

A Biblical Hermeneutical Study on Literal Interpretation

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The aim of this research is to discover the fundamental principle of literal interpretation as it pertains to biblical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a discipline that establishes principles or techniques for interpreting the meaning of a particular author's work. Over time, there have been numerous contradictions in the interpretation of the Bible in the field of hermeneutics. This study specifically focuses on biblical hermeneutics and identifies the principles of literal interpretation. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, with data analysis conducted using Miles and Huberman's theory. The study reveals three principles of biblical hermeneutics, namely genre context, historical context, and grammatical context. The principles are useful for interpreting the Bible according to a literal interpretation. Moreover, hermeneutics is essential for Bible interpreters to objectively determine the meaning of a text, given its divine inspiration and significance. Ignoring this guide can lead to flawed theories since hermeneutics is the science of biblical interpretation. Previous studies indicate that having an open and curious mindset assists people in comprehending and following the Scripture.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Biblical Hermeneutics, Literal Interpretation, Scripture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics is a science that establishes principles or methods for interpreting the meaning of an individual author (Osborne: 5). The word hermeneutics is derived from Hermes in Greek mythology. The deity of messengers, Hermes, brought messages from the gods to mortals. Hermes was given the job of translating these transmissions into something that people might understand (Alanka, 2015). Hermeneutics poses the classic conflict between explanation and understanding (Smit, 2015). This study focuses on biblical hermeneutics throughout history in order to identify the principles of literal interpretation.

There have been many contradictions in the process of interpreting the Bible throughout the history of hermeneutics. The study of classical literature, particularly the stories of Homer and other Greek legends, was emphasized in the Hellenistic educational system, where the history of the Alexandrian school's allegory partly originates. Hellenistic studies prompted pagans to reinterpret these fables using Platonic and Stoic assumptions about reality, reimagining the legends as allegories containing deeper philosophical truths (Slade, 2019). The allegorical approach historically developed in Alexandria to "properly" understand Homer, and a little later

in Palestine and Alexandria to “properly” understand the Old Testament so that it might be interpreted as a prophecy of Christ or the coming reign of God (Bloomfield, 1972). Jewish and Christian scholars used allegory to win over-educated Hellenists in Alexandria. This approach made their religious texts more respectable since Hellenistic philosophy was entrenched at the time. With everything from Scripture having symbolic significance, scholars like Philo and Irenaeus were able to use apologetics to convert local Alexandrian Greeks to Judaism. Philo’s symbolism inspired the Alexandrian Christian tradition’s development of allegorical reading (B. Lee, 2015).

Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C - A.D 40) interprets the biblical writings from the same point of view, emphasizing that the ability of a person to prioritize their love for God and understand the relativity of the material world determines the quality of their existence (Decock: 3). The ideas from Greek philosophy and Jewish interpretive traditions that are used to build the allegorical meanings throughout the reading serve as both the method and the outcome of this inquiry. According to the extent of its own spiritual development, the soul can recognize itself as in a mirror in these allegorical interpretations. In the allegorical process, Philo explains the same events in a more profound manner rather than attempting to introduce an alternative interpretation of the biblical narrative, which would simply serve as a sign of a different reality (Moreau: 67).

However, Clement of Alexandria (A.D 150-215) is arguing that the Bible alone is sufficient for understanding the Bible; he claims that no other source is required (Fayazi, 2017). Considers the symbolic nature of religious language among both barbarians and Greeks in the fifth book of his *Stromateis* before providing his own figurative interpretation of the Tabernacle from the Jewish Scriptures. Clement suggests that the Scriptures use parables, just as Jesus came to earth in human form. God presents Himself through human language and literature. Clement advocates for a spiritual interpretation of the Bible (Chase: 290). It initially appears that Christians must utilize symbolic interpretation in order to understand their sacred writings since he claims that the symbolic method is useful for conveying divine truths (Ward, 2017).

Moreover, Origen of Alexandria (A.D 185-254) asserts that the limitations are reflected in the Words. Because he believed that the best exegesis required a certain approach to theological and philosophical arguments, he used allegory. In Origen’s view, the instability that penetrates human thought, action, and politics is a major factor in the desire for stability that surpasses it (Kolbet, 2013). Origen believed that Scripture has multiple meanings beyond the literal one, including moral and spiritual meanings. Therefore, he argued that an allegorical interpretation is necessary to fully grasp its true significance (Brooke: 322). The hermeneutical task required a reason to expand its horizons, and look more closely at things outside simply itself and its incredible accomplishments, as well as beyond the ambitions and worries of people in general. By using allegory, one can develop a type of mental vision that goes beyond what the human intellect is capable of, without assuming to have found or understood the thing they were looking for.

Another argument comes from John Chrysostom. He was born in Antioch in about 345 A. D (Moxon, 1932). The greatest influence on Chrysostom’s development was Diodorus, who later became Bishop of Tarsus. He taught a literal interpretation of the Bible, not the allegorical interpretation followed by Chrysostom, which led to his famous sermons based on the Bible (Kingsmill: 148). Chrysostom embraced the Antiochene School's exegetical techniques and beliefs but opted for a moderate,

moral-based hermeneutic. With a solid background in rhetoric, he read writings effortlessly and understood their persuasive aspects. Chrysostom, regarding Scripture as more than just conveying static dogmatic concepts, interprets texts exclusively. Besides, he uses his expertise to elucidate the interactive functions of the author's expressions instead of technicalities (Thurén, 2001).

Theologians in Alexandria and Antioch were expedient hermeneutics, which means they used whatever exegetical practice (allegory, typology, literal, historical) provided them with the desired theology or interpretive conclusion (Slade, 2019).

Augustine of Hippo (A.D 354) presented another argument. Many of his works, particularly *The City of God* and *Confession*, provided the foundations for medieval thought and have long influenced society. He believed that the interpretation of the Bible should be guided by spiritual reality (mcgra, 2021). Augustine claims "where we have not clear proof from Scripture, human presumption must restrain itself. In the writings of orthodox men, I am free; to the Canonical Scriptures alone I owe unreserved assent. We must not be diverted from Scripture by any catena of opinions" (Moule: 501). He argues that love and faith should guide Bible interpretations. Two valid modes, literal and allegorical, depend on circumstance. Augustine confronted the Manicheans who rejected the Old Testament due to a too-literal interpretation. He distinguishes between literal and allegorical (or spiritual) readings of the Old Testament. He believes the Old Testament holds a spiritual sense which can only be fully understood with the guidance of the New Testament. It's like removing a veil that previously obscured the true meaning of the Old Testament, revealing it in the context of the New Testament (Mcgrath: 4). Many of his works, particularly *The City of God* and *Confession*, provided the foundations for medieval thought and have long influenced society.

In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas made significant contributions to Christianity in terms of Biblical interpretation. He claims that every interpretation of Scripture must be originally based on the literal sense. The human author's intended meaning is expressed in this literal sense. All of the writings possess his meaning since a writer expresses ideas through language (Shelton, 1974). Thomas Aquinas shows how Scripture reveals the significance of history in theology. God's participation in each event makes Revelation nonlinear like a kaleidoscope (Roszak, 2023).

Thereafter, Martin Luther, who is a well-known person from the Protestant Reformation, intended to reveal the genuine meaning of the Bible to his listeners using inductive techniques when faced with interpreting the Bible. As a result, all interpretative rules applicable to Scripture must originate inside the text itself (Shelton, 1974). He claims, therefore, no allegory, tropology, or anagogy is valid in Scripture unless the same truth is explicitly stated in a historical manner elsewhere (Mcgrath: 55). The concept of a "rediscovery" of the Bible through Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation is often seen as an important part of religious history in the 16th century. Although Luther himself believed this to be true, it only applies if we understand precisely what was being rediscovered (Vogel, 2017).

II. METHODOLOGY

This research used the descriptive qualitative methodology. Since qualitative research is exploratory, descriptive qualitative methods are used (Creswell, 2014). Miles and Huberman's theory is used for data analysis in this study. Data Collection, Data Reduction, Data Display, and Drawing Conclusions/Verification are the components used in the data analysis process (Miles: 12). Data collection is gathered

through studies of relevant literature to the research topic. Data reduction is a type of analysis that clarifies, groups, concentrates, and arranges data in order to draw and objectively confirm “final” conclusions. Data display is an organized, condensed collection of information that enables for action and drawing conclusions. The qualitative analyst begins to draw conclusions about the meaning of the data as soon as it is gathered by looking for patterns, explanations, potential configurations, causal flows, and propositions (Rijali: 83).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hermeneutics is defined by the Greek words *hermeneia*, which means interpretation, and *hermeneuo*, which means to explain in words, to expound, to interpret (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, 2006). The term of hermeneutics is used to describe the explanation of written documents and can thus be more precisely defined as the science of interpreting an author’s language. The primary objective of Hermeneutic was to translate complex ideas from texts into language that was understandable to common people (Oshchepkova and Alafnan, 2023). Hermeneutics reveals how to bridge the gap between author and reader. To comprehend the content, readers must enter the author’s time and spirit. Thus, Hermeneutics guides us from text to context and revitalizes the meaning of the Word for modern times (Alu, 2020). Hermeneutics must first be explained in terms of its object, the Bible, in order to be handled properly. The term “Bible” itself refers to written texts with verbal messages. Grudem on the inerrancy of Scripture claims,

The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact. The definition in simple terms just means that the bible always tells the truth, and that it always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about (Grudem: 90).

The Bible is the text that most effectively embodies the entire tradition of hermeneutics, interpretation, and even jurisprudence (Cummins: 6). It is crucial for a Bible interpreter to comprehend, put into practice, and be aware of hermeneutical principles in order to effectively use hermeneutics as a technique of determining the meaning of a setting. The interpreter’s ability to assess a text’s value, meaning, and meaning with objectivity is the desired outcome (D. W. Lee 34). The process of identification (or constituting, seeing-as, and grasping as a particular entity) through the use of concepts is known as interpretation (Rincón: 2). Bloesch emphasizes his approach to biblical hermeneutics,

Scripture is said to have one primary author, the Holy Spirit, with the prophets and Apostles as secondary authors. For these reasons, Scripture is believed to contain an underlying theological and philosophical unity. Every text in the bible, it is supposed, can be harmonized not only with the whole of Scripture but also with the findings of secular history and natural science (Mcgrath: 81).

The most fundamental element that guides biblical hermeneutics is that the Bible is divinely inspired. Any interpretation theory that ignores it is essentially flawed and will not aid in interpreting the Bible as God’s Word. Ramm writes Biblical hermeneutics is the study of the rules guiding how to read the Bible. Because there are all of the customary gaps between the reader and the texts of the Bible, rules for interpretation must be observed. Hermeneutics and exegesis form one continuum (Ramm: 8). The approach of exegesis has thus far been the standard, whereas

eisegesis has been seen as a fallacy, despite the fact that the actual results of accurate exegesis on particular biblical texts have always been up to debate (Hong). Grudem states, "The authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God" (Grudem: 73).

This study proposes three principles of biblical hermeneutics to interpret the Bible according to a literal interpretation. Alu on biblical literalism asserts that the Bible communicates God's truth plainly through its text. It maintains that a passage should be understood based on its grammatical composition and historical context to align with the writer's intent (Alu, 2020).

3.1 Genre Context

The word of genre, which means "type, arrangement, and style," in German, the term *gattung* has been used to describe lengthier literary compositions, such as the Gospel, Epistle, and Revelation (Engle: 82). The context of genre considers various types of linguistic genres, such as poetry, prophecy, typology, etc.

Berlin defines "poetry" as a discourse style that heavily utilizes figures and motifs. Imagery, parallelism, meter, rhythm, repetition, patterning, anaphora, cataphora, anadiplosis, figures of speech, inclusio, and chiasm are all present throughout the poem (Berlin, 1996). Moreover, the genre emphasizes the figurative language of parables, metaphors, nuance, symbols, and hyperbole. Genre affects the interpreter's Bible approach. Antiochene theologians rejected Revelation until the fifth century as the genre had the potential to challenge their ideas about Christ (Slade, 2019). For Lookadoo, Metaphors compare one thing to another, using suggestive language. They animate unrelated topics by shedding light through elements of one item onto another. Metaphors enhance the audience's understanding of a topic by connecting it to a better-known object (Lookadoo, 2022).

Typology is a method of biblical interpretation known as a typology that focuses on parallels between individuals or events that took place at different stages in the history of salvation (Douglas and Tenney, 2011). For Chafer, a type is a divinely proposed anticipation that illustrates its anti-type. A true type is a prophecy of its anti-type. The Passover-Lamb pattern infuses Christ's redeeming grace with meaning, while redemption infuses the Passover-Lamb type with all its wondrous significance (Chafer: xxx). Interpreting the Bible can be difficult. Interpreters must create categories for analysis that require special attention because no type is fixed. To make things easier, one approach is to group examples of New Testament theology by common characteristics (Heringer, 2022).

Furthermore, there is a genre of prophecy. The genre of prophecy that is commonly observed in the Old Testament. There are prophetic literary genres that may be examined and identified. Revelations, exhortations, covenant disputes, and oracles of salvation and damnation are among them. All of them may be identified as belonging to a certain genre based on their language, structure, and, in some cases, the figures of speech used (Fouts: 410). For Chafer, without understanding God's plan for the future, past events are uncertain. God's purpose includes everything past and future, and it's dangerous to interpret one without the other (Chafer: xxxiii).

3.2 Historical Context

Historical contexts are important as a necessary qualification for biblical interpreters. Every text must be able to be connected to not only all of Scripture but

also with the discoveries of secular history and natural science (Mcgrath: 81). The problem with the historical context is that misunderstandings arise when a person's social and geographic context is so different from the text's social and geographic location that we begin to ignore the specific way that the biblical context shapes theological interpretation (Jobe, 2019). The historical significance lies in interpreting a written, identifying who its author was, and determining when, where, and under what circumstances it was written. The writer's personality, the local environment, his relationship with the people he writes for, his and their nationality, and the characteristics of the time when he writes all these issues are all important for the thorough interpretation of the various books of the bible (Terry: 231). The historical principle, in essence, requires critical study. The data is rich, varied, and often confusing (Filson, 1950). While understanding the intent of the author or community is key, some argue that historical knowledge is essential for Greek texts. Objectives differ depending on history and language (Heringer, 2022). For example, Hebrews seems to show little interest in women from a straightforward reading, especially when it is read in its original language. For Christians, the absence of women in this Scripture may suggest disrespect from a fellow believer and a possible divine preference for males. The author of Hebrews used masculine language for mixed-gender groups as was common at the time (Peeler, 2021).

3.3 Grammatical Context

Grammatical meaning must always be sought through careful study and application of established linguistic principles and rules. Focus on the meaning and relationship of words and record the flow of thoughts, mood, time, and place of each word as a whole (Terry: 210). Since the Bible was written in human language, it must first be interpreted verbally. Therefore, understanding grammar and text is a priority (Heringer, 2022). The grammar of the text should be taken into consideration while interpreting it, and the words used should determine the meaning of any expression, proposal, or declaration. While applying grammatical principles, two tasks must be considered: lexical analysis and syntax analysis. Lexical Analysis. The established etymology of a word should be taken into consideration by the person interpreting the Bible since it may reveal the world's true meaning or assist in determining its true meaning. Furthermore, in order to correctly interpret the Bible, the reader must be concerned with the signification that the words have gained over time, as well as the manner in which the Biblical authors express them. Syntax Analysis in the widest sense refers to any relationship inside a phrase that helps to clarify the meaning of the entire unit. As component patterns, grammar, and semantics are all included in syntax in this wide sense, the conclusion is accurate (Osborne: 93).

Previous studies suggest that no method ensures comprehension and obedience of Scripture more than a receptive heart and inquisitive mind (Psalm 119:18), giving the Bible precedence over conflicting sources due to its infallibility (Alu, 2020). Nobody asserts that assumptions or prior knowledge are unavoidable "for me." Anyone who claims, "I cannot approach a text without an understanding framework," is misleading. Objectively, everyone acknowledges that no one can be totally objective, and no one enters the text as an impartial reader (Howe, 2022). The focus of interpreting scripture is not just on the text and theological method, but also on the goal of illuminating the Christian's existence through the truth about God. The aim is not to bind theology to language, but to emphasize that exegesis is a meeting with the living God (Roszak, 2023). Missionary hermeneutics interprets the Bible in relation to the missionary task, based on the belief that God is at work in the world, and that

Scripture guides the community in fulfilling this mission (Barker, 2017).

On the other hand, those who claim to take the Bible literally lack understanding about the need for interpretation of words, particularly when general rules are applied to specific situations. They also do not acknowledge the interpretation of a translator, exceptions to many general rules, and the fact that some passages require non-literal interpretation (Firestone, 2014). Our theology is influenced by modern philosophers and preconceived notions that reject objective interpretation. This flawed approach assumes readers will understand their argument objectively, leading to failure. Interpreters present their own opinions as facts, making interpretations subjective (Howe, 2022). Interpret the text without imposing the reader's caprice or seeking the author's intent (Dickman, 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

The church fathers sought a unifying text for all Christians to preserve church unity. They believed that a shared method of doctrinal interpretation was necessary after affirming this text. Hermeneutics is the study of interpreting the Bible. Bible interpreters use hermeneutics to objectively determine a text's meaning based on its value and divine inspiration. Ignoring this guide renders any theory flawed. This statement serves as a reminder that every word present in the Scripture belongs to God, and rejecting or defying any of them is equivalent to rejecting or defying God Himself. According to earlier studies, having an open and curious mind helped more people understand and obey Scripture.

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