics:** discipline concerned with the proper theory and practice of textual interpretation

**Hermeneutic of perception:** interpretive approach that prizes careful listening to the text

**Historical-critical method:** interpretive approach whose primary concern is the assessment of the historicity of events recorded in Scripture, often with negative results

***Scriptura sui interpres*:** Reformation dictum that Scripture is its own best interpreter

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is it so important to interpret Scripture accurately? Cite Scripture to support your answer.
2. What are some of the results if people fail to interpret Scripture responsibly? Again, support your answer with scriptural references.
3. Name at least three characteristics required of the interpreter of Scripture and support your answer with Scripture.
4. What are the three realities with which the interpreter finds himself confronted, and how do these realities form the “hermeneutical triad”?
5. What happens when interpreters neglect any one or two of the three elements of the “hermeneutical triad”? Illustrate your answer by giving examples from the history of biblical interpretation.

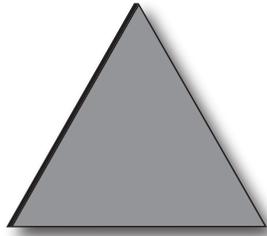
## ASSIGNMENTS

1. Give examples from Scripture and from your own personal experience that illustrate the benefits of proper biblical interpretation and/or the cost of failed biblical interpretation.
2. Make up a chart tracing the history of biblical interpretation, including major interpretive schools or individual interpreters, dates, and pertinent characteristics. If possible, supplement the information provided in this chapter with additional research into the history of biblical interpretation.
3. Discuss the importance of each of the three major aspects of the hermeneutical triad—history, literature, and theology—as well as the importance of canon, genre, and language. Show how neglect of one or two of these aspects results in imbalanced interpretation and point out how this can be harmful in distorting the proper understanding of the biblical text.
4. Reflect upon and provide a detailed commentary on each of the following interpretive competencies: historical-cultural awareness, canonical consciousness, sensitivity to genre, literary and linguistic competence, a grasp of biblical theology, and the ability to apply and communicate biblical truth.

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**INTERPRETATION:**  
**The Hermeneutical Triad**

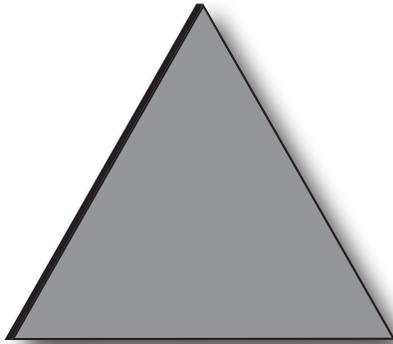




**PART 1**

**THE CONTEXT OF SCRIPTURE:**

**HISTORY**



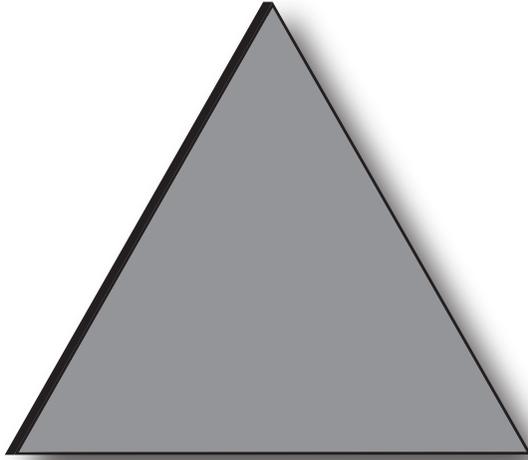
## **CHAPTER 2 OBJECTIVES**

1. To impress upon the student the crucial importance of understanding the historical-cultural background of a given biblical passage.
2. To assure the student of the trustworthiness of the biblical record.
3. To direct the student's attention to the need for determining the author's purpose regarding the specific details he has chosen to record.
4. To provide a set of interpretive guidelines for applying the principles embedded in the historical-cultural data of the Bible to contemporary social and political problems.

## CHAPTER 2 OUTLINE

- A. Chapter 2 Objectives
- B. Chapter 2 Outline
- C. Introduction: History and Hermeneutics
- D. Chronology
  - 1. Old Testament Period
    - a. Primeval Period
    - b. Patriarchal Period
    - c. From the Exodus to the United Monarchy
    - d. Divided Monarchy
    - e. Exile and Return
  - 2. Second Temple Period
    - a. Babylonian and Persian Periods
    - b. Hellenistic Period
    - c. Maccabean Period
    - d. Roman Period
  - 3. New Testament Period
    - a. Jesus
    - b. Early Church and Paul
    - c. Rest of the New Testament
- E. Archaeology
  - 1. Old Testament
  - 2. New Testament
- F. Historical-Cultural Background
  - 1. Primary Sources
    - a. Ancient Near Eastern Literature
    - b. Old and New Testament Apocrypha
    - c. Old Testament Pseudepigrapha
    - d. Dead Sea Scrolls
    - e. Other Relevant Primary Sources
  - 2. Secondary Sources
- G. Conclusion
- H. Sample Exegesis (Old Testament): 1 Kings 17–18
- I. Sample Exegesis (New Testament): Luke 2:1–20
- J. Guidelines for Interpreting Biblical Historical-Cultural Backgrounds
- K. Key Words
- L. Study Questions
- M. Assignments
- N. Chapter Bibliography

**THEOLOGY**



**◆HISTORY◆**

**LITERATURE**

## Chapter 2

# SETTING THE STAGE: HISTORICAL-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND HERMENEUTICS

**I**N ORDER FOR THE INTERPRETATION of Scripture to be properly grounded, it is vital to explore the historical setting of a scriptural passage, including any cultural background features. An informed knowledge of the historical and cultural background is imperative also for applying the message of Scripture. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays put the issue well:

Since we live in a very different context, we must recapture God's original intended meaning as reflected in the text and framed by the ancient historical-cultural context. Once we understand the meaning of the text in its original context, we can apply it to our lives in ways that will be just as relevant.<sup>1</sup>

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1. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 100.

Emphasizing the importance of historical information, of course, does not mean that every available piece of background data will necessarily be germane for the interpretation of a given biblical passage. The relevance of a particular piece of background information must to be carefully weighed and assessed. Certainly, background information should never override what is stated explicitly in the text. In fact, lack of judiciousness in selecting background information has led some to disparage the use of historical-cultural data in scriptural interpretation altogether (surely an overreaction).

For our present purposes, the most important hermeneutical question relates to the relationship between history and literature, the first and second element in the hermeneutical triad. Literature, in the ancient Greek and Hebrew languages, immediately reinforces the notion of texts, different from our own, with unique historical and cultural development. These texts not only require translation into a understandable language (English) but also the study of historical-cultural aspects embedded within them since both the biblical languages and other parts of biblical culture and history are inextricably intertwined.

Indeed, it is commonly acknowledged that it is vital to study Scripture in its proper context, and that context, in turn, properly conceived, consists of both historical and literary facets; so there is no need to justify the necessity of responsible historical research as part of the interpretive process. Suffice it to say that the necessity of historical research underlies major reference works such as study Bibles, Old and New Testament introductions, commentaries, and other standard reference works.

However, historical research has been given a bad name by the practitioners of the historical-critical method, which has been largely undergirded by an anti-supernatural bias that has consistently cast aspersions on the historicity of much of the biblical material.<sup>2</sup> In reaction to the excesses of the historical-critical method, some have advocated a strict literary reading of Scripture while leaving aside the question of historical referentiality.<sup>3</sup> While surmounting the difficulty of alleged historical

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2. See William Baird, *The History of New Testament Research*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, 2002). See also Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

3. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).