

MTP/HB Intro to the Hebrew Bible Hermeneutics & Exegesis

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a word used a great deal within the walls of a seminary but rarely is heard or discussed outside of academia. Yet, it is an activity in which humans are constantly engaged. Simply put, hermeneutics is about interpretation. Whether we are reading the newspaper or watching a movie or listening to a conversation, we must always interpret what we read, see, or hear. In biblical studies, then, hermeneutics is about the interpretation of the bible. More specifically, hermeneutics is an interpretive framework through which biblical texts are understood.

The key is to seek a consistent hermeneutic when interpreting the HB. Your “hermeneutic” is the interpretive framework that you apply to each text you read. You should be able to identify/define the hermeneutic that you use. This interpretive framework, then, is how we determine which texts contain important concepts and faithful words that can shape our 21st century faith. It is also how we determine which texts are so bound by their socio-historical human perspective, that they are no longer directly applicable to our lives. In other words, my hermeneutic is how I determine which stories teach lessons that I should “go and do likewise” and which ones are teaching me what not to do. For example, how does one deal with the fact that in the HB we find texts that support the idea of killing all the “Canaanites” and we find texts that charge us to make justice happen, love passionately as God loves, and to be God’s images in the world (Micah 6:8, Davison translation)? Which one should we hold onto, and which one do we need to argue against?

One's "hermeneutic" is grounded in, and shaped by, one's "reading location". That is to say, who we are influences how we read and interpret a biblical text (or any text¹). Our identity shapes our perspectives/values/beliefs. In the reading by Lee, you encountered a scholar who is aware of how her "reading location" affects her hermeneutic (post-colonial), and she acknowledges this influence on her reading/teaching of a text. This is a new approach among biblical scholars. For the first decades of critical study of the bible, scholars often assumed and/or claimed that their reading was neutral and objective. Some of the biggest names in Hebrew Bible scholarship (e.g., Gunkel, von Rad, etc.) never would have opened their articles/books by identifying their "reading location", even though they most certainly had one. With the rise of Feminist and Liberationist approaches to studying the bible (and the subsequent other approaches like: Womanist, Mujerista, etc.), one of the key interpretive moves was to recognize that not only did biblical texts have ideological assumptions but so also did their interpreters. Those employing these new approaches were upfront in naming that they were not neutral or objective readers; they were reading through their particular hermeneutic and often were reading counter to the ideological claims both of the biblical texts and of those who had interpreted the texts over the centuries. While some were quick to accuse these new interpreters had an "agenda" behind their exegesis, their efforts uncovered the fallacy of any neutral or objective reading.

Recognition of the influence one's reading location has on the interpretation of a text does not mean that it is no longer important to do critical study of the bible. Utilizing the recognized methods of biblical exegesis is necessary in order to understand as much as possible about the "who/what/when/where" of a text. Once we acknowledge our own reading location, and the biases that come with it, we do the investigative work and discover as much as possible about a passage. One key characteristic of this new approach to interpretation is a "hermeneutic of suspicion", which means to openly question the "truth claims" made in a text, particularly looking at assumptions behind the

¹ "Text" is used here to include both written and spoken words, as well as behaviors and other media of communication. Not only do we interpret written material, but we also interpret speech, body language, situations, etc.

text and for those voices that are not heard (the marginalized). For instance, in the tenth commandment, why does it only prohibit coveting “your neighbor’s wife” and not also “your neighbor’s husband”? What does this say about women’s rights/sexuality? To whom is this commandment really directed? Etc. We will continue to ask such questions as we journey through the Hebrew Bible this semester.

In an effort for full disclosure, I will share my hermeneutic for reading the HB (and all of the bible). As one who seeks to follow the “way of Jesus”, my hermeneutic is defined by an image/understanding of the Divine displayed in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, I draw from what Jesus taught were the 2 greatest commandments, which come from Deut 6 and Lev 19: love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as you love yourself.² Thus, when I read the texts that support killing all of the Canaanites, I interpret it as not teaching me to love God or to love my neighbor. This does not mean that I can ignore or “throw-away” this text; rather, I now must do serious study to understand why this message is in the HB. In the text from Micah 6:8, though, I find it to be consistent with my hermeneutic. I still do not get to take it “literally” and must do in-depth study as well, but it is more likely to be something I will preach for rather than against. [If this does not make sense, please e-mail me your questions, and I will try to answer them.] Each of us must identify and consistently apply our own hermeneutic. [This week’s Discussion Board Assignment will include an opportunity for you to consider your particular “reading location”.]

What is exegesis?

The basic definition of “exegesis” is “to draw out meaning from (a text, painting, etc.)”. Although most people first encounter this word in biblical studies, this practice is not unique to biblical interpretation. Rather, in order to understand the world around us, we are doing exegesis. For example, when I am reading a newspaper (paper/digital), I must draw out meaning from the words that the author composed. What kind of text is

² I do want to name that my hermeneutic is deeply influenced by the “hermeneutic of suspicion” employed by feminists, womanists, and other liberationist interpreters of the HB.

this (e.g., news report, editorial, etc.)? What is this article trying to tell me? Who wrote it? When was it written? Where was it written, or at least, where was the author when she/he wrote the text? How do the words used help to construct meaning in the text? From whose perspective is the author writing, or what are the ideological aspects of the text? This last question is especially true in reading an editorial, but even a so-called "news report" is written from a particular perspective. The same kinds of questions are involved when I see a piece of art or when I am listening to a speech/presentation. Even in a casual conversation with another person, exegesis is necessary for the two of you to understand what the other is saying. Exegesis is a process that, for the most part, we engage in subconsciously.

If a person reads a biblical passage, exegesis is taking place; however, usually the reader is not aware of the process. Often, the reader will say that she/he is just reading what the text "says", but a text "says" nothing. An author "says" something in the words on the page, but it is only when a reader tries to understand what the words mean that meaning is made. It is a dance among the author, text, and audience. Our purpose is to do intentional biblical exegesis, to be aware of what questions we are asking and how we find those answers (if possible). Some would say that biblical exegesis is a "scientific process", in that I should be able to follow the steps by which an interpretation was developed by another interpreter. There are different methods employed in exegesis, each attempting to answer different questions and to consider different aspects of the text. I like to think of the exegetical methods as different lenses that we use in "photographing" the text; each one brings out a different characteristic of our "subject". Then, we make a composite picture of the text that includes what each lens helped us "see". The more lenses we use render a deeper understanding of the text. I know that was a long metaphor, perhaps too long, but it is one way of approaching exegesis that I have found helpful. More will be said about the different methods (lenses) below and in the coming weeks.

My mentor, Dr. Toni Craven, describes exegesis as "having a love affair with the text."

This, too, can be a useful way to understand exegesis. If the idea of a love affair with the biblical text is troubling, one could also use the metaphor of developing a relationship with the text. In either image, the basic concept applies. At the beginning of any relationship, we try to get to know the other person as best we can. We ask questions (e.g., Where are you from? What do you do?) to learn more about this new person. As the relationship develops, we start to ask questions that are at a deeper level (e.g., What do you think about global warming?). With each answer to the questions, the relationship matures, and we start to feel like we “really” know the other person. When we do biblical exegesis, we are trying to learn all we can about the text under study by asking similar questions. When we have done a thorough exegesis of a passage, we know that text at a much deeper level than when we began. I must confess that sometimes the “love affair” with the text does not work; we may end-up disliking what we learn about the text. However, the effort has not been useless because, without exegeting the passage, we would not have been able to make this evaluation. [This is where one’s “hermeneutic” comes into play again.]

Certainly, there are other metaphors for exegesis; the above are just two that have been particularly helpful for me. What is most important for biblical exegesis is to remember that we are making an informed and intentional attempt to draw out meaning from a biblical text in order to develop **an** interpretation. Please note the emphasis on “an” interpretation. There is never just one possible interpretation of a biblical text (just like there is never one interpretation of a painting); one’s interpretation is based on the methods employed and the one doing the exegesis. Since we never come to a text as a “blank slate”, we must allow for different people to come to different conclusions about a biblical text. While there can be multiple interpretations of a text, that does not mean that all interpretations are appropriate and based on exegesis. For instance, it is not acceptable to claim that a text “means” something that the words do not support, or to decide what a text means and then force that meaning onto the text (even if exegetical methods reveal something very different). You may have already recognized that this last example represents

“eisegesis”, to read meaning **into** a text. While we cannot do a purely objective reading of the text (eisegesis is always lurking at the edges), using exegetical methods is a way of trying to overcome our biases, to the extent that this is possible.

Obstacles to Our Quest

While we are engaged in exegesis every day of our lives, most of this exercise entails interpreting current events, recent writings, living people, etc. Even if we are exegeting something from the past, usually we know, or can easily find, information about the author, when it was created, the culture in which it was created, etc. For example, a play by Shakespeare was written 5 centuries ago in a different country, but we have a wealth of information about Elizabethan England and even information about Shakespeare himself. There are still certain obstacles to overcome: Elizabethan English vs American English (or the interpreter’s native language), 16th century vs 21st century, etc. However, when we turn to the Hebrew Bible, the number of obstacles that stand between us and the texts are numerous and sizable.

First, the texts were written in Hebrew, a language very different from English or any of the other “romance” languages. It has a different alphabet, no verb tenses (at least not as traditionally understood), reads from right to left, and the earliest manuscripts are written without any vowels. Non-Hebrew readers must rely on translations, which are themselves interpretations based on the choices of the translator(s) in rendering the words from Hebrew to the target language. Even for those who read biblical Hebrew, the translation of the ancient language is challenging at best and typically based on Hebrew manuscripts that date to the 9th century CE (except for what has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls), which have vowel points that were added rather late in the transmission process.

Another obstacle is distance. Even if, conservatively speaking, the bulk of the Hebrew Bible was written/compiled around the 4th century BCE, our best complete manuscripts

(the Masoretic Text) are 12 centuries removed from their earliest composition. Add to this the long oral transmission of many Hebrew Bible texts, and we are looking at an even greater distance between us and the original storytellers/authors. Distance involves more than just time; it also involves the distance between locations. Most scholars would agree that the bulk of the Hebrew Bible was composed/compiled in different parts of the Ancient Near East, namely: Egypt, Judea, and Babylon. The geographies of these areas are vastly different than, for example, what is found in the US. For example, the Cisjordan (aka: Palestine, Israel, Canaan, etc.) is approximately 85 miles wide, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, and 150 miles long, from Syria/Lebanon to Egypt. Within that small area, you find beaches, mountains, desert, foothills, and a lush river valley. The Dead Sea, for example, is hard to envision because it is unique; the presence of such a body of water was surely a puzzle for the ancients, so they told the story of how Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed as a way of explaining its existence.

Cultural differences present another obstacle. From what we can glean about Ancient Israel, the societal structures were very different. Depending on the time period, life was either built around a family unit (the *bet'ab*) that had to be self-sustaining in a subsistence economy or around an urban center (e.g., Jerusalem) that provided markets and other opportunities so that a household did not have to produce its own food, clothing, etc. The household was based on an elder male and his wife, or wives, and their children. If their children were adults, then the sons and their wives, with their families, would be part of the household, while the daughters would go to live with their husbands' families (patrilocal marriage). This household could also include elderly parents, orphaned nieces and nephews, and, depending on the wealth of the family, slaves. The household did allow for some mutual respect for women and men (everyone was important for the survival of the family), but the authority still rested with males (patriarchy). The move to a more urban society meant that authority moved from the household to the public arena. Since women needed to stay in the home (due to pregnancy, nursing, etc.), the society became even more heavily

patriarchal. While there are still real vestiges of patriarchy in the 21st century, this way of living is foreign to many, along with the values, beliefs, and practices of these ancients.

When we approach the Hebrew Bible and attempt to interpret its texts, we must seek to overcome the obstacles and recognize that the communities behind these texts saw the world very differently than we do. A pre-scientific and pre-industrialized existence is radically unlike our own. While our 21st century values and ethics may cringe at some of the practices described or views present in the Hebrew Bible, we must first seek to understand the when, where, and why of these elements before we pass judgment. Exegetical methods help us to overcome these obstacles in a reasoned and intentional way. Archaeology, Sociology, and Anthropology help us understand aspects of the text and develop theories about the backdrops for the texts and the ideas expressed in them.

Exegetical Methods

Different exegetical methods focus on one of three possible “places” around the received text: behind the text, on the actual text, or on the reader of the text. Those that focus at what lies behind the received text include: Historical Criticism, Textual Criticism, Form Criticism, Source Criticism, and Redaction Criticism. The methods that focus on the received text are: Canonical Criticism, Literary Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, Sociological Criticism, and Ideological Criticism (including: Feminist, Womanist, Mujerista, Liberationist, Queer³, etc.). If one wants to focus on the reader of the received text, that is usually done with Reader-Response Criticism, which argues that the text means nothing; meaning rests with the reader or in the dance between the text and its reader. Scholars disagree about whether this should be considered a “true” exegetical method because of its inherent danger of eisegesis. I would say that

³ This is the terminology used by biblical scholars who self-identify as LGBTQ and are doing exegesis through this particular lens.

Reader-Response Criticism should be either a prelude to the other exegetical methods or the postlude to them, but it should not be used alone, if one is attempting a scholarly understanding and interpretation of a biblical text.

In the weeks ahead, we will be employing a variety of exegetical methods, or “lenses” as we seek to learn more about the Hebrew Bible. For now, though, I have provided brief definitions/descriptions of exegetical methods to get us thinking about the questions each of them seeks to answer. [The piece by Newsome also provides helpful information.]

Textual Criticism: This method attempts to find/uncover the most original text of a biblical passage. It seeks to answer text-critical questions that emerge when two or more manuscripts disagree on the proper wording of a passage of scripture. Using observations, textual witnesses and certain criteria, this method would come to a conclusion on these problems.

Historical Criticism: This method attempts to discern the historical context out of which a passage of scripture emerged. Every text claims a historical setting/date, but most scholars believe that many, if not all, of the biblical materials were written much later than the dates they claim. This method looks for historical “clues” within the text to see if they reveal answers to the following questions: When? Who? Where?

Form Criticism: This method begins with the assumption that many, if not most, of the biblical materials were handed down orally before being put into writing. In an oral culture, certain forms/structures were developed within different settings for particular types of communication. Storytellers and others could use these forms, and the audience would understand what kind of information was being conveyed. This method searches for identifiable oral

forms/structures present within a biblical passage and then discerns what this “known” form would have added to the audience’s understanding of the message.

Source Criticism: This method is built on the scholarly argument that the bible was not written by one person or one group of people. Rather, the bible is a compilation of written sources that existed from an earlier time. Source Critics have identified these sources and even attempted to do Historical Criticism on them. This method seeks to identify the sources (if any) within a passage and to gain insight into the text, based on what is believed to be the setting/perspective of each source.

Redaction Criticism: This method examines the work of the editors of the biblical text. How were different sources combined? Is there evidence of editorial changes/transitions? Why were these stories put together in this particular way?

Canonical Criticism: This method believes that the final form of the canon is intentional and, thus, must play a role in one’s understanding of a particular biblical text. Canonical Critics look at how a passage’s placement within the canon impacts how it is read. Also, this method looks at how a particular text connects with the rest of the canon.

Literary/Rhetorical Criticism: This method treats the bible as any other piece of literature/written work. It brings to bear on the biblical texts the issues of secular Literary Criticism. Issues of genre, plot, setting, characters, imagery, poetic devices, wordplays, etc. are considered, as appropriate for the passage under study.

Sociological Criticism: Drawing upon the knowledge gleaned from the Social

Sciences, this method examines the text to discern the societal structure(s) described/assumed within it. This method looks at issues of customs, government, civic arrangements, etc. in order to see how these items influence possible interpretations of the passage.

Ideological Criticism: This method starts with the assumption that the biblical texts are propaganda, and thus it seeks to uncover the explicit/implicit ideology within a text. What does the text assume is “normal/abnormal” or “good/bad”? What image of the Divine is portrayed here? What does the text want the reader to believe/do about a situation/issue?

Concluding Thoughts

While some may see exegesis as a chore, I hope you will come to view the process as a challenge and opportunity. It can be as exciting as solving a mystery, going on a treasure hunt, working a jigsaw puzzle, or building a legal case (for all the “Law & Order” or “CSI” fans out there). I confess that my love of exegesis will not be shared by many people, but be careful; it can be contagious!