

Faith Pulpit

The Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic

Communication involves at least two parties in its process: the communicator who delivers the message and the recipient. Both individuals must follow some basic principles for communication to occur: the communicator must express the message clearly, and the recipient must understand the communicator's meaning in its context. If individuals follow these rules for communication, how much more significant is the practice of attempting to understand correctly what God has recorded for them in His Word? This attempt at accurate comprehension is the study of interpretation, also known as hermeneutics. Biblical fundamentalists should be committed to an accurate understanding of God's Word, and this understanding begins with accurate hermeneutics. The purpose of this article is to discuss the grammatical-historical hermeneutic (1) by distinguishing it from the allegorical hermeneutic, (2) by tracing the history of those two methods up to the Reformation, and (3) by explaining the basic principles of the grammatical-historical method.

Grammatical-Historical vs. Allegorical

Throughout the history of the church, there have been primarily two competing schools of thought on the proper method of interpretation. One is the grammatical-historical or literal method, and the other is the allegorical method. A literal method seeks to understand the words of the passage in their normal, natural, and customary meaning within the context. This method searches for the intended meaning of the Biblical author. According to Rolland McCune, "In this method, interpretation consists in finding the meaning of words according to grammar, syntax, and cultural setting and in correlation with the rest of Scripture. In this normal or plain interpretation, the Bible is best allowed to speak for itself."¹ An allegorical method seeks to understand the words of the passage in a deeper, more obscure way; it searches for the spiritual meaning that is beyond the intent of the author. According to Roy Zuck, "Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or a secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text."²

The following two passages demonstrate the difference between these two hermeneutical systems. In Genesis 2:10–14, Moses recorded that a river left the Garden of Eden and formed four rivers, which he named and then gave additional details concerning them. A literal interpretation is that Moses described a physical garden and rivers, but an allegorical interpretation is that the river of Eden signified goodness, Eden signified wisdom, and the four rivers signified four character qualities.³ In Leviticus 11:7–15, Moses prescribed the food laws for Israel, in which he listed a number of animals that Israel could and could not eat. A literal interpretation is that Moses prescribed positive and negative food laws. Examples of animals that were not to be eaten were the swine (v. 7), the eagle (v. 13), and the raven (v. 15). An allegorical interpretation recognized this prohibition, but held that there was a “spiritual reference” as well. The “spiritual reference” to these birds of prey was that the Israelites should not unite with human thieves.⁴

History of the Two Methods

In the debate between these two interpretative systems, Origen (ca. 185–254) is a key figure in the history of the allegorical method. He recognized that the Bible often contained difficult or obscure passages and, therefore, sought for meaning on a secondary or lower level.⁵ He thought Scripture had three layers, similar to an individual’s three-part existence of body, soul, and spirit. Each of these layers demonstrated the increased maturity of the believer.⁶ Although he recognized the literal, moral, and allegorical meanings of Scripture, Origen believed that the allegorical was the most prominent.⁷

The literal method also had its adherents during this period. Interpreters from the school of Antioch of Syria championed the literal method but also employed typology, in which one component in the Old Testament foreshadowed its greater reality in the New Testament.⁸ Augustine (354–430) contributed to the hermeneutical debate with his fourfold method of interpretation. This process grew into the following steps:

- the literal understanding,
- the rationale of the passage,
- the harmony between the Old and New Testaments, and
- the allegorical meaning.⁹

John Cassian (ca. 360–435) put this fourfold approach into poetry, which can be translated as follows:

The letter teaches events [i.e., what God and our ancestors did],

What you believe is [taught] by allegory,

The moral [teaching] is what you do,

Where you are heading is [taught] by analogy.¹⁰

During the Middle Ages both schools of thought had representatives. In line with the allegorical method, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), a prominent voice for the Roman Catholic Church, recognized meaning both in the words of Scripture but also in the objects of Scripture.¹¹ On the other hand, Hugh of St. Victor (1097–1141) accentuated the literal hermeneutic but also stressed that interpretation should agree with the view held by the church. This practice, he asserted, would safeguard the church from error. As the Middle Ages progressed, the influence of the church on the interpretative process increased to the point where the Catholic Church became the official authority on interpretation.¹²

The Reformation saw the rise of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–64) and their opposition to the allegorical method. Although Luther first used the method, he later rejected it, holding that the interpreter should seek the literal meaning in the passage and should understand words within their context. Luther also believed that the spirituality of the individual and the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life played a role in interpretation. John Calvin also employed the grammatical-historical interpretation, in which he stressed searching for the author's meaning and understanding of words in their context. He believed that interpretations must correlate with all of Scripture, that the interpreter should be godly, and that the Holy Spirit had a role in interpretation. The Roman Catholic Church countered this emphasis by condemning any understanding that was not from the church and stated that such interpreters deserved legal punishment.¹³ Gregg Allison correctly states, "Thus, a major point of separation between Protestants and Catholics during the Reformation was the interpretation of Scripture."¹⁴ Authoritative meaning for the Reformers rested in the text, whereas for the Catholic Church meaning rested in the text and the church's proclamation about the text.

Basic Principles of Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic

The grammatical-historical method comprises several aspects. In grammatical interpretation, the interpreter seeks to understand the meaning of the words, syntax, and grammar of a passage. Because the Biblical languages are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, interpreters stress the importance of knowing these languages. The text of Scripture is composed of words, which necessitates comprehending their meaning, but this meaning is in the intention of the original author and the surrounding context. Seeking the author's intent is a vital key to accurate understanding. This goal places a restraint on the interpreter in which he seeks to draw out ("exegete") the author's meaning instead of reading into the text ("eisegesis") his or her own meaning. The interpreter will also consider broader contexts such as the surrounding chapters, the book, or related passages to gain further understanding.

The historical setting of a passage also provides assistance in the interpretative process. In this feature, the reader seeks to understand the text in its historical context or "life setting." Topics that the student considers are the individuals in the text, their theological understanding, their culture, their geography, and the surrounding nations that relate to the particular context. Kevin Bauder gives a key principle related to this process when he states, "Historical passages tell us what happened, but by themselves

they do not tell us what ought to happen. On the other hand, teaching passages are designed to instruct us in what to do.”¹⁵

Comparing Scripture with Scripture is another skill that is significant in Biblical understanding. This practice is founded on the truth that the Bible does not contradict itself because it is inspired by an all-knowing (omniscient) God (2 Tim. 3:16–17) who never makes mistakes. In light of these truths, the Bible is without error (John 17:17) in the original manuscripts and therefore never contradicts itself. The interpreter seeks to compare Scripture with Scripture in order to avoid holding a view in one passage that contradicts the teaching in another passage. This practice of comparison is often expressed as, “The best commentary on Scripture is Scripture itself.”

For example, one should not conclude from James 2:24 that salvation is by works when Ephesians 2:8–9 clearly denies that misunderstanding. The interpreter must reconcile the meaning of these two passages, which in this case is that salvation is by faith without works, but works are a demonstration of faith. This principle of correlation presupposes that the interpreter knows Bible doctrine. Another factor in this discussion is that clearer passages shed light on difficult passages. Bauder points out, “The trick is determining which passages are clear and which passages are obscure. In view of this difficulty, I would like to restate a principle: a passage that can mean only one thing should be used to interpret a passage that could possibly mean several things.”¹⁶ Another guideline is that passages that specifically address the issue carry greater weight in interpretation than those passages that merely refer to the issue.¹⁷

A common objection to a literal interpretation by those opposed to it is that since the Bible uses figurative language, the literal interpreter is not consistent. For example, when John the Baptist refers to Christ as “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), no exegete thinks that John is saying that Christ is a four-footed animal. This argument against a literal interpretation demonstrates a misunderstanding of its method. When an author uses a figure of speech, he is drawing a colorful analogy between two objects or concepts; therefore, the reader must know the literal meaning of the objects or concepts and the analogy between them. In the example of John 1:29, one must have a literal understanding of Christ, a lamb, and the role of the lamb in the sacrificial system in order to grasp the analogy John is making. Zuck correctly states, “Figurative language then is not antithetical to literal interpretation; it is a part of it.”¹⁸

Choices are significant, and this fact is no less true in interpretation. The ramifications of past choices still affect theology to the present era. The hermeneutical choices that interpreters make affect their understanding of God and His will for them and have ramifications for future generations. Biblical fundamentalists of today would be wise to avoid the errors of past generations by meticulous application of the literal hermeneutic in their preaching and practice. Because of who God is and our desire to know Him deeply, the study of the Bible is a sacred trust. This study begins with

hermeneutics.

Works Cited

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4. *The Epistle of Barnabas*, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, rev. ed. (1885; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1:143.
5. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 36.
6. Greg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 164. Allison is drawing from Origen, *First Principles*, 4.1.11 (from the Latin ed.), in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 4:359.
7. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 36.
8. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 165–67.
9. *Ibid.*, 167–68.
10. John Cassian, “Cassian’s Conferences,” 14, chap. 8, in *Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 11:437; as cited by Allison, *Historical Theology*, 169. See also Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 40. Robert Grant provides the following translation: “The letter shows us what God and our fathers did; The allegory shows where our faith is hid; The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life; The analogy shows us where we end our strife” (Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, rev. ed. [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963], 119).
11. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 43.
12. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 169–72.
13. *Ibid.*, 173–77.
14. *Ibid.*, 177.
15. Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 13–14.
16. *Ibid.*, 15.
17. *Ibid.*, 16.
18. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 147.

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