

Handout: How to Read the Bible, Part I

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Introduction

“The Bible is written for you, but the Bible is not written to you.”
– Ian Provan



Interpretive Method

Historical-Grammatical Method

Hermeneutic Circle

'Hermeneutics': from a Greek word meaning 'interpretation,' the word 'hermeneutics' refers to the process and method of interpreting a text.

"The **hermeneutic circle**... describes the process of understanding a text hermeneutically. It refers to the idea that one's understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and one's understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circle. However, this circular character of interpretation does not make it impossible to interpret a text; rather, it stresses that the meaning of a text must be found within its cultural, historical, and literary context."¹

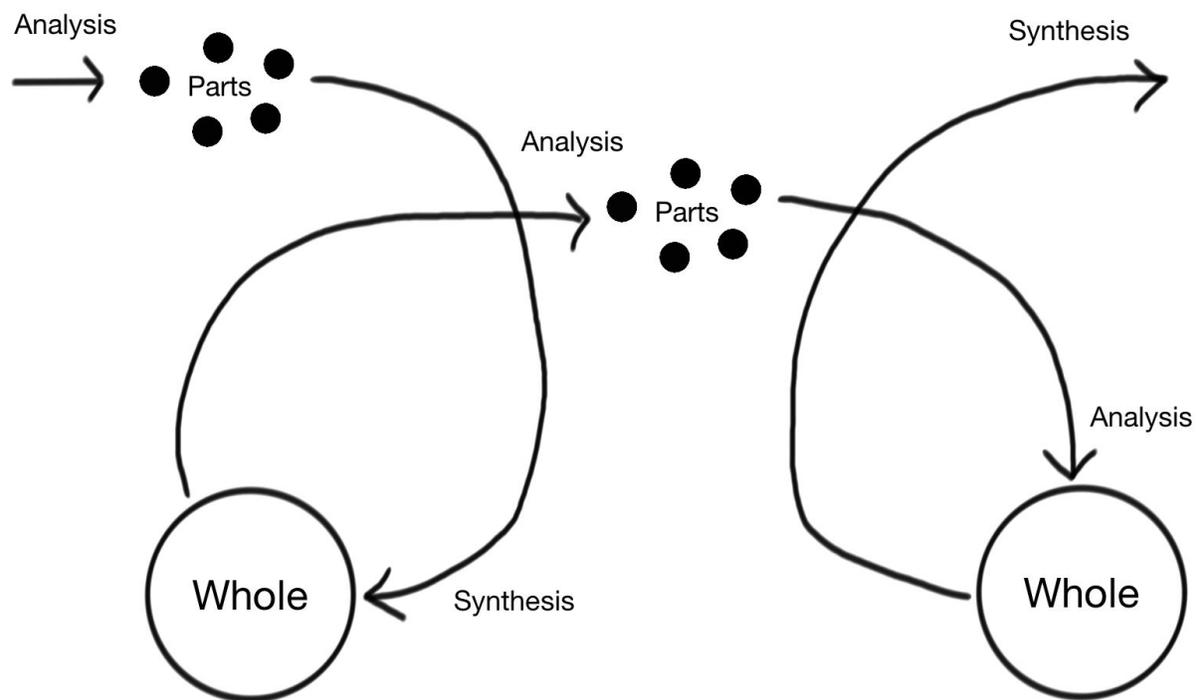


Figure: Hermeneutic Cycle

1. Cited from Wikipedia on Oct. 30, 2017: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutic_circle.

Key Concepts for Interpretation

- **Historical context:** events past and present (with respect to the text's time of writing) that influence the situation of the passage. Usually one begins by establishing who the author is, when the book was written, and who the intended audience was.
- **Geographical context:** where events took place, what kind of food and drink was available in that place at that time in history, where were the borders of neighbouring territories, etc.
- **Cultural context:** beliefs, technologies, and customs that shape the worldview of the author and the audience.
- **Literary context:** the build up and flow of the whole book within which a particular passage is found. For example, what Matthew 12 communicates may be better understood in light of what chapters 11 and 13 say. Literary context includes the text, but also the structure and literary devices (e.g. word play, imagery, irony).
- **Canonical context:** the position of the book (and its ideas, images, promises, etc.) within the Bible and within the history of the Bible's composition. For example, Ezekiel's vision of the river flowing from the south side of the altar in Ezek 47 is reworked in Revelation 22 where the river flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb.
- **Genre:** the specific type of literature of a particular book or passage (e.g. The book of Matthew is a historical narrative, but Matthew also contains short teaching narratives called parables). Different genres use human language to communicate in different ways (e.g. 1-2 Samuel is a historical narrative and makes use of character and plot development, but Paul's letters don't need to do that).
- **Passage boundaries:** it is important to interpret the words of the Bible as parts of logical levels of discourse. Each level has boundaries, including a beginning and an end. The relevant levels are: Canon > Book > Pericope > Paragraph > Sentence > Clause > Phrase > Word. Know the boundaries of the unit you are reading and the relationship of that unit to the other levels. In ancient literature the beginning and ending of a work (e.g. a whole book) was often key to interpreting the message of the whole.

Recommended Reading

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks, *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).