



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

### Lesson #9

#### Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

#### Principle Four: The Only Valid Literary Criticism Is the External Kind: The Historical Setting

For a clear understanding of what a Bible passage means it is necessary to understand the history behind the passage. Almost the entire Bible is connected to events, people, and places in history. There are many who seem to think that the Bible is simply a collection of random thoughts and they put everything on the same level. But the statements in the Bible fit into a historical sequence from the beginning to the end. The Bible begins with the factual history of God's creation of the world. Creation really happened at a certain time and place. In the same way, the flood actually happened. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob truly lived on this earth at a certain time and place. We understand the Psalms and Proverbs much better if we know something about the life and times of David and Solomon. The writings of the prophets become clearer when we put them into the historical situation supplied by 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The New Testament has its own historical background. Luke, in his Gospel and in the book of Acts, is very careful to place the events he describes in their historical setting. The letters of the apostle Paul were writing during the history presented by the book of Acts. Paul's letters help us understand what is written in Acts and Acts helps us understand Paul's letters. We need to acquaint ourselves with the historical background that Scripture itself supplies. It is information that God Himself supplies about His Word. It is part of the inspired record.

Besides the history provided by Scripture itself, we today have access to much historical information from sources outside of the Bible. When we use these resources, however, we have to be careful that we do not alter or change what the Bible says based on information from outside the Bible. The Bible is God's Word and, therefore, it is infallible and without error. Other historical resources are not infallible. Nevertheless, secular historians and students of archaeology can provide information that helps us understand the customs, expressions, and historical figures mentioned in the Bible. For example, the Bible gives us some information about the various men named Herod who ruled over Palestine during the days of Jesus and His apostles. But the historical records of that time from outside the Bible reveal many more details of the lives of these different men named Herod. This additional information gives us a better picture of the kind of rulers these men were.

When reading the Bible, it is particularly important to pay close attention to who is speaking and whom is being spoken to. In the book of Job, for example, we must carefully distinguish between God's words to the devil and Job, the devil's words to God, Job's words, the words of Job's three friends, and the words of Elihu, the young man who spoke after the three friends had stopped talking. We will not be able to understand the book of Job if we fail to keep in mind the speaker and the person being addressed.

In order to understand correctly Jesus' words recorded in the Gospels, we must consider to whom He is speaking. Is He talking to individuals, His disciples, His enemies, or to the general public? For example, Jesus said this to a rich young ruler: **"Sell whatever you have and give to the poor"** (Mark 9:21). Jesus did not say this to every one of His followers. The spiritual condition of the persons whom Jesus addressed determined whether He would speak Law or Gospel. In this example, Jesus words

were law address only to this rich young ruler who had made an idol out of his wealth. It is highly important that we notice the difference.

Another important thing to remember is that the Old Testament laws were given only to the Israelites. They were not give to us Christians today. They were written for our learning, and we should study them, but we do not need to obey them. God's moral law, however, which is written in man's hearts from the beginning, still applies to us today. This moral law is repeated in the New Testament. For example, every one of the Ten Commandments is repeated in the New Testament except for the Third Commandment: **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work"** (Exodus 20:8-10). The apostle Paul shows us that we no longer need to worship on a certain day in his letter to the Colossians: **"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ"** (Colossians 2:16-17).

The most important background information for understanding the Bible is found in the Bible itself. But it is also helpful to study history, geography, economics, agriculture, politics, social customs, culture, etc. These can help us better understand the Bible. Nevertheless, the Bible, as God's Word, always has the last and final word if there is any disagreement between what the Bible says and what secular sources say. Do not forget that the devil's original question was intended to make Eve doubt God's word: **"Has God indeed said?"** (Genesis 3:1). If what man says contradicts God's word, we should trust what God says rather than man.

### Questions

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1. What are some of the statements in Genesis 1-11 that show that it is actual factual history, not myth or legend?
2. What can help us better understand the Old Testament prophets?
3. Which Gospel writer pays special attention to the history of what he writes?
4. What can we learn about the rulers named Herod from non-Bible sources?
5. Give an example that show why it is important to know who is speaking in a Bible passage.
6. What is one wrong way to use non-Biblical resources?
7. Why is it important to distinguish between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
8. What makes the Bible different from all other books in the world?
9. Why does the Bible include so many references to time and place?