

Hermeneutics: The Art of Biblical interpretation **by Rev. Jim Mueller**

Beautiful and Dangerous: The Bible is both. Theologians dread the day a person opens the Bible and reads “Judas hanged himself” - only to close it, open it again, and read in another section “go and do the same”. The Bible is a historical library of God’s interaction with our world. It includes wars, deaths, pain, rape, suicide, genocide, and redemption - and that’s all in Genesis alone. Wading through these books can seem intimidating, but there are some tools that any reader can use to help answer the question: “what does this mean?”

1. Prayer - Pray before, during and after reading challenging passages. Since this is God’s Word to mankind, ask him what it means.
2. Context - The context in which a passage exists gives plenty of clues to its meaning. Look in the sentences before and after then expand your search out to other paragraphs. For further clues, look at other books by the same author (ex: Paul’s writings in Romans and Galatians) where the same subject is addressed.
3. Genre - The genre of literature (poetry, history, narrative, apocalyptic) helps make sense of allegories, symbols, and questions of literalism. When the interpreter understands that hyperbole and figures of speech (ex: I am Jesus’ little lamb) are common to certain types of literature, the accuracy of interpretation is much higher.
4. Audience - Who was the author specifically writing to? Who was a character in the story preaching to? What cultural norms existed then that make interpretation more challenging now? Knowing the audience is the key to knowing the authorial intent.
5. Self-interpreting - Use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Look at fulfillments of Old Testament passages in the New Testament. Consider using a concordance to find all the places a word can be found in the Bible (ex: love) or use a lexicon for the various meanings a word might have in the Bible.
6. Communal - Even though you might be studying Scripture on your own, Christian interpretation was always meant to be done in community. Share your questions with other Christians or consider talking with a trained theologian. Biblical interpretation was never meant to be done in a box.