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The Bible and hermeneutics

Andrew S. Kulikovsky

Hermeneutics is the formal process by which the interpreter employs certain principles and methods in order to derive the author's intended meaning. Naturally, this is foundational to all theological studies, and before a biblical theology of creation can be built, it is necessary to discuss the hermeneutical approach that should be utilised and how it should be applied to the text of Scripture, and in particular, the creation account of Genesis

Biblical inerrancy

Presuppositions and prior understandings have always played a significant role in the hermeneutical process, and one such presupposition is biblical *inerrancy*. Inerrancy is a complex doctrine, but it is internally coherent, and consistent with a perfect and righteous God who has revealed Himself. Broadly speaking, the doctrine of inerrancy identifies Scripture as true and without error in all that it affirms, including its affirmations regarding history and the physical universe.[1] Article IX of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* states:

> '***WE AFFIRM*** that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write.
>
> ***WE DENY*** that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.'

Concerning the role of history and science in the interpretation of Scripture relating to creation and the Flood, Article XII states:

> '***WE AFFIRM*** that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.
>
> ***WE DENY*** that *Biblical* infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.'

Indeed, as Herman Bavinck noted, when Scripture touches on science it does not suddenly cease to be the Word of God.[2]

Of course, a high view of Scripture is 'of little value to us if we do not enthusiastically embrace the Scripture's authority.'[3] Indeed, many scholars who claim to be evangelical have either rejected this doctrine outright, or have redefined it to allow for errors in historical and scientific references. Francis Schaeffer described the denial of biblical inerrancy as 'The great evangelical disaster'. He noted that accommodating Scripture to the current scientific consensus has led many evangelicals to a weakened view of the Bible and to no longer affirm the truth of all that it teaches—not only in regard to theology and morality but also regarding science and history.[4] Why, then, have many so-called evangelical historians and theologians denied inerrancy and infallibility in relation to history and science? John D. Woodbridge suggests they believe that if the Bible is only infallible for faith and practice, then it cannot be negatively affected by evolutionary hypotheses.[5] The irony of this position is that in trying to defend inerrancy, they have essentially given it up!

But even if one affirms the superiority and inerrancy of the special revelation of Scripture in all areas, what are we to do with science? How does science affect our interpretation of specific passages and our overall theology? These are pertinent questions when constructing a biblical theology of creation.

It is often stated that the theologian is the God-appointed interpreter of Scripture, and the scientist is the God-appointed interpreter of nature. For example, Roger Forster and Paul Marston present the relationship of the Bible and theology, and the relationship of nature and science as follows:

2 Books:	Bible	Nature
Human Interpretation:	Theology	Science

The point here is that both books (the Bible and nature) are true and infallible, but their human interpretations are not.[6] In other words, interpretation occurs in both theology and science, which means there is also a possibility of making interpretive errors in both fields. Thus, denying a particular interpretation does not necessarily mean or imply that biblical inerrancy is being questioned or denied. In the same way that a scientist may wrongly interpret certain scientific data, the theologian may also incorrectly interpret a particular passage. However, Forster and Marston offer no solution to this problem, nor do they discuss the methodological problems and issues relating to scientific research. They simply dismiss the problems of scientific research by merely stating that there are also problems in biblical interpretation.[7] David F. Payne, on the other hand, acknowledges the primacy of biblical revelation when he states:

> '[I]t must be decided what exactly the biblical teaching is before any criticism of its accuracy

> can be made … The majority of Concordists take the scientific data as their starting-point, and interpret the biblical statements to fit them. But it is essential to achieve first a sound exegesis of the latter; and then, if any rapprochement is necessary, it can be made on a firm basis. Biblical exegesis is paramount, even when the scientific challenge is under consideration.'[8]

This raises the question of epistemology (the theory of knowledge) and the possibility of knowing. How can the interpreter know whether his exegesis is accurate or whether a particular interpretation is the correct one? Can the interpreter know anything for certain, or should all interpretations be held tentatively? Upon which criteria can such an assessment be made?

Scripture and the problem of interpretation

It is certainly true that different interpretations of Scripture abound, especially for those Scriptures which teach about creation. But are all interpretations valid and equally plausible, or is there only ever one correct interpretation? If there is only ever one correct interpretation, how can it be determined?



After Domenichino, from Wikipedia.org, the free encyclopedia

The biblical account of creation simply assumes that God had endowed man with the faculties to communicate with his Creator.

Human language as God's medium of communication

The Bible is God's special revelation and its purpose is to communicate specific truth to all humanity, past, present and future. In order to accomplish this, God employed common human language as the medium for His message. The biblical account of creation does not discuss the question of whether God can meaningfully speak to mankind or whether mankind can understand God. It is simply assumed as 'self-evident' that God and mankind could engage in meaningful linguistic communication.[9] Thus, Jack Barentsen concludes that 'God must have endowed man with adequate faculties to respond to and interact with his Creator.'[10] Indeed, 'Genesis describes God as the first language user … . [He] instituted language as the vehicle of communication between man and himself.'[11] Similarly, Packer points out that Genesis 'shows us that human thought and speech have their counterparts and archetypes in [God]'.[1] Furthermore, God continued to employ human language as His medium of communication throughout biblical history. When God spoke directly to Moses, He used intelligible human language; when He spoke to His prophets He used intelligible human language; when Jesus taught He used intelligible human language; when He appeared to Saul, He used intelligible human language.

Nevertheless, there are many who claim that language in general, or the biblical languages in particular, are somewhat deficient in that they are unable to communicate with the same precision as modern languages. Hugh Ross, for example, argues that since biblical Hebrew has a much smaller vocabulary than English, Hebrew words can convey many *different* 'literal' meanings.[13] This is surely a very naïve view of language. Vocabulary size is irrelevant. Indeed, all languages 'are quite able to express complex, deep, or subtle ideas. Virtually anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, provided one takes enough time.'[14]

God is sovereign and He wills to be understood (2 Tim. 3:15–17), and actively reveals Himself to us.[15] Human language 'offers no resistance to his purposes and cannot frustrate his desire to communicate.'[16] As E.R. Clendenen succinctly writes: 'Language works. A skilful reader will experience what a skilful communicator intended to accomplish through the agency of a text as an interface takes place between the worlds of the author, text, and reader.'[17] Indeed, everyday human experience confirms this to be so. As innate users of language, human beings readily engage in meaningful linguistic communication. Such communication is not always easy, but it is never impossible.

Propositional revelation and truth

God's linguistic communication to humanity as recorded in the Bible takes the form of *propositional revelation*. God supernaturally communicated His message

to a chosen spokesperson in the form of explicit cognitive statements of truth, and these statements are recorded in sentences that are not internally contradictory.[18] As Carl Henry states, 'the inspired Scriptures contain a body of divinely given information actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions. In brief, the Bible is a propositional revelation of the unchanging truth of God.'[18] By 'proposition', Henry means 'a verbal statement that is either true or false; it is a rational declaration capable of being either believed, doubted or denied',[19] and adds that '[n]othing can be literally true but a propositional statement'.[20] Likewise, Norman Geisler notes that 'the normal and consistent New Testament usage of "truth" is of truth in the cognitive, propositional sense'.[21]

Roger Forster and Paul Marston claim that a statement can still have genuine historical content but be allegorical in form.[22] In other words, a distinction is made between historical fact and historical event. A particular historical fact may be presented in the form of a non-historical event. But on what basis can one claim that a non-historical event represents a true historical situation? Such distinctions are not only arbitrary; they lack any coherence, and are surely motivated by concerns totally external to the Bible. Mcquilkin and Mullen add:

> 'To deny the possibility of words corresponding to reality is ultimately an attack on the nature and activity of God … Evangelical faith is that God can communicate and indeed has communicated in words all the truth about ultimate reality he thinks it necessary for us to know.'[23]

Viewing the Bible as propositional revelation from God implies there is the possibility of verifiable facts involved. God has verbally communicated in a propositional form to humanity, not just truth about spiritual matters but also truth relating to history and science. If truth was not expressed in this way, then the interpreter can never be sure of anything—even his own salvation.

In Scripture, propositional revelation most often takes the form of historical narrative.[24] Indeed, Rodney Decker points out that

> 'Scripture employs narrative genre deliberately, but it does so in such a way that the historical basis (event) for the narratival depiction (text) is absolutely essential. The revelation value of the Bible depends on its history value … Historical narrative explicitly appeals to history to verify what it teaches: names, places, events, dates, etc. are cited … . If these references are not trustworthy, it casts grave doubt over the theology being propounded in narrative fashion.'[25]

Keep in mind that true communication does not necessarily lead to exhaustive knowledge. Francis Schaeffer writes:

> 'It is helpful … to distinguish between true communication and exhaustive communication. What we claim as Christians is that when all of the facts are taken into consideration, the Bible gives us true knowledge although not exhaustive knowledge.'[26]

He adds: '… we can have confidence that this is true history, but that does not mean that the situation is exhaustively revealed or that all our questions are answered.'[27]

The influence of postmodernism

In the 19th century, Søren Kierkegaard, although a deeply religious and apparently pious man, proposed that true knowledge was completely subjective, and that absolute certainty was impossible (one must wonder how he was 'certain' that *this* claim was 'true'). In other words, it is not possible to express absolute truth in propositional form.[28] Thus, Kierkegaard unwittingly became the father of postmodern existentialism. It is unfortunate that this same kind of postmodern thinking has convinced many interpreters that it is virtually impossible to be certain of the meaning of a text, especially the biblical text.[29] Many believe that language 'cannot accurately communicate thought to another person's mind', and that meaning is relative, especially in relation to the interpreter's present subjective perceptions.[30] Donald Williams notes that postmodernism 'manifests itself in literary study that ignores (or "deconstructs") traditional issues of meaning or even aesthetics … .'[31] In effect, language and the communication process is 'deconstructed'. The usual meaning and implications of common words, grammar, expressions and idiom are rejected, along with normal interpretive procedures. Instead of being a natural and intuitive activity, linguistic communication becomes a problematic task with insurmountable hurdles. This is clearly illustrated by the anti–young-earth-creationist Mark Noll in his critique of the hermeneutics of certain conservative Christian groups. He accuses them of

> '… an overwhelming tendency to "essentialism", or the conviction that a specific formula could capture for all times and places the essence of Biblical truth for any specific issue concerning God, the human condition, or the fate of the world [and] a corresponding neglect of forces in history that shape perceptions and help define the issues that loom as most important to any particular age.'[32]

Clearly, Noll thinks that following a systematic procedure when interpreting the Bible in order to accurately determine what God is saying to all men in all times, is somehow presumptuous and negligent. This is surely postmodernist existentialism applied to biblical interpretation!

Bernard Ramm, on the other hand, is more subtle: 'Revelation is the communication of divine truth; interpretation is the effort to understand it.'[33] Nevertheless, the implication is the same. Although God communicates inerrant truth, the interpreter may misunderstand it.

Despite God revealing Himself in history as recorded in the Bible, the interpreter can never really be certain about the meaning of this revelation, and must always remain open to alternative interpretations. Unfortunately, those who hold such a view rarely apply it consistently. Their scepticism and uncertainty are almost never applied to scientific interpretations and conclusions.

In contrast to previous generations,[34] we seem to be caught in a state of biblical and theological uncertainty. As Mcquilkin and Mullen poignantly note, 'we seem to be in the process of losing any assurance of certainty about knowing and communicating objective reality. And many evangelicals are becoming at least moderate relativists.'[35] This has serious implications for biblical and theological studies. If the meaning of a text cannot be known for certain because no particular understanding can claim to be authoritive, then there is no basis for integrating it with other related texts in order to produce an overall theological statement or synthesis.

In fact, the problem runs deeper still. Interpretive uncertainty essentially implies that it is meaningless to talk about the authority, infallibility and inerrancy of the Scriptures because the Scriptures do not really tell us anything—or at least anything of which we can be certain. The meaning ascribed to each text is merely a human interpretation which may or may not be correct. This, of course, means that the central pillars of Christianity, the doctrines of sin, atonement and judgment, the virgin birth, and the physical resurrection are mere interpretations which may or may not be correct. Indeed, since historic Christianity is merely a systematic framework of biblical interpretations it too may not be correct. Therefore, this view of biblical interpretation can only lead to liberalism or agnosticism—and in many cases, it has done exactly this.

Furthermore, arguing that interpretation is always uncertain due to the supposed limitations of language is ultimately self-defeating and incoherent, as Mcquilkin and Mullen point out:

> 'If we do not do interpretation on the premise that God has spoken and that he can be understood, that truth about him can be communicated accurately in words, we run the danger of ending up where postmodern thinking has taken some proponents: speaking nonsense. That is, they use words in an attempt to communicate their own thought about how impossible communication with words is.'[36]

Is it possible, then, to be certain about the meaning of a given text? If we assume that Scripture is revelation from God, that it is the word of God, then it *must* be possible for any person, regardless of their culture, language or historical situation, to comprehend, at least in a general sense, what Scripture is saying. If God's communication is not objectively understandable, then He has essentially failed to communicate. In effect, He may as well not have spoken at all! If this is the case, then on what basis can the Bible be regarded as the word of God? What authority can it possibly have? Indeed, what is the point of having an authoritative, infallible, inerrant message if it is impossible to ascertain its meaning?

Historical-grammatical exegesis

The key to understanding the biblical text is to apply a hermeneutic which takes into account the historical and literary context. This can be done by employing *historical-grammatical* exegesis. This method presupposes that human beings are rational creatures capable of linguistic communication, and that linguistic communication is meaningful and objective. Historical-grammatical exegesis involves a systematic approach to analyzing in detail the historical situation, events and circumstances surrounding the text, and the semantics and syntactical relationships of the words which comprise the text. In essence, it attempts to formalize what language speakers do automatically and unconsciously whenever they read a book, watch television or engage in conversation.

'The "Word of God is inherently more reliable than science" ... "Scripture is much easier to interpret than nature."'

The importance of a systematic approach to interpreting Scripture cannot be underestimated. Walter Kaiser points out that

> '… the basic teaching of all of sacred theology is inseparably connected with the results of our hermeneutics; for what is that theology except what Scripture teaches? And the way to ascertain what Scripture teaches is to apply the rules and principles of interpretation. Therefore it is imperative that these rules be properly grounded and that their application be skillfully and faithfully applied. If the foundation itself is conjecture, imagination, or error, what more can be hoped for what is built on it?'[37]

Space does not allow for a detailed exposition of the historical-grammatical method and how it is applied,[38] but two articles of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* are worth noting. Article XIV explicitly affirms the historical basis of Scripture:

> ***'WE AFFIRM*** that the biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to historical fact.
>
> ***WE DENY*** that any such event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated.'

This is reinforced by Article XX which affirms that the Bible also speaks truly on matters relating to history, science and the natural world:

> ***'WE AFFIRM*** that since God is the author of all truth, all truths, biblical and extrabiblical, are consistent and cohere, and that the Bible speaks truth when it touches on matters pertaining to nature, history, or anything else. We further affirm that in some cases extrabiblical data have value for clarifying what Scripture teaches, and for prompting correction of faulty interpretations.
>
> ***WE DENY*** that extrabiblical views ever disprove the teaching of Scripture or hold priority over it.'

Note also that the denial explicitly disallows the teachings of other fields, including philosophy and the sciences, to 'trump' the teachings of Scripture.

But will the historical-grammatical method bring certainty regarding the teaching of Scripture? There are, of course, numerous difficult passages which can be understood in different ways, and although a good exegetical case can be made for several options, no consensus presently exists. Yet even in such cases it is still possible to be certain of the broad thrust and theological message even though some of the details are difficult to comprehend. As Packer puts it: 'One can master the argument … and still be unsure of the precise meaning of occasional sentences in it.'[39] Nevertheless, the vast majority of biblical teaching is very clear, and even those passages which at first seem confusing, can be more easily understood when the interpreter performs a thorough analysis of the text's genre, structure, language, and historical and cultural setting.

Indeed, the task of interpreting the Bible is apparently much simpler and less error-prone than interpreting scientific data. Scientist Taylor Jones acknowledges that the 'Word of God is inherently more reliable than science', and that Scripture is much easier to interpret than nature.[40] Likewise, Robert C. Newman admits that since general revelation is not in human language, 'it is more liable to misinterpretation than is special revelation'.[41] David Diehi also concedes that propositional revelation 'has a certain advantage over nonpropositional revelation'.[42] In any case, all misinterpretations and misunderstandings of Scripture result from false presuppositions, insufficient data, or an inadequate or inconsistent hermeneutic. However, all these problems can be overcome if the interpreter is willing to thoroughly investigate the text's historical and grammatical context.

'[T]he Apostle's Creed, although it has been refined and expanded over time, has never gone through any extensive and fundamental changes, let alone several.'

Cultural accommodation?

Theologians of a more liberal persuasion have long believed that divine revelation necessitated the use of time-bound and erroneous statements. This position was never held by the Reformers or ascribed to by the protestant scholastics (Lutheran or Reformed), but arose in the eighteenth century in the thought of Semler and his contemporaries.[43] Nevertheless, there is now a growing trend among evangelicals to redefine inspiration and inerrancy to allow for errors when Scripture speaks on matters of history and science. Inerrancy is limited to truth concerning spiritual and moral matters. For example, Bernard Ramm, under the influence of German higher critical thinking, was convinced that 'language of accommodation' contained errors.[44] Such language 'employs the culture of the times in which it was written as the medium of revelation',[45] and that all direct references to nature are most likely 'in terms of the prevailing cultural concepts'.[46] This is essentially another way of saying that Scripture is always wrong when it contradicts modern scientific conclusions. As Woodbridge points out, Ramm 'is actually advising [evangelicals] to consider departing from the central tradition of the Christian churches regarding the authority of Scripture'.[47] Likewise, Paul Seely believes a 'more biblical approach' to relating science and the Bible is to accept the historical-grammatical meaning of Genesis 1 but to acknowledge that

> 'it reflects the cosmology of the second millennium BC, and that modern science presents a more valid picture of the universe … there is no biblical reason why the theological message in Genesis 1 cannot be eternally valid, while the package in which it came was a temporal concession to the people of that time.'[48]

While it true that an infinite God must in some way accommodate Himself to finite human ways of knowing in order to reveal His nature, law and gospel, this does not imply the loss of truth, nor the lessening of Scriptural authority. Accommodation occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts, and refers to the manner or mode of revelation, not to the quality and integrity of the revelation itself.[49] It is adaptation to human finitude, not accommodation to human error. Communication directed at mankind may involve less precision, but imprecision must not be confused with error. Inerrantists do not require scientific precision in order for a statement to be true.[50]

In any case, why stop at the possibility of errors in only those texts which relate to history and science? Why not allow for errors in spiritual, moral and ethical matters also? If the language of accommodation does indeed allow for errors, then limiting such errors to nature and history is surely an arbitrary decision. Ramm, Seely and others who adopt the same approach appear to accept that although much of Scripture is true, some parts are false, and the interpreter decides in which category a particular text should be placed. Thus, the standard of truth ultimately becomes whatever the interpreter decides at that time.

The stability of Scripture and theology

Unlike scientific data, theories and conclusions, the Scriptures have remained essentially the same for centuries,

with respect to both text and canon. The Old Testament canon has been well known and generally accepted since the beginning of the Christian era, and the New Testament canon was officially recognized by the fourth century (i.e. the Church recognized what had always been authoritative since the Canon was closed by the death of the last Apostle[51]).

The actual accepted texts (i.e. the current consensus of what the originals said) of both testaments have undergone minor revisions as a result of textual and philological studies of newly discovered manuscripts. But these changes are relatively few in number, and have not caused any significant changes in Christian belief or practice. No doctrine of Christianity rests on a disputed text.

The central doctrines and theological motifs of Christianity have remained remarkably stable and unchanged since the time of the early church. As Michael Bauman points out, '[T]he Apostle's Creed, although it has been refined and expanded over time, has never gone through *any* extensive and fundamental changes, let alone several'.[52]

In relation to the doctrine of creation, W.F. Albright notes that it is 'unique in ancient literature' and that modern scientific cosmogonies 'show a disconcerting tendency to be short-lived'. Indeed, he seriously doubted whether science 'has yet caught up with the Biblical story'.[53]

Conclusion

If the interpreter begins his task by assuming that the Bible is God's special, inerrant, propositional revelation to humanity in human language, then most interpretive problems will quickly disappear. Biblical interpretation is sometimes difficult, but careful and judicious exegesis is worth the effort, and gives virtual certainty or at least a very high level of confidence in one's interpretation.

Yet, so many interpreters continue to be intimidated by the truth claims of modern science, and either deny what the Scriptures apparently teach or stretch them to fit the current scientific consensus. The truth claims of science always seem to trump exegesis, regardless of how thorough it is and how well done. At this point, one would do well to head the warning of John D. Hannah:

> '[In the 19th century] science appeared to speak with the inerrancy that we accord to Scripture alone. It behooves us to remember to be cautious not to neglect the exegesis of Scripture and the qualitative gulf between special and general revelation.'[54]

E.J. Young asks:

> 'Why is it so difficult to [get at the meaning the author sought to convey] with the first chapter of the Bible? The answer, we believe, is that although men pay lip service to the doctrine of creation, in reality they find it a very difficult doctrine to accept.'[55]

Indeed, it appears that when considering the doctrine of creation, the difficulty is not *understanding* the teaching of Scripture, but *believing* it … .

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44. Woodbridge, ref. 5, pp. 264–266.
45. Ramm, ref. 33, p. 48.
46. Ramm, ref. 33, p. 53. Ramm actually seems to be a bit confused on this point. He states elsewhere (Ramm, ref. 33, p. 51) that he believes the biblical writers 'do not teach *any cosmological system* or follow *any cosmogony*, *ancient* or *modern*. Rather their writings are prescientific and phenomenal or non-postulational' (my emphasis). Ramm's belief that Scripture is 'prescientific' is surely an attempt to insulate it from scientific criticisms, since (despite Ramm's claims to the contrary) 'prescientific' is another way of saying it is not correct.
47. Woodbridge, ref. 5, p. 267.
48. Seely, P.H., The first four days of Genesis in concordist theory and biblical context, *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* **49**(2):95, 1997.
49. Note that verses such as Isa 55:8–9 do not imply that God's thoughts cannot be expressed in human language because they are so much higher than our own. As Carson (ref. 3, p. 37) points out, the context shows that God's thoughts are 'higher' *in the moral realm*, and therefore 'our response must be repentance, not some kind of awareness of the ineffable'.
50. E.g., stating that the approximate value of π (*pi*) is 3 is no less truthful than saying it is 3.14159265358979323846 26. Both values are approximations but the latter is more precise. See also Grigg, R., Does the Bible say pi equals 3.0? *Creation* **17**(2):24–25, 1995.
51. The NT scholar F.F. Bruce writes (*The New Testament Documents: Are they reliable?* IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1960): 'The NT books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognising their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect … . [Church] councils [did] not impose something new upon the Christian communities but codif[ied] what was already the general practice of those communities.'
52. Bauman, M., Between Jerusalem and the laboratory, *TJ* **11**(1):19, 1997; my emphasis.
53. As cited by Ramm, ref. 33, p. 120.
54. Hannah, J.D., Bibliotheca Sacra and Darwinism: an analysis of the nineteenth-century conflict between science and theology, *Grace Theological Journal* **4**(1):57, 58, 1983.
55. Young, ref. 2, p. 101.

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