

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

“Biblical scholars believe a biblical text must be interpreted according to the language in which it was written, its historical context, the identity and purpose of the author, its literary nature, and the situation to which it was originally addressed.” From Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary

The Bible is written by an Oriental people, and the Hebrew thought form differs in several ways from the Greek thought form with which we are familiar. This puts us on a different track from the Biblical writers when we read the scriptures. If we can shift mental gears as much as possible - learn to think like Hebrews - we will have a greater understanding and appreciation of the scriptures we read.

VOCABULARY

As *Greek* thinkers, our vocabulary is abstract. Words like stubborn and desire, for example:

The *Hebrew* speaks in concrete word pictures. To be stubborn is to the Hebrew mind to be Stiff necked. The Prophets often called Israel a Stiff-necked people. Desire is “like a thirst that can’t be quenched.” Our tendency is to take words literally. The Hebrew looks at the meaning behind the words. He sees the picture the words convey.

CONCERNS

The *Greek* mind wants to know origins. We are scientific. Our questions are How and Why? (How do I know there is a God?)

The *Hebrew* just proclaims facts as he sees them. The Creation speaks of a Creator, so he assumes there is a God. His question is What? What is the meaning of this? What does this tell me about God?

CONTRASTS IN PHILOSOPHY

As *Greek* thinkers we want things to be logical. We like things to move from A to B to C. We’re definitive.

The *Hebrew* is comfortable with mystery.

HISTORICAL PRINCIPAL

Knowing the historical times and circumstances of a text is important for the *Greek*.

The *Hebrews* believed that God was active in and through their history.

PURPOSE

It’s essential to remember that the purpose of the Bible is RELIGIOUS. Don’t ask scientific questions of this book. That’s not its purpose.

LITERARY FORMS

There are many kinds of literature in the Bible - histories, poetry, reporting, stories, etc. In Judges 4 and in Judges 5:6-18, the same story is told in reporting and poetry. In Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, the vehicle that carries the story is poetry. In Isaiah 11:6-9, the vehicle is prophecy.

INTERPRETIVE PRINCIPLES (HERMENEUTICS)

What we bring to Scripture from our background, our education, our tradition determines to a greater degree than we like to admit what we draw from our reading. In short, our presuppositions too often get in the way.

The Bible is an eastern (Hebrew) form of religious literature and in order for us, who have a western (Greek) mindset, to properly understand the Bible we need to make a major mental shift from:

West ----- to ----- East
Greek ----- to ----- Hebrew

When we read the Bible we need to read it in its own terms, not imposing upon it the thought forms of our scientific, technological, rational western way of thinking.

Some characteristics of:

<u>HEBREW Thinking</u>	<u>GREEK Thinking</u>
Holistic (concerned with totality)	Analytical (concerned with parts)
Poetic	Scientific
Asks "Who?" and "What?"	Asks "How?" and "Why?"
Asks "Meaning?"	Asks "Cause?"
Asks "Destiny?"	Asks "Origins?"
Feelings/intuition	Thought
Imagination	Reason
Supernatural/mystery	Natural
Theology	Technology
Describes	Defines
Concrete/picture language	Abstract
Corporate	Individual
Figurative/Symbolic	Literal
Particular/incarnational	General
Reality	Ideal
Involved	Detached
Dynamic	Static
When you are able to perceive:	When you are preoccupied and "hung-up" with:
the Faith	the Framework or Form
the Message	the Medium
the "Cargo"	the "Vehicle"
Of biblical expression, you are "thinking Hebrew".	Of biblical expression, you probably have limited yourself to "thinking Greek".

THE EASTERN VS THE WESTERN

The following represents a suggested list of attitude and value difference between the East and West. These differences represent a fact of life - not a value judgment! These were compiled by Rev. Tran Binh Trong, Vietnamese Apostolate, Richmond, Virginia.

EAST

We live in time.

We are always at rest.

We are passive.

We like to contemplate.

We accept the world as it is.

We live in peace with nature.

Religion is our first love.

We delight to think about the meaning of life.

We believe in the freedom of silence.

We lapse into meditation.

Our love is mute.

We try to conceal it from the world.

Self-denial is the secret of our survival.

We are taught from the cradle to want less and less.

The love of life is our ideal.

We glorify in austerity and renunciation.

Poverty is to us a badge of spiritual elevation.

In the sunset years of our life we renounce the world and prepare ourselves for the hereafter.

WEST

We live in space.

We are always on the move.

We are aggressive.

We like to act.

We try to change it according to our blueprint.

We try to impose our will on her.

Science is our passion.

We delight in Physics.

We believe in freedom of speech.

We strive for articulation.

Our love is vocal.

We delight in showing it to others.

Self-assertiveness is the key to our success.

We are urged every day to want more and more.

Conquest is our goal.

We emphasize gracious living and enjoyment.

Poverty is a sign of degradation.

We retire to enjoy the fruits of our labour.