Introduction to Hermeneutics

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This course on how to interpret the Bible will start in a way you probably didn't expect it to start: I think hermeneutics is a bad word and I'm going to avoid it as much as I possibly can. There. I said it. Now we can get to the real meat of the problem, and it is this: hermeneutics is a complex word that very few people understand but it refers to a process that is supposed to make complex things simple.

What, then, is the problem? Well, as Christians we believe that the Bible somehow contains truths that were not just relevant for the times in which the events in the Bible took place, but they are also relevant now. The question is how we get from the times and places of the Bible to our times and places.

There are dozens of hermeneutics textbooks out there, and they have all kinds of trendy ways of putting this problem. (Note: I'm going to do my best to not plagiarize any of them here, but I've probably read most of the textbooks that are out there so forgive me if some of their language slips through. I'm trying my best to think original thoughts and to make sense of things in a way that gets us outside of the many boxes in which these textbooks like to have us think.)

However, no matter what the language we use to describe the problem, it still exists: we still need to find ways to first learn the right things from the texts we read, and then bring those lessons we have learned from their world to ours. That, my friends, is the problem of hermeneutics.

At the outset I want to make something quite clear: I am not expecting anyone to have any knowledge of the biblical languages in order to understand the arguments that I will be making here. I will make constant references to the biblical languages but I will do so in a way that is as easy as possible to understand. I would, however, suggest that anyone who wants to end up in a situation where they will be teaching the Bible to others needs to learn to read both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in the languages in which they were written. This takes a lot of work, but so be it; if you're studying with me I take it that you feel called to this work yourself.

Throughout this course, I'm going to be using the idea of a journey to talk about how we get from there to here. In this journey we'll be taking, there are four major obstacles we have to cross; four barriers between where we start and where we want to end: language, time, place, and culture. Learning how to interpret the Bible well is about learning how to undertake this journey and cross those obstacles as best as we can, knowing that we'll probably get lost along the way but that we're also bound to see some beautiful views. We'll encounter inspiring traveling companions and learn to look at our surroundings in totally new ways when we see through their eyes. But most of all, we will get there. Somehow. I promise. Welcome to the journey.

The Four Barriers

If we're going with the metaphor of a journey for this business of interpreting the Bible (we should, by the way; I like it!) it would probably be helpful to think of the four barriers I mentioned before as four of the kind of obstacles that you'd encounter on a long hike. One of them, let's say, is a really deep ravine into which you have to clamber and out of which you have to scramble. The next, let's say, is a wide, muddy stream with a few rocks dotted through it. To cross it, you have to hop from rock to rock, but you know you're probably going to fall in at some point, or at least get wet feet. After that, let's say you encounter a swamp. You have to either find your way around the swamp or you have to carefully pick your way through it, even though it smells. Finally, in order to get to your goal, you have to climb a mountain.

In a lot of ways, that's what this journey is going to be like. As we work through this material, we're going to encounter some places where it feels like it's dark all around you and you can't see very far and the walls of the ravine are way too close. Other times you're definitely going to get wet feet and your shoes might smell. Other times everything around you might stink like methane and all you'll be able to hear is frogs and mosquitoes. And finally, toward the end, you'll work yourself into a sweat as we climb the mountain. But at the top of that mountain, trust me, it's going to be beautiful!

The first obstacle we're going to have to deal with is language. In a lot of ways, learning the biblical languages is like going through a deep ravine. I told you already that for this introductory series, I'm going to assume that none of you know the languages, but we're still going to have to deal with them. So we'll deal with them together.

When you're learning the languages, though, it's really easy to get disillusioned, to lose hope! You spend ages memorizing vocabulary and trying to get a grasp of grammar, and then after that you painstakingly work through texts as though you were a child in kindergarten learning to read for the first time. Often, only after years of work is it possible to comfortably read from the different genres contained within the Bible, and then you have to work every day to keep your skills active otherwise they deteriorate. Those years of work are like going through the ravine. When you come through and out the other side, of course you have to keep going and work hard, but at least you can see where you're going!

Then, the next obstacle we have to meet and conquer is the great distance of time between us and them. So much has happened in the 2,500 years since most of the Bible was written! Here's the thing that makes it even harder, though: For most of those 2,500 years, people have been reading the Bible and trying to live it out, just like us. They've been doing their best to interpret it. They've come up with all kinds of answers to some of the questions that we're going to be asking. Some of the answers have been really good, but some have been ridiculously bad. Getting past those bad answers is sometimes going to feel like jumping from rock to rock as we cross a stream and falling in every now and again and getting our feet wet. The stream is wide, but we'll get to the other side somehow, I'm sure.

Everything that happened in the Bible happened in very specific places. Since we, as Christians, believe that God guided every aspect of the history of His people, we have to believe that the places in which these things happened were also part of God's plan. Here's the problem, though, and this is why encountering this obstacle often feels like a swamp: for generations upon generations, people who have interpreted the Bible have treated the geography of the Bible (that is, where things happened) as though it was irrelevant, as though it didn't matter. They've completely detached the stories in the Bible from the land in which they took place. Many of the people who thought this way have controlled how the rest of us interpret the Bible - in other words, they've left their smell all around. Often, the smell they've left is really bad; some of the most influential interpreters of the New Testament, for instance, have tried so hard to divide Jesus from his land and his people that they've ended up supporting horrible things like the Holocaust. This is a history we have to grapple with; we can't ignore it or run past it. In our time together, we'll be talking about it.

Finally, we have to grapple with Jewish culture. This is where it gets absolutely fascinating: the Jewish people have given us hundreds of thousands of pages of literature, religious texts, commentaries, poetry, songs, and historical accounts, starting from centuries before the time of Jesus and going all the way to the present. These all differ wildly from each other, but they also all share common traits, themes, and threads - things that make them "Jewish." If we want to understand the Hebrew Bible, if we want to understand the New Testament, we have to spend time grappling with these texts and their culture. It's a bit like climbing a mountain: you have to work hard to get to the top, but once you get there the view is incredible.

In this course, we'll be reading through as much of the Bible as we can, along with some questions to help guide your thinking and check your understanding of each text. By the end, you will have a very practical, common-sense approach to how to read the Bible and interpret it well. These four barriers will become not barriers but fascinating areas of inquiry from which we can learn a great deal. It will all start to make sense, I promise.

The Bible As History

What does it mean that the Bible is a historical record of things that - in all likelihood - actually happened? I would argue that viewing the Bible as a record of things that happened in a particular place and time should form the foundation of everything else we do in our work of interpreting the Bible. I wrote that time is one of the obstacles we have to cross. It's a big obstacle, but we can do it if we know what we're doing.

Let me try to explain what I mean. For those of us who consider ourselves to be evangelical Christians, we're used to viewing the Bible as "God's Word" or as "God's Word to us" in particular. There is nothing wrong, really nothing wrong with viewing the Bible this way. However, we have to make one important qualification: the Bible is primarily the story of God's working through history. If there is anything to be learned from the Bible, it is going to be mostly through what we understand of God's work in history.

See, there are many times and places in the Bible where we can sense a direct encouragement, a challenge, a lesson, or a prophetic word that speaks to us today just as clearly as it did to its first audience thousands of years ago. That's why we talk about the "inspiration of Scripture" - somehow, in some sense, God can use the Bible that way. However, the Bible is primarily a record of history.

This is where it might get uncomfortable: the Bible, as a record of history, can be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny as any other historical work. This is not a problem, will not damage our faith by doing so, and should not pose any kind of difficulty to us as faithful Christians. It should, in fact, be an encouragement to us: God worked in history, and we can use the tools of historians to find out more about what he did and why it matters.

As we work through this course, we're going to be getting ourselves more and more used to treating the Bible as history. We're going to still maintain our reverence for the Bible as a unique record of God's work among a particular people at a particular place and time, but not as some kind of secret trove of mystical insights that can be taken out of context and mined for special knowledge and esoteric lessons.

Let me give you some examples of the kind of reading we're not going to do. You know that passage in Jeremiah that reads "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you?" Well, I bet each one of you has heard that passage taken out of context at one time or another. We're going to stay far away from that kind of reading. When we read a passage like that, our first step will always be to ask "Into what situation is God speaking?" Then, once we understand the situation, we'll learn to read the lesson from their situation into ours. It is a fine distinction but a very important one: God speaks to us through his speech to them. God can absolutely still speak directly into our time. But when we read the Bible we are hearing his voice to them.

I hope that makes sense. It's really important that we try to get that clear before we go any further - that we learn to set aside this kind of reading where we can take passages out of context as though they contained hidden timeless nuggets of wisdom regardless of the situation in which they first were written. The Bible can be used as a genuine record of historical events, although it is of course more than that. It is *most of all* a record of God's word and of God's work in history. That's why we care so much about interpreting it well and applying it to our lives. If we gain inspiration and timeless truths from it, that's wonderful!

The Languages of the Bible

The Bible, first of all, is not a single book. It is a library of books. Within the Bible, there are represented at least three different major languages, with little hints and suggestions of at least two more. These languages are as follows: the majority of the Old Testament was written in a variety of dialects and registers of classical Hebrew, which is often referred to as "Biblical Hebrew." Then, parts of the Old Testament including most of Daniel, sections of Ezra and Nehemiah, and a couple of other passages were written in Aramaic. Finally, the entire New Testament was written in various registers of a dialect of Greek called Koine.

Let me start by giving some basic details about the languages. Biblical/Classical Hebrew is a very old language, but like most other languages it was in a constant state of flow and development over time. Some of the oldest Hebrew in the Bible is found in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 and the Song of the Sea in Exodus - that's the song that the Israelites sang after they crossed the Red Sea. Some of the most recent Hebrew in the Old Testament is found in 1 and 2 Chronicles, the end of the book of Daniel, and some passages in Ecclesiastes.

Aramaic is an enormously important language for understanding the world of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, although the texts within the Bible that are written in Aramaic are relatively few in comparison to those written in Hebrew: parts of Daniel and parts of Ezra and Nehemiah. It had a very far reach, though; at one point or another it was spoken as far west as Morocco and as far east as India. People often ask how different Aramaic is from Hebrew. The answer is: it depends entirely on what kind of Aramaic you mean. There are at least six different major dialects of Aramaic that one could study, and each one has a relatively independent body of literature.

In general, though, Aramaic is to Hebrew as Spanish is to Italian: they're similar enough to be mutually recognizable by speakers of the other language, and it would have been relatively easy for any Aramaic speaker to learn Hebrew or for a Hebrew speaker to learn Aramaic. It's also clear that there was a fair amount of language mixing between Hebrew and Aramaic within Israel over the centuries, especially in the years after the return from exile.

Finally, we have Greek: the entire New Testament is written in a dialect of Greek that is known as Koine. Within the New Testament, there are a variety of different registers of Koine, though; some of the simplest Greek is in the gospel of John, the letters of John, and James, while some of the most difficult Greek is in the letter to the Hebrews and certain passages in Paul's letters.

I mentioned some of the details about how Hebrew developed and changed over time. Just a couple more points about Aramaic and Greek before we move on: Aramaic became one of the languages of the Jewish people during their time in exile. Scholarship has suggested that after the exile, Hebrew never really returned to the prominence it once had held. This just isn't true; during the time of the Maccabees, the people revived Hebrew as a language of discourse. Later on, the Dead Sea Scrolls bore witness to Hebrew as very much a living language, being used in all kinds of different situations for all kinds of different reasons. Within the land of Israel by the time the events of the New Testament actually took place, Hebrew most likely held prominence over Aramaic as the language of discourse for Jews. Outside the land, Aramaic and Greek held prominence in everyday life, while they probably still used Hebrew at home.

The big question, then, is why Greek became the language of the New Testament. It's not a hard question to answer: the documents that formed what we call the "New Testament" were at least three stages of development away from the events that actually took place. They were written, by and large, for people who - while some of them may have been Jewish - did not, by and large, live in Israel and therefore would not have known Hebrew as

a mother language. After the time of Alexander the Great, Greek became the "lingua franca" of much of the area around the Mediterranean. For a message to be as universal as it could be, it would have to have been in Greek.

Learning to read the Bible well involves wrestling with these three languages at some level. Those who know more than one language know how profoundly language affects how we think. If we want to understand the world of the Bible, we must learn to read and think as they did.

The Geography Of The Bible

Before we go any further, we have to say a few things about the geography of the Bible. This is really important (like most of the things I've been telling you about!) Everything in the Bible - every word, every story, every poem, every song - happened in a specific place. We have to be able to understand the nature of both where things happened in context and how the place affects what happened and what was said.

Again, it comes back (in many ways) to two big ideas that we've already been talking about: how we treat our Bible, and how we treat the incarnation. If, as we like to say, we take the Bible seriously, we have to learn to wrestle with this stuff. Where things happen matters. For some reason, God chose to send his Son to this people, at this particular time, in this place. We tell ourselves that this is the most important thing that ever happened in history, yet far too often we treat the details of how and where it happened as somehow incidental, as somehow not quite as important as the deep theological truths that were conveyed.

If you learn nothing else from this course, learn this: All of these details matter. In fact, they're often not just "details." They often matter profoundly for the development of each story as a setting for God's redemptive work. I can't teach you all the details of this in one course, though. What I can do is give you examples of how geography might affect our reading of the Bible.

Let's take, for instance, the beginning of Luke's gospel. Luke writes that Jesus's parents took him to Jerusalem when the time came "for their purification." (Read Luke 2 for more details on that.) If we don't know where these places are, we can't imagine how remarkable this was. If we don't know a little bit about Jewish theology, history, and culture, we don't get a sense of how remarkable this was.

Nazareth and Jerusalem are roughly three days journey from each other, depending on which way you go, how many people are in your party, and how often you stop along the way. If you don't believe me, go ahead and enter the two locations in Google Maps and get the pedestrian directions. The best time you'll make if you're walking nonstop is about thirty hours. If you're a fast walker, you're in a small group, and you have good supplies, the longest you'll be walking is ten hours per day. That makes three full days of walking. Back then, it may have been more.

While the temple was still standing in Jerusalem (that means before 70 AD) it was customary that all Jews had to appear at least three times per year in Jerusalem for

religious festivals. These festivals were Pesach (what we call passover), Shavuot (what we call Pentecost or Whitsun) and Sukkot (the Feast of Booths, which was also a harvest festival). There was a specific reason why they had to come to Jerusalem: it was apparently the duty of the whole people of Israel to take care of the priests who did not have lands or fields to grow their own food, but performed a service for the people of Israel instead.

All that to say that there were times when people definitely were supposed to come to Jerusalem. To understand what's going on here, though, we have to take it a step further back: for Jews, every stage of life involved rituals. We also have lots of rituals: I could write you a whole book about the rituals endemic to evangelical Christianity. That's another story, though. For Jews in Jesus's time, some of these rituals involved coming to Jerusalem at specific times (like the "pilgrimage festivals" I've just explained to you). But there were other life rituals where it was more a situation like "Well, if you can make it to Jerusalem that's great but if not, that's also fine." There were still other situations where the directive clearly was "If you can make it to Jerusalem that is amazing and you are a very faithful person."

The direction about the purification of the mother after birth happening in Jerusalem was one such direction. You can read the relevant Old Testament passage. It's not hard to find. However, what you don't always see is the sheer effort that was involved in coming all the way from Nazareth to Jerusalem for this simple purification ritual which could just as well have happened in Nazareth.

See, by that time everyone understood that the direction in Leviticus and Deuteronomy about what the parents should do after the birth of the child was from a time when they all lived within walking distance of the Tabernacle. When it says that they should come "before the Lord" it didn't mean packing their stuff and leaving on a long trip. It meant just walking to the center of the camp. By Jesus's time this was understood, so they had agreed that people just needed to go to a priest. Priests were everywhere. Jesus's dad and mom went to Jerusalem with a newborn for something that they just as well could have done in their hometown. They undertook a three day journey for a religious observance. What does this say about them as people?

Long story short: It says that Jesus's parents took their faith very, very seriously. This one little tip about geography (the distance between Nazareth and Jerusalem) gives us a window into that. For every story - I would argue - the geography of the land gives us a little window into the story that we wouldn't get otherwise.

Let me give you another example. We're probably all familiar with the 23rd Psalm. Reading that psalm while keeping in mind the place where it happened can give us new insight into the power of those words. Let's take, for instance, the line "He leads me in paths of righteousness." The Hebrew (for those of you who are interested) is ינחני במעגלי צדק. A better translation would be "he leads me along the right paths."

When David was a shepherd, he tended sheep on the hills outside Jerusalem. Those hills are very steep, with deep ravines in between them. If you walk those hills (as I have) you will see that they're covered with paths that run straight along the side of each slope. Even now, shepherds walk with their sheep along these paths. If the sheep take a step or two off the

path, they trip, fall, and roll down the hill (sometimes several hundred feet of very steep incline). They must, therefore, stay on the path.

When we read “He leads me in paths of righteousness” it’s more than just “He helps me make good ethical decisions.” It tells us that the Shepherd leads us past real danger along the only paths that will keep us safe. Again, geography gives the clue. Next, we’ll be working Jewish culture.