

## **Different Methodologies Used in the Biblical Interpretation**

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## 1.1 Introduction

The interpretation of biblical texts continues in our own day to be a matter of lively interest and significant debate. All interpretations contain elements of at least three voices. A text has a meaning within its own historical and cultural context, that is, 'meaning behind the text'. It has a meaning as a piece of literature distinct from its historical context, that is, 'meaning in the text'. It remains meaningful to contemporary reading communities, that is the meaning in front of the text. Scholars use the term "hermeneutics for" various theories of how these different voices should relate to each other. The term hermeneutics comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, meaning 'to interpret, translate, explain, declare' and from nominal *hermeneutike* meaning ['the art of'] interpretation'.

## 1.2 Biblical Interpretation – Goal and Necessity

The Bible was originally written to people who lived in a different place, different culture, at a different time and period of history, and who spoke different languages. It also contains several different types of literature, called genres. Because the Bible is God's word in history revealed to people in history, each passage has a historical context – a particular author, audience, purpose and occasion. Since the Bible is also the word of God, its contents are also eternally relevant. The goal of interpretation is to discover the original intended meaning of a passage. It is called exegesis. Bad interpretation results directly from bad exegesis.

The Bible itself bears witness that its interpretation can be a difficult matter. Alongside texts that are perfectly clear, it contains passages of some obscurity. When reading certain prophecies of Jeremiah, Daniel pondered at length over their meaning (Dn. 9:2). According to the Acts of the Apostles, an Ethiopian of the first century found himself in the same situation with respect to a passage from the Book of Isaiah (Is. 53:7-8) and recognized that he had need of an interpreter (Acts 8:30-35). The Second Letter of Peter insists that "no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private interpretation" (2 Pt. 1:20), and it also observes that the letters of the apostle Paul contain "some difficult passages, the meaning of which the ignorant and untrained distort, as they do also in the case of the other Scriptures, to their own ruin" (2 Pt. 3: 16).

## **1.3 Methods for Biblical Interpretation**

### **1.3.1 Historical-Critical Method (Diachronic Method)**

The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy Scripture, in as much as it is the "word of God in human language," has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it. Certain elements of this method of interpretation are very ancient. They were used in antiquity by Greek commentators of classical literature and, much later, in the course of the patristic period by authors such as Origen, Jerome and Augustine. The method at that time was much less developed. Its modern forms are the result of refinements brought about especially since the time of the Renaissance humanists and their *recursus ad fontes* (return to the sources).

#### *1.3.1.1 The Steps followed in the Diachronic Method*

##### **A. Textual Criticism**

The textual criticism of the New Testament was able to be developed as a scientific discipline only from about 1800 onward, after its link with the *textus receptus* was severed. Textual Criticism is a specialized and technical discipline aimed at restoring the presumed original form of the text as accurately as possible. We see the diversity of copies of the text, sometimes not agreeing one with the other. On the basis of the oldest and the best mss, as well as papyri, ancient versions, and patristic texts, textual criticism seeks to establish, according to fixed rules, a biblical text as close to the original as possible.

##### **B. Literary Criticism**

Literary criticism determines the beginning and end of textual units, large and small; it seeks to establish the literal coherence of the text. In this stage of critical analysis one is also concerned with the existence of the doublets, irregularities, and irreconcilable differences. This inquiry is important because they can be seen as indicators or clues to the composite nature of certain texts. Literary criticism shows that, once written, any text assumes a life of its own and may convey meaning beyond the original author's intention.

Literary criticism for a long time came to be identified with the attempt to distinguish in texts different sources. Thus it was that there developed in the 19th century the "documentary hypothesis," which sought to give an explanation of the editing of the Pentateuch. According to this hypothesis, four documents, to some extent parallel with each other, had been woven together: that of the Yahwist (J), that of the Elohist (E), that of the Deuteronomist (D) and that of the priestly author (P); the final editor made use of this latter (priestly) document to provide a structure for the whole.

In similar fashion, to explain both the agreements and disagreements between the three synoptic Gospels, scholars had recourse to the "two source" hypothesis. According to this, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were composed out of two principal sources: on the one hand, the Gospel of Mark and, on the other, a collection of the sayings of Jesus (called Q, from the German word *Quelle*, meaning "source"). In their essential features, these two hypotheses retain their prominence in scientific exegesis today--though they are also under challenge.

It was Hermann Gunkel who brought the method out of the ghetto of literary criticism understood in this way. Although he continued to regard the books of the Pentateuch as compilations, he attended to the particular texture of the different elements of the text. He sought to define the genre of each piece (e.g., whether "legend" or "hymn") and its original setting in the life of the community or *Sitz im Leben* (e.g., a legal setting or a liturgical one, etc.).

### C. Historical Criticism

The detection of what the author meant to say is one aspect of historical criticism. Many times the literal sense is relatively easy to discern; at other times it requires a good knowledge of the ancient languages, grammar, idioms, customs, etc. When the text studied belongs to a historical literary genre or is related to events in history, historical criticism completes literary criticism, so as determine the historical significance of the text, in the modern sense of this expression.

#### D. Source Criticism Source

Source Criticism Source Criticism studies the relationship between individual texts in a wider literary context and their dependence on source. Here the approach is diachronic which treats language as a historical material. Its most important proponent, Wellhausen, argued that four sources may be found in the Laws of Moses from Genesis to Deuteronomy. This takes the emphasis away from Moses as the author and places new emphasis on the compiler of the sources/documents (this term is used to underline that this is already a written account). Repetitions and double accounts. Narratives of the creation, flood, beginning of the Joseph story, the stories of Abraham (Gen 12-25), Moses and the plagues (Ex 1-11), origins of Passover and crossing of the red sea (Ex 12-15), and God's appearance on Sinai (Ex 19-24) will be seen as indicators for the existence of different sources.

The first source, which mainly used the name Yahweh for God, was called J (Jahwist) and the second using the name Elohim is known as E (Elohist); the source which is particularly interested in the obedience to the covenant is identified as D (Deuteronomist – less evident in Genesis but more in Exodus); the final source, with a repetitive liturgical style and an interest in priestly matters, is called P (Priestly); Wellhausen labeled them as JEDP (the documentary hypothesis).

#### E. Form (Genre) Criticism

Form criticism assumes an oral tradition behind the written text and is interested in its transition from the pre-literary form to the literary form. For the OT Gunkel, and for the NT, his disciples Dibelius and Bultmann made important contributions in this regard. Form criticism seeks to get behind the written sources by studying and analysing the “form” of individual gospel traditions. It describes the characteristics of the various forms and how they emerged in the period of oral transmission in the church. One of the problems with form criticism is the form categories are often based on content rather than actual form. Although form and content do influence each other, some categories are simply stylistic descriptions. Also, many sayings and stories have no “common” form and many have “mixed” form. Some may even fall into multiple categories.

## F. Redaction Criticism/Editorial Criticism

This proceeds from the assumption that the individual authors of the biblical books had a strong influence on their eventual form and on the analyses of the composition of these texts from the perspective of the final redactor. Redaction criticism builds on the results of source and tradition criticism. It treasures and examines the editorial work of gospel authors in order to see their emphases and purposes. Redaction Criticism involves analysing individual traditions comparing it with parallels, in order to identify common and unique phrases and words. It also involves analysing the whole gospel in comparison with other gospels.

### *1.3.1.2 Limitation*

The classic use of the historical-critical method reveals its limitations. It restricts itself to a search for the meaning of the biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the church. Nonetheless, this method has contributed to the production of works of exegesis and of biblical theology which are of great value.

To sum up, the goal of the historical-critical method is to determine, particularly in a diachronic manner, the meaning expressed by the biblical authors and editors. Along with other methods and approaches, the historical-critical method opens up to the modern reader a path to the meaning of the biblical text such as we have it today.

## **1.3.2 New Methods for Literary Analysis**

Taking advantage of the progress made in our day by linguistic and literary studies, biblical exegesis makes use more and more of new methods of literary analysis, in particular rhetorical analysis narrative analysis and semiotic analysis.

### *1.3.2.1 Rhetorical Analysis*

Rhetorical analysis in itself is not, in fact, a new method. What is new is the use of it in a systematic way for the interpretation of the Bible and also the start and development of a “new rhetoric”. Rhetoric is the art of composing discourse aimed at persuasion. The

fact that all biblical texts are in some measure persuasive in character means that some knowledge of rhetoric should be part of the normal scholarly equipment of all exegetes. Rhetorical analysis must be carried out in a critical way, since scientific exegesis is an undertaking which necessarily submits itself to the demands of the critical mind.

A considerable number of recent studies in the biblical area have devoted considerable attention to the presence of rhetorical features in Scripture. Three different approaches can be distinguished. The first is based upon classical Greco-Roman rhetoric; the second devotes itself to Semitic procedures of composition; the third takes its inspiration from more recent studies--namely, from what is called the "new rhetoric."

Every situation of discourse involves the presence of three elements: the speaker (or author), the discourse (or text) and the audience (or the addressees). Classical rhetoric distinguished accordingly three factors which contribute to the quality of a discourse as an instrument of persuasion: the authority of the speaker, the force of the argument and the feelings aroused in the audience. The diversity of situation and of audience largely determines the way of speaking adopted. Recognizing the immense influence of rhetoric in Hellenistic culture, a growing number of exegetes make use of treatises on classical rhetoric as an aid toward analyzing certain aspects of biblical texts, especially those of the New Testament.

The new rhetoric adopts a more general point of view. It aims to be something more than a simple catalogue of stylistic figures, oratorical stratagems and various kinds of discourse. It investigates what makes a particular use of language effective and successful in the communication of conviction. It seeks to be "realistic" in the sense of not wanting to limit itself to an analysis that is purely formal. It takes due account of the actual situation of debate or discussion. It studies style and composition as means of acting upon an audience. To this end, it benefits from contributions made of late in other areas of knowledge such as linguistics, semiotics, anthropology and sociology.

Applied to the Bible, the new rhetoric aims to penetrate to the very core of the language of revelation precisely as persuasive religious discourse and to measure the impact of such discourse in the social context of the communication thus begun.

## A. Limitations

Rhetorical analysis have some limitations. Basically synchronic in nature, it cannot claim to be an independent method which would be sufficient by itself. Its application to biblical texts raises several questions. Did the authors of these texts belong to the more educated levels of society? To what extent did they follow the rules of rhetoric in their work of composition? What kind of rhetoric is relevant for the analysis of any given text: Greco-Roman or Semitic? Is there sometimes the risk of attributing to certain biblical texts a rhetorical structure that is really too sophisticated? These questions--and there are others--ought not in any way cast doubt upon the use of this kind of analysis; they simply suggest that it is not something to which recourse ought be had without some measure of discernment.

### *1.3.2.2 Narrative Analysis*

Narrative analysis offers a method for understanding and communicating the biblical message which corresponds to the form of story and personal witness. It is particularly attentive to those elements in the text which have to do with plot, characterization, and the point of view of the narrator. It studies how a text tells a story so as to engage the reader in its 'narrative world' and the system of values contained therein. The characteristic feature of this type of analysis is that it looks at the whole unit. The doublets repetitions, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the translated text are included in the whole. They enable us to understand the variety and balance in the text and they enrich our knowledge of the text as a whole. One can thus create a theology which can unite the text as a whole.

Several methods introduce a distinction between *real author* and *implied author*, *real reader* and *implied reader*. The *real author* is the person who actually composed the story. By *implied author* one means the image of the author which the text progressively creates in the course of the reading (with his or her own culture, character, inclinations faith, etc.). The *real reader* is any person who has access to the text--from those who first read it or heard it read, right down to those who read or hear it today. By *implied reader* one means the reader which the text presupposes and in effect creates, the one who is capable of performing the mental and affective operations necessary for entering into the narrative



world of the text and responding to it in the way envisaged by the real author through the instrumentality of the implied author.

Narrative analysis involves a new way of understanding how a text works. While the historical-critical method considers the text as a "window" giving access to one or other period (not only to the situation which the story relates but also to that of the community for whom the story is told), narrative analysis insists that the text also functions as a "mirror" in the sense that it projects a certain image--a "narrative world"--which exercises an influence upon readers' perceptions in such a way as to bring them to adopt certain values rather than others.

The usefulness of narrative analysis for the exegesis of the Bible is clear. It is well suited to the narrative character which so many biblical texts display. It can facilitate the transition, often so difficult, from the meaning of the text in its historical context (the proper object of the historical-critical method) to its significance for the reader of today. On the other hand, the distinction between the real author and the implied author does tend to make problems of interpretation somewhat more complex.

### *1.3.2.3 Semiotic Analysis*

Ranged among the methods identified as synchronic, those namely which concentrate on the study of the biblical text as it comes before the reader in its final state, is semiotic analysis. This has experienced a notable development in certain quarters over the last 20 years. Originally known by the more general term *structuralism*, this method can claim as forefather the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who at the beginning of the present century worked out the theory according to which all language is a system of relationships obeying fixed laws. Semiotics is based upon three main principles or presuppositions:

--The principle of immanence: Each text forms a unit of meaning complete in itself; the analysis considers the entire text but only the text it does not look to any date "external" to the text such as the author, the audience, any events it describes or what might have been its process of composition.

--The principle of the structure of meaning: There is no meaning given except in and through relationship, in particular the relationship of "difference" the analysis of the text consists then in establishing the network of relationships (of opposition, confirmation, etc.) between the various elements; out of this the meaning of the text is constructed.

--The principle of the grammar of the text: Each text follows a "grammar," that is to say, a certain number of rules or structures; in the collection of sentences that we call discourse there are various levels, each of which has its own distinct grammar.

The overall content of a text can be analyzed at three different levels.

--The narrative level. Here one studies in the story the transformations which move the action from the initial to the final state. Within the course of the narrative, the analysis seeks to retrace the different phases, logically bound to each other, which mark the transformation from one state to another. In each of these phases it establishes the relationships between the "roles" played by the "actants" which determine the various stages of development and bring about transformation.

--The level of discourse. The analysis here consists of three operations: (a) the fixing and classification of figures, that is to say, the elements of meaning in a text (actors, times, places), (b) the tracking of the course of each figure in the text in order to determine just how the text uses each one; (c) inquiry into the thematic value of the figures. This last operation consists in discerning "in the name of what" (= what value) the figures follow such a path in the text determined in this way.

--The logico-semantic level. This is the so-called deep level. It is also the most abstract. It proceeds from the assumption that certain forms of logic and meaning underlie the narrative and discursive organization of all discourse. The analysis at this level consists in identifying the logic which governs the basic articulations of the narrative and figurative flow of a text. To achieve this, recourse is often had to an instrument called the "semiotic square" (*carre semiotique*), a figure which makes use of the relationships between two "contrary" terms and two "contradictory" terms (for example, black and white; white and non-white; black and not-black).

(Fr. Vadakkal told that we should give application. That means we can explain our method which we used for Thesis)