

## **Talking Scripture: How we read the Bible**

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Hermeneutics is a foreign word to most English speakers even though it is a deeply rooted word in biblical studies. Basically, the word is a label for the science or art of biblical interpretation. This is not merely the purview of scholars; it is actually something every believer does. Every time we read the Bible we are trying to understand its meaning and discover its message.

The task involves three specific aspects: (1) What we think the Bible is. This pertains to our presuppositions or pre-thoughts about the Bible. Do we believe it is the Word of God? Do we think it is merely a book? Do we see it is a manual for faith and doctrine? These pre-thoughts influence how we interpret what we read. (2) How we study the Bible. This has to do with methodology and concerns the manner by which we discover information and meaning in biblical texts. It involves study (exegetical) tools we employ to enable us to understand what we discover. (3) What we derive from the Bible. Such derivations may lead to concepts, which in turn birth doctrines, or they may lead to applications, which eventually create traditions. This is the process of doing theology where every believer is involved, knowingly or unknowingly. At the end of this process we have a system of understanding we often call 'truth'.

For the sake of this paper, it is more accurate to speak of hermeneutical principles which have impacted biblical interpretation. A comprehensive survey of such principles is not possible here or even necessary, only a cursory one. Nevertheless, we should be aware of some of the principal ideas which have driven biblical interpretation through the centuries.

### *Hermeneutical Principles in Academia*

At the more academic level, there are important principles which have played major roles in interpreting the Bible. An examination of a few of the more significant ones and their usage is helpful.

- **Christological.** This was an idea which maintained that the entire Bible is all about Jesus Christ and every event or text should be read with Jesus as the interpretative lens, including OT passages. This was a favourite platform for NT writers and Early Christianity even if at times there were unexpected challenges such as interpreting Song of Songs.
- **Literalist.** This principle underscored the importance of the literal text; that it should be read at face value for what it says and no hidden meanings should be entertained. This was another principle favoured by Early Christianity and promoted by Church Fathers like Athanasius.
- **Allegorical.** This became the dominant form of interpretation for Medieval Christianity and received staunch support from the likes of Bishop Augustine of Hippo. Allegorical principles maintained four layers of meaning for the biblical text ranging from literal to 'heavenly' and also claimed that the hidden meanings were the more crucial ones. Allegorical hermeneutics ruled biblical interpretation for about 1,000 years. Unfortunately, the approach rendered biblical interpretation entirely subjective and enabled the Medieval Church to contrive doctrines which could not be derived from a literal reading of the text.
- **Church Dogma.** A companion to allegorical principles held that church pronouncements trumped biblical truths since the Church is the repository of truth (not the Word). Consequently, papal decrees and external human authority supplanted the simple words of the Bible which was relegated to the back rooms of monasteries and nearly lost from sight as far as most believers were concerned.

- Sola Scriptura. The Protestant Reformation, as a protest against Medieval Christianity and theology, developed the most influential hermeneutical principle termed *sola scriptura*. The outstanding element of this idea is that no external human authority is needed to interpret the Bible since the Bible should and could interpret itself. Without the battle cry of *sola scriptura*, it is conceivable that the Reformation itself would have petered out meekly. Contemporary Christian theology owes a great debt to this hermeneutical principle; it re-elevated the Bible to its rightful place.
- Typological. A hermeneutical principle which greatly influenced early Adventism is the use of typological paradigms to explain biblical texts. In this system, ideas, events, persons and prophecies from OT are seen as ‘types’ of NT realities. For instance, this had a great impact on how the Sanctuary was explained and its relevance to the modern world.
- Historical Critical Method. This hermeneutical principle was a companion of several thought movements (evolutionary theories, rational philosophy, empirical paradigms in science and psychology) which arose in conjunction with the Enlightenment. This became the dominant hermeneutics of the modernist period. Essentially, this principle dismissed the idea of the ‘Word of God’ and replaced it with critical human authority. Human intellectual endeavours became vogue for explaining the Bible and Scripture was reduced to the level of ‘interesting old document’ at best or pure mythology at worst. Attempts were instituted to demonstrate the natural development of the text without any divine interjection. Such attempts led to the rejection of certain biblical authors and material as valid and new theories were pushed forward to explain away traditional concepts of authorship, revelation and inspiration.

At the scholarly level of research, hermeneutics is a very rich and variegated field of study. Its influence on how we understand the Bible cannot be underestimated.

#### *Hermeneutical Principles among Non-academics*

Arguably, for most Bible students, the ideas presented above may not have a direct impact. However, there are other hermeneutical principles which affect the rank and file student. Again, only a few interesting and overly-used concepts are highlighted.

- Proof Texting. This approach looks at biblical texts which share common words and phraseology, places such texts on a straight line without considering contexts and arrives at a conclusion based on this re-arrangement. This a rather popular hermeneutical principle and is a primary method for creating doctrines. The downside of the system is that often the original meaning of the text is pushed aside for a more derivative meaning. Moreover, texts may easily be manipulated or twisted to fit a pre-determined framework by ignoring the varying weightage texts may carry organically.
- Devotional Reading. For most Bible students, this is the closest they ever get to ‘serious’ Bible study. The approach lends itself to quick application-based conclusions that completely bypass more serious issues with the text like context and literary analysis. There is the added over-dependence on what someone else says about the text and results in a sort of second-hand knowledge version of ‘truth’.
- Doctrinal of Creedal approach. This is an ally and product of proof texting and is also widely employed. Here, the church (or group) decides what to believe and then digs into the Bible to find adequate support for its position. While we all believe that church doctrines or creeds are self-evident, the reality is that they tend to be derivative in nature; they are products of a particular hermeneutical principle. Sadly, every church terms this approach as ‘correct’ and claims that discovery made this way is ‘God’s word’.
- Collative Hermeneutics. This paradigm is a favourite one when Christmas or Easter comes around. Basically, material from different biblical sources are collated to reproduce a new

portrait. This happens with every Christmas pageant retelling of the nativity story. It also happens with other stories in the Bible and becomes a useful tool for those who seek to reproduce Bible narrative in some media format. An unusual use of this approach may be seen in the film 'Noah' where the story line in the film is so far-removed from the Bible narrative as to be virtually unrecognisable. A more mundane use of the principle may be observed in a little children's song, 'Only a boy named David', which has been extremely popular but whose retelling does not fit the biblical account.

### *Suggestion Going Forward*

The big question is, 'Where do we go from here?' I suggest the following as a source of reflection and discovery for anyone involved in doing theology.

First, to decide what we think the Bible is. Is it Scripture? Is it a product of revelation and inspiration? Is it God's word? This is foundational pre-thought because hermeneutics is about biblical interpretation and we ought to be crystal clear that it is God's book we are reading and studying.

Second, to decide how we study the Bible. The Reformation concept of *sola scriptura* is indispensable in this endeavour. We have to be clear that the Bible is its own interpreter and requires no outside authority to speak for it. Having said that, it is important to employ the best study (exegetical) tools for study. I suggest three 'power' study tools, contextual analysis, literary analysis and inter-textuality. These tools have different functions and make Bible study truly 'biblical'. The first tool enables us to properly locate the text without losing sight of its contextual import. The second tool allows us to see what the text is doing and enables us to come to terms with macro and micro structures as well as literary techniques employed by biblical writers. The third tool opens up the Bible so we can see the inter-connections which make this book the 'Word of God'.

Third, to exercise caution about the meaning or application we derive. Any 'truth' arising from study should be organic to the text. We cannot impose external reading upon the text no matter how attractive it may appear. In trying to apply the meaning of the text, we should make tentative conclusions to allow for growth of understanding or any new insights which may arise from later studies.

In the following article, I will utilise these hermeneutical suggestions to articulate an unexpected biblical message embedded in the book of Genesis. Hopefully this will demonstrate the need for doing theology in a truly biblical manner.

## Talking Scripture: How we MAY read the Bible

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In the previous article, I made three suggestions regarding biblical interpretation (hermeneutics): to decide what we think the Bible is; to decide how to study the Bible; and to exercise caution about any derived meaning or application. These three suggestions deal with pre-suppositions, methodology (exegesis) and theology (or doing theology). However, the proposed approach also requires a working demonstration of how the three steps may be utilised. Genesis 37-50, the narrative about Jacob's sons, serves as a sample exercise. By applying the three steps of hermeneutics we discover what is the primary intent of the narrative and how it may affect our understanding of the text.

### *Step 1: To decide what the Bible is*

In this step we contend with certain pre-thoughts about Genesis. As the lead book of the Bible, Genesis is integral to the Scriptures; it is the Word of God. *Sola scriptura* is crucial at this point in light of the ongoing attacks on the authorship and historical validity of the stories in the book. Therefore, Genesis is viewed as inspired Scripture and its narrative data as historically reliable. For anyone who rejects this pre-thought, this study might as well cease at this point. This hermeneutical step is both simple and fundamental; it is either validated or invalidated. For the discussion in this paper, Genesis *is* Scripture, authored by Moses and historically accurate.

### *Step 2: To decide how to study the Bible*

The second step of interpretation is usually the most complex. It is at this stage where methodology comes into play and involves numerous facets. As suggested in the previous article, we consider three 'power' tools of Bible study (exegesis), context, literary elements and inter-textuality.

The first 'power' tool is analysis of both immediate and biblical contexts (and sometimes extra-biblical contexts such as history and culture may be necessary). Genesis 37-50 is part of the larger story of Abraham and his descendants which starts in Genesis 12. Following a zoom pattern of the book, these stories also zoom in from Abraham (and Isaac) to Jacob and then Jacob's sons. With each step in the zoom pattern, the amount of detail also increases. The wider the scope, the fewer the details, while, the narrower the scope, the more numerous the details. Chapters 37-50, as the final narrative block of the book, is the longest and most detailed account. The entire book of Genesis begins with the creation of 'heaven and earth' (involving only 2 chapters) and culminates in the stories about Jacob's sons (involving 14 chapters). This contextual location clearly demonstrates a narrative intent where the stories of Abraham and his descendants become the primary focus of the book and the rest of the Bible.

The next tool to employ is literary analysis which allows us to explore the primary narrative techniques used in Genesis, particularly in chapters 37-50. For demonstration purposes two distinctive narrative techniques of these chapters are analysed.

1. The reversal of roles between Judah and Joseph. The story commences with Jacob's attempt to elevate Joseph, the first born of favourite wife Rachel, over his brothers so as to establish a succession line (Genesis 37). Next, Joseph has dreams in which he sees his brothers (and even parents) bow down and pay homage to him. It appears as if the succession line is a done deal. However, in Genesis 49, Jacob chooses Judah as his successor and specifically states that his brothers would bow down and pay him homage. Evidently, the succession line

would run from Jacob through Judah but not Joseph. There is total reversal in the narrative between Joseph and Judah, a chosen one versus one who gets chosen.

2. The elevation and de-elevation technique. Most people who read Genesis 37-50 are enamoured by the Joseph persona and Judah's story goes almost unnoticed. A closer inspection reveals that Joseph's story undergoes a series of elevation and de-elevation steps leading up to the Jacob's unexpected decision to choose Judah as his heir. When Jacob gave Joseph a royal robe, his brothers dump him in a pit then sell him as a slave. Potiphar makes Joseph his household manager but Mrs Potiphar gets him thrown into prison. Pharaoh's ultimate elevation of Joseph to political power is followed by Jacob's decision to promote Judah instead to family succession. In the meantime, flying under the narrative radar is Judah's gradual rise to prominence. His ascendancy goes unnoticed until we reach chapter 49 when, almost unannounced, Judah is made heir and prophecy is made about his long-term destiny which would exceed that of all his brothers, Joseph included (Gen 49:8-12). This fact has been affirmed in both Judaic and Christian teaching and yet it is Joseph who still captures the imagination. Simply put, Judah and not Joseph is the intended successor to the Abraham covenant line; he is the primary character in Genesis 37-50.

There are several other narrative techniques employed in Genesis and all of them accomplish the same result, establishing Judah as next in line for the succession line.

The third tool of Bible study is Inter-textual exploration which simply reinforces the emerging picture. Links to two other texts enhances the portrayal of Judah as God's chosen instrument. Psalm 78:67-68 makes this assertion: 'He [God] rejected the tent of Joseph and did not choose the tribe of Ephraim. He chose instead the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which He loved' (HCSB). Revelation 5:5 refers to Jesus as 'the lion of the tribe of Judah'. The picture is consistent; Judah is the successor, not Joseph. More importantly, Judah's line is the covenant line through which the 'messiah' would come. As the story pans out, the three outstanding characters of the Patriarchal narratives are Abraham, Jacob and Judah.

### *Step 3: To exercise caution about doing theology*

Two things may be said from this perspective. First, the succession line leading to Jesus runs through Judah not Joseph. The book of Genesis not only tells how the universe and the world came into existence, it is also the beginning of the redemptive story. No matter how captivated we may be with some characters in the book (like Joseph), we cannot lose sight of the story line. The characters who are the most important to that story line do not always grab the headlines of the story (as is the case with Judah). Genesis is excellent story-telling, with twists, turns, reversals, unexpected outcomes and even misdirection. In the end the redemptive line runs this way: Adam-Seth-Noah-Shem-Abraham-Jacob-Judah.

Of all the characters in the book, Judah is the most redemptive, a fact depicted in every episode. In chapter 37, Judah suggests to sell Joseph as slave for a fairly measly sum of cash. A superficial reading paints a dark picture of Judah, yet this act may actually have saved Joseph's life. After all, he was safer in Egypt than at home, considering the extreme ire of the brothers (not to mention the violence of Simeon and Levi seen in Genesis 34). In chapter 38, Judah ensures the safety and survival of his daughter-in-law Tamar while having the integrity to admit his culpability in her predicament. In chapter 43, Judah turns redeemer of the clan by persuading Jacob to allow Benjamin to travel with the brothers to Egypt to restock their grain supply. He succeeds where Rueben had failed and does this by invoking a curse on himself on behalf of Benjamin. In chapters 44-45, Judah turns mediator on behalf of Benjamin, making the longest speech in the book. While attempting to save one brother's life, his words soften the heart of another brother. His intervention leads to complete

family reunion. Perhaps, this is why Judah is the one God looked upon as the person to carry the redemptive line forward.

Second, at the application level, these stories offer a degree of comfort in that they show God's choice is not always what humans expect. God is capable of the unexpected and we may have to wait to see what God is really doing. For those who live in the shadows of life, it is helpful to realise that God may be choosing you even when it is not apparent. We may not always fathom God's will but it always comes through in the end. An additional thought is that many of these chosen people were not paragons of virtue. It is not always the superstars who are chosen by God. His dealings with humans are both mysterious and affirming; anyone could be a vital player in God's plans.

In the final analysis, God had plans for both Joseph and Judah. The former for a special need at a particular time. The latter for an eternal destiny and the redemption of all humanity. Likewise, God has plans for each of his children and our task is to keep ourselves open to his summons.

Talking Scripture is a demanding task but a very fruitful one. Hopefully, we never stop doing that because this is both a necessity of faith and something that faith demands.