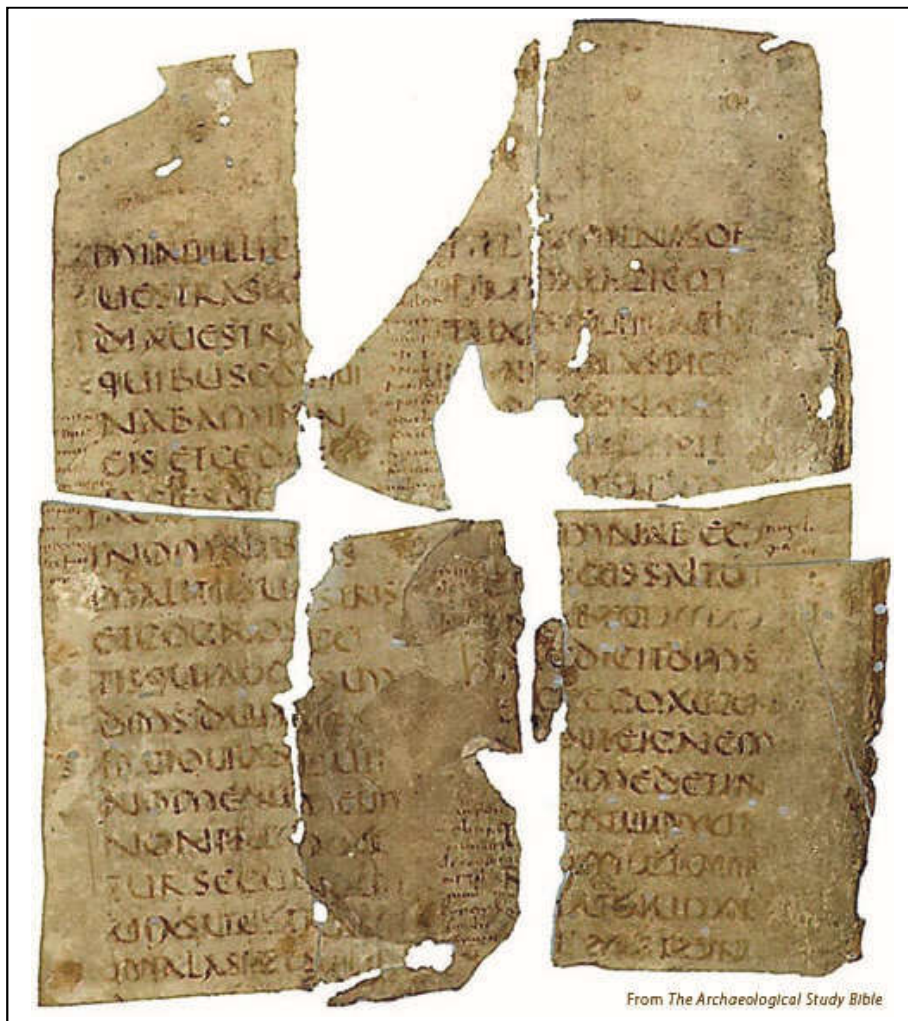


Introducing  
**Exegesis**  
(the art of interpreting the Bible)

And  
**Hermeneutics**  
(the art of drawing contemporary meaning from the Bible)

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## Exegesis and Hermeneutics: A Summary.<sup>1</sup>

In moving towards an interpretation of a particular passage the following questions are important. Not all can be answered on every occasion, though there are some basic questions (such as establishing the text that is going to be interpreted). A focus on a few might be able to break open a "fresh" meaning of the text. The last question is always important and can only be answered in the light of the questions that precede it.

### 1. *What do I bring to the text?*

- What are my questions, biases, prejudices, cultural situation, history, religious background?
- What understandings of the Scriptures in general and of the excerpted text in particular have I inherited?
- What is my initial reaction on reading the text?
- What questions does it raise for me?

### 2. *How accurate is the text? (Textual criticism and issues arising from translation)*

- Are there any variant readings in ancient manuscripts? What issues do they raise?
- Which of the ancient manuscripts is likely to have the earliest version?

And reflecting on the move from the original language to English (i.e. Hebrew/Aramaic for the OT, Greek for the NT):

- Are there any noteworthy discrepancies between different translations into English that may influence our interpretation of the passage?

### 3. *What is the cultural background that needs to be remembered in understanding the text? (Cultural/social-scientific Criticism)*

- What cultural and sociological information is important for understanding the text?
- What sociological and/or anthropological models can help us to gain a better understanding of the social and cultural dynamics reflected in the text?

### 4. *What is the literary form of the text? (Form/Genre Criticism)*

- Does this text share a literary form or genre with other passages in the Bible and/or other ancient literature, such as hymn, lament, saga, legend, parable, healing story, pronouncement story?
- What is the (type of) social setting that gave rise/gives rise to the form?
- How are those forms/genres expected to operate or be understood in the ancient world?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Trainor, 1998, adapted V. Balabanski 2002, A. Cadwallader, Marie Turner 2004, V. Balabanski 2009, E. Boase, 2010, Adam Robinson 2020.

5. *What is the literary structure of the passage? (Literary, Rhetorical, Grammatical Criticisms)*

- What is its context in the wider book? Are there literary techniques, such as repetitions or other literary devices present, and why would they be used?
- How does the text seek to persuade the reader? What is its mood? In the case of the NT, do ancient rhetorical handbooks provide any help to understanding the rhetorical devices incorporated and why they were chosen?
- What grammar, phrases, images, words are significant in the text? How is the judgment about significance supported by the text?

6. *What are the traditional stories informing the text? (Tradition Criticism)*

- What biblical and non-biblical resources resonate with the text?
- What indications are present in the text that these resources were used (eg. quotations are the most obvious)?
- How were these used (copied, debated, modified etc)?

7a. *In Old Testament studies: Is there any indication that there are earlier, written or oral sources behind the text? (Source Criticism)*

- What features of the text suggest the existence of sources? What features does this text share with other texts thought to belong to a particular source document?
- What do these differences communicate about the accents or interests of each of the texts?
- Can a probable dependency of one text on another source be established?

7b. *In NT Studies: How does the text relate to parallel texts in the New Testament and other Christian writings? (Synoptic and Source Criticism)*

- What differences are there between this text and the parallel texts? What do these differences communicate about the accents or interests of each of the texts?
- Can a probable dependency of one text on another source be established?

8. *What seems to be the author's intention or perspective in this passage? (Redaction Criticism)*

- How did the author use, modify, or explain earlier material?
- What does this tell us about the community for which the author was writing?

9. *Who says or does what to whom? Where, when and how? (Narrative Criticism)*

- How did the author construct the plot, the setting, the narration, the characterization and the flow of the story?

10. *How would an audience have heard this passage? (Reader-Response Criticism)*

- What can be said about the ideal reader/hearer?
- What can be said about the intended/IMPLIED reader/hearer?
- What can be said about the real reader/hearer?

- How does the perception of a reader/hearer shape the writing of the text?
- How does the perception of the author/narrator shape the reading/hearing of a text?

11. *What does the text tell us about what actually happened (Historical Criticism)?*

- What history does the text presume?
- What actually happened in the time of Jesus?
- What changes had taken place since the original ministry of Jesus?
- What was going on in the life of the author(s) and the Christian community/ies for which the text was first written?
- What other ancient materials can assist us to assess the historicity of the story?
- What tests can we apply to establish historical elements in the text?

12. *What have been the difficulties in interpreting the passages through the centuries, and particularly more recently? (History of Interpretation)*

- What do scholars say about it? Are there differences between the Christian traditions about how this text is interpreted?

13. *Are there aspects of the text that are problematic or need re-discovery today, particularly in the face of concerns for justice and liberation? (Liberation, feminist, materialist, political, Earth Bible hermeneutics)*

- What is 'suspicious' about the text?
- How do the marginalized appear, if at all?
- How can the text be retrieved for proclamation?

14. *How is the passage relevant to the contemporary world? (Hermeneutics)*

- How can the original meaning and significance of the passage be translated into contemporary life? What is the relevance of this passage today?
- What meaning does or could this passage have for your life?
- How have the previous two questions already influenced the way I have interpreted the text?

### **Writing an exegesis:**

1. Read the passage carefully, consulting various translations (or the original Greek, if possible!)
2. Tackle the above questions first without consulting secondary sources.
3. Once this is done, consult a range of commentaries and books about the questions.
4. Identify which are the key 3 or 4 questions, in addition to #1, 2, 5 & 14, that are particularly relevant to your passage. It is not possible to be completely comprehensive, and much of the art of exegesis lies in the integration of disparate information into a coherent *reading* of the passage.
5. Write up your interpretation of the passage, including an introduction and conclusion, and set out which are the key questions for your passage.
6. In answering #14, be sure that your application and engagement flow from your interpretation of the passage.

# Historical Criticism

## Definition

Historical criticism aims to understand the historical, geographical, political, social and cultural background of the times when the traditions were formed and written so that the writings may be interpreted in their proper periods and environment. It focuses on both the history in the text and the history of the text.

Historical criticism focuses on the setting of the text in time and place in an attempt to focus on the issues of where and when a text was written, and the factors of that time and place which were important in the production of the text. It concerns the world behind the text and what can be known about that world.

## General Principles/Presuppositions

Historical criticism assumes two things about a text:

- that it may relate to history: i.e., we may be able to find historical information within the text itself
- that it may have a history of its own: the text was written in a particular place and time

We can thus make a distinction between the “history in the text” and the “history of the text.”

**History in the text** – refers to what the text itself narrates or relates about history – persons, events, social conditions, ideas. Text can be a window through which we can gain information about a particular historical period – about what was happening or what some of the concerns with the age might have been

**History of the text** – refers to a different aspect of the text – history of the text is not concerned so much with what the text describes or says, but about the “career” of the text itself – its own history. It is concerned with how, why, when, where and in what circumstances the text originated; who wrote it and for whom it was written. It is also concerned with editorial activity, preservation of the text and the various factors that influenced the development, transmission and preservation.

Both the history in the text and the history of the text assume that in order to understand a text it is necessary to understand the context in which the text arose.

## Questions/Steps

Some of the questions which may be asked in order to explore both the history in the text and the history of the text include

### **History in the Text:**

1. Who and what are talked about in the text?
2. What historical situation is being described in the text?
3. How can we know what actually happened?

Some useful tools to help with this task include

- Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias
- Histories (of Israel/the Roman Empire etc) – chronology, dates, names and events
- Sociological studies – cultural practices etc
- Bible atlases
- Comparative non-biblical literature
- Archaeological findings
- Critical commentaries, especially those whose focus is in the world behind the text.

### **History of the Text**

1. In which historical situation was the author writing?
2. What concerns was the author addressing in his own time?
3. Are there special emphases of the author apparent in the passage?
4. What may have happened in the development and transmission of the text? Does it address more than one situation?
5. Why were these particular traditions preserved?

Many of these concerns are covered within other methodologies, including source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism.

Historical approaches seek to give the most plausible account of an event or tradition, taking into account all the diverse facts and sources.

# Textual Criticism

## Definition

Textual criticism deals with the differences between ancient manuscripts. It seeks to apply rigorous methods to reconstruct the earliest form of the text, to evaluate how certain we can be in deciding between the variant readings and to understand the changes and distinctive approaches that are evident in different ‘families’ of manuscripts.

## General Principles/Presuppositions

The original document (the ‘autograph’) of each of the books of the Bible no longer exists. Instead, we have hundreds of ancient manuscripts from different centuries and different locations. These manuscripts have come down from the originals through an unknown number of intermediate copies (‘recensions’), and form groups or families, rather like a family tree, with different branches showing different features.

The manuscripts have undergone changes as they have been copied. The differences between them are known as ‘textual variants’. Some changes were made inadvertently, when the scribes made a mistake. Others were made intentionally to clarify the text or improve the style or to bring them into line with other passages. The business of textual criticism is to produce a text as close as possible to the original so that work of translating the Bible into modern languages is done on the best scholarly foundation.

A committee of scholars with expertise in the study of ancient manuscripts produced what is known as a ‘critical edition’ of the text. This edition makes available

- the evidence that the editorial committee considered (names of manuscripts, giving the abbreviations called *sigla*),
- the editorial committee’s analysis of that evidence, indicating how they evaluated the likelihood of certain variants (for the critical edition of the Greek NT, the letters A, B, C, and D indicate the likelihood, ‘A’ being the most certain, and D the least).
- a record of those variants deemed to be later developments.

## Criteria for deciding the most original reading

### 1. External evidence.

This evaluates how likely a variant is on the basis of the manuscript or family of manuscripts in which it appears. It takes into account physical aspects, such as the date and source of a manuscript and its relationship to other manuscripts.

- Preference is given to the *oldest* witnesses (manuscripts). Since errors tend to accumulate, older manuscripts should have fewer errors.
- Readings supported by a *majority* of witnesses are also usually preferred, since these are less likely to reflect accidents or individual biases.
- For the same reasons, the most *geographically diverse* witnesses are preferred.



## 2. Internal evidence.

This is evidence that comes from the text itself, giving attention to the meaning of the variant and evaluating what is most likely on the basis of the text.

- The shorter reading (*lectio brevior*) is more likely, given that scribes tended to add words for clarification or out of habit, more often than they removed them.
- The more difficult reading (*lectio difficilior*) may be earlier, given that scribes tended to clarify and harmonize passages, to resolve apparent inconsistencies.
- Another scribal tendency is called *homoioteleuton*, meaning "same endings". Homoioteleuton occurs when two words/phrases/lines end with the same sequence of letters. The scribe, having finished copying the first, skips to the second, omitting all intervening words.
- The critic also examines other passages of the writing to decide what words and grammatical constructions match the style of the writing.

Sometimes external and internal considerations point in different directions.

### Steps

1. Check the footnotes in a critical edition of the Bible to see whether there are variant readings mentioned for the passage you are studying. This may be indicated by such words as "Other ancient authorities add/read...".
2. Check commentaries to clarify which manuscripts have the alternative reading, and what scholars consider to be the implications of the different readings.
3. Look at the 'apparatus' (the footnotes) of the Greek or Hebrew Bible for more indication of manuscript traditions, and consult the relevant textual commentaries (e.g. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: a companion volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 4th rev. ed., 1994*).
4. Consider learning ancient Greek and Hebrew!

# Social Science Criticism

## Definition

Social-Scientific criticism is a method which seeks to understand texts within the matrix of their social, cultural, historical and literary contexts.

The central premise is that texts are the product of or can be best understood in light of the social and cultural institutions, values etc of the particular era out of which they arose.

The method seeks to clarify the differences between the historical conditions, social institutions and cultural writings proper to the biblical accounts and those proper to the biblical interpreter in order to provide a clearer comprehension for the reading and use of the bible.

## General Principles/Presuppositions

1. All knowledge is socially conditioned and perspectival in nature
2. Therefore, the differing social locations of the interpreter (sic) and the authors and objects to be interpreted must be distinguished
3. Theories and models play an essential role in the clarification of the differences between ancient texts and modern readers as well as in the clarification of the properties and relations of ancient social and cultural systems
4. The logic of social scientific criticism moves from evidence to hypothesis and back again
5. The texts of the bible must be set within their geographical, social, and cultural region, that is, within the circum-Mediterranean and ancient Near East
6. Texts are units of meaningful social discourse that
  - a. Encode aspects of the social system of which they are part
  - b. Whose meaning, intent, and impact cannot be understood apart from knowledge of the social systems and linguistic conventions of both the author and the audience/readers
  - c. Texts have not only a cognitive and affective dimension but also an ideological one through which the varied self-interests of the author (person, group, or class) are expressed
  - d. An understanding of the author or the recipient cannot be achieved apart from identifying the social location of each<sup>2</sup>

## Questions

The questions of social-scientific criticism: The discipline asks questions of a different kind than historical criticism and it claims that asking the “new questions” reveals some aspects of the text left hidden by traditional methods. These are concerned not so much with diachronic aspects as with synchronic aspects, the typical social patterns and taken-for-granted cultural conditions and conceptions most likely to have characterized the biblical world and

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<sup>2</sup> R.N. Soulen, and R.K. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, 175.

influenced the biblical writers.<sup>3</sup>

Some specific types of questions you may ask include

1. Who are the explicit or implied readers/hearers of the text? What is/are their
  - a. Social and geographical locations
  - b. Relationships to the real or implied author(s)
  - c. Positions in their social networks
  - d. Social and cultural scripts, plausibility structures, and traditions and beliefs that hearers/readers are presumed to share with the author(s)?
2. Who is/are the real or implied author(s) of the text?
  - a. What can be inferred about the author(s) identity and on what basis?
  - b. Is information outside the text available about the author(s)?
  - c. If the work is thought to be pseudonymous, how and why is this determined?
  - d. What is the relationship between author and audience?
  - e. How is the social situation described in the text?
3. How does the author diagnose or evaluate the situation?
  - a. What phenomenon are singled out for approval, disapproval, or change?
  - b. What ideas, beliefs, values, norms and sanctions are involved?
4. What is the nature of the situation and strategy of this text as seen from the social-scientific perspective of the interpreter with the aid of historical and comparative social-scientific research?
  - a. What social system constitutes the larger context of the writing?
  - b. What are the dominant institutions and the Christian or Jewish group's relations to these institutions?
  - c. Are there comparable groups in comparable situations?
  - d. What social issues and conflicting interests are at stake?

### **Procedures**

1. Read the text and nominate what aspect of the social science criticism will be the focus.
2. Identify the social context, as far as possible, of the text under examination. Is it possible to construct a social profile of the author/audience?
3. Identify any features of the text which show overt influence of any of the above
4. Identify the differences and similarities between the social world of the text and our own world.
5. Discuss how the observations contribute to the theology of the text and to our interpretation of the text.
6. Consider any changes which might need to be addressed for the text to speak to our own time.

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<sup>3</sup>[http://docs.google.com/gview?a=v&q=cache:9CDVd8h7scYJ:www.geocities.com/peter\\_balla2000/MethodsNTstudyGL05March2008.pdf+%22social-scientific+criticism%22+bible+procedures&hl=en&gl=au](http://docs.google.com/gview?a=v&q=cache:9CDVd8h7scYJ:www.geocities.com/peter_balla2000/MethodsNTstudyGL05March2008.pdf+%22social-scientific+criticism%22+bible+procedures&hl=en&gl=au)  
**Process**

# Form Criticism

## Definition

A means of analysing the typical features of texts, especially their conventional forms or structures, in order to relate them to their sociological contexts.<sup>4</sup>

## Aim

1. To identify the literary form/genre of a biblical text
2. To identify the setting in life of the identified genre in order to discuss how the text might have functioned in its original setting.

## Presuppositions

1. All forms of verbal communication among human beings, whether expressed orally or in writing, follow well-defined patterns.
2. Most of the literature in the bible had a long and often complicated oral prehistory.
  - Initially oral text – passed into hands of writers eventually
  - Although techniques of form-criticism are often used in the analysis of the oral stage of biblical literature, they are also applicable to the written stage
3. Genres develop to meet certain needs, but are not static – they change as they develop and eventually fall out of use – or decay. Form criticism is able to look at the historical development of genres over time. Certain genres and stages of their development belong to specific periods and their situations
4. Each genre originates in a particular setting (*Sitz im Leben*) and this setting can be recovered through a study of the genre itself.
5. Knowledge of the genre and the life setting facilitates understanding of the text.

## Questions

1. What is the genre of a given text?
2. What circumstances prompted the development of the genre?
3. How might the genre have been used in its original context?

## **Four basic steps**

- Outline the **Structure** of the text
- **Description** of the genre
- Outline the possible **Setting** (*Sitz im Leben*)
- Discuss the **Purpose** of the text/genre

## **Procedure**

1. Analyse the structure of the text
  - a. Identify the limits of the unit (look for opening and closing formulas etc)
  - b. Look for markers in the text which indicate subsections (change in speaker, character, introductory and concluding phrases, changes in tense etc)
2. Identify the genre – often done comparatively – use commentaries to help
3. Define the life setting of this form – again, use commentaries to help
4. Identify the function the genre serves in its literary context
5. Ask appropriate questions of the text in light of the findings.
6. Can any theology be gleaned yet from the findings?

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<sup>4</sup> G.M. Tucker, 'Form criticism, OT.' in G. A. Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, supplementary edition*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962-1976, 342.

# Literary Criticism

## Definition

Literary criticism analyses the biblical text in terms of the literary and artistic features of the text. Its primary concern is with the world of the text itself, rather than on the world behind the text.

## General Principles of Literary Criticism

- Rests on the assumption that the biblical text is an artistic creation – a work of literature.
- Literary critical tools are not interested in looking at the origins of the text, but analysing the text as it stands.
- As literature, the bible can be investigated in the same way as other kinds of literature.
- Understanding the literary techniques contained within the text can help to inform the theological insights we draw from the text.
- Literary criticism assumes that biblical texts are crafted into a purposeful design. The questions centre only on the text itself without trying to draw any conclusions about the intentions of the author. This method works from the assumption that the intentions of the author are not available to us.

## Questions

1. What makes this good literature?
2. How does the text engage the reader?
3. What literary devices are used within the text (e.g., metaphors, symbols, repetition, imagery etc)?

## Procedures

1. Determine the limits of the unit of study.
  - a. Never assume that a literary unit is the same as a chapter or a subsection set apart in your bibles.
  - b. You need to define the beginnings and ends of the unit – consulting commentaries may help if you are uncertain.
2. Determine the immediate and wider literary context of the unit
  - a. How does the material relate to what comes immediately before or after the unit?
  - b. How does it relate to the wider context (i.e., this may be the book in which the passage is located, or an even wider unit)?
  - c. Some questions you may ask include
    - i. Does the passage seem to fit in the wider context or not?
    - ii. Does the wider context help in the understanding of the unit?
    - iii. Does the unit play a role in relation to the wider unit (i.e., the prologue to John's gospel etc)
3. Determine the design and structure of the passage. Look for formal structures and patterns within the unit. Two common patterns are
  - a. **Chiasm**: this is a symmetrical pattern, often used in poetic texts a-b-b-a. You see this depicted as follows (see, for example)

## Genesis 17:1-25

- A Abram's age (1a)
- B The LORD appears to Abram (1b)
- C God's first speech (1b-2)
- D Abram falls on his face (3)
- E God's second speech  
(Abram's name changed, kings; 4-8)
- X God's Third Speech**  
**(the covenant of circumcision; 9-14)**
- E' God's fourth speech  
(Sari's name changed, kings; 15-16)
- D' Abraham falls on his face (17-18)
- C' God's fifth speech (19-21)
- B' God "goes up" from Abraham (22)
- A' Abraham's age (24-25)

The purpose of this sort of structure is to highlight the central, turning point of the passage.

- b. Another common pattern is that of **inclusio** – the repetition of the same word/phrase etc at the beginning and the end of a passage.
    - i. Ruth 1 begins and ends with references to harvest
    - ii. Prophetic oracles often begin with “the word of the Lord” and end with “thus says the Lord”
  - c. **Hook words**: words that are used to link (hook) units together. For example, in the letter to the Hebrews, the author repeats words at the end of one unit (paragraph) and the beginning of the next
    - i. 1:4 – “angels”                      “angels” – 1:5
    - ii. 2:13 – “children”                      “children” – 2:14
    - iii. 2:17 – “faithful”                      “faithful” – 3:2
4. Look for and analyse literary devices and techniques which occur within the passage. There are a range of different techniques. Some common ones can include
- a. **Repetition** – key words, phrases, sentences
  - b. **Parallelism** – often used in poetry.
    - i. Synonymous
    - ii. Antithetical
    - iii. Synthetic
  - c. **Symbolism** - The practice of representing things by means of symbols or of attributing symbolic meanings or significance to objects, events, or relationships.
  - d. **Metaphor** - A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus making an implicit comparison, as in *"a sea of troubles"*
  - e. **Simile** - A figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are compared, often in a phrase introduced by *like* or *as*, as in *"How like the winter hath my absence been"* or *"So are you to my thoughts as food to life"*
  - f. **Hyperbole** - A figure of speech in which exaggeration is used for emphasis or effect, as in *I could sleep for a year* or *This book weighs a ton*.
  - g. **Personification** - A figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are endowed with human qualities or are represented as possessing human form, as in *Hunger sat shivering on the road* or *Flowers danced about the lawn*.

- h. **Word play/pun** -
- i. **Chiasm** (within a single verse) -
- j. **Opposition/contrast** -
- k. **Vocabulary/grammar/use of language** -
- l. **Rhetorical questions** - a question to which no answer is required, used for dramatic effect, for example *who knows?*
- m. **Irony** –
  - The use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning.
  - An expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning.
  - A literary style employing such contrasts for humorous or rhetorical effect.
- n. **Motifs** - A recurrent thematic element in a literary work.

# Canonical Criticism

## Definition

Canonical criticism uses the final form of the canon as a platform from which exegesis is launched. The canon becomes the object of study because it is the normative religious text for successive generations in a community of faith and because, as a religious text, it bears witness to the community's full history of revelation from God.<sup>5</sup>

## General Principles/Presuppositions

- Communities of faith have authoritative texts that form a canon. The canon, then, is not just a work of literature, but is a religious text that the community has deemed authoritative.
- The canon is the primary context in which the meaning of sacred texts is adjudicated for faith communities.
- Religious canons have fixed final forms.
- Canonical criticism focusses on the final form of the canon. Methods that focus on the world behind the text (source, form, historical, social scientific and redaction criticisms) are less important in this approach than the final form of the text and its canonical context (world in the text). Similarly, methods developed to emphasize the world in front of the text, particularly the world of the individual reader or interpreter (rhetorical, reader response and ideological criticisms) are deemed secondary to the communities' shared understanding of the text in context.

## Questions/Steps

- Which community am I studying? For example:
  - Protestant
  - Catholic
  - Jewish
  - First-century Christians
  - Ancient Israel
- Which canon is normative for that community? That is, which text should I use? For example:
  - Protestant Community: Old and New Testaments. Masoretic Text for Old Testament and Greek text such as the NA<sup>28</sup> for the New Testament.
  - Catholic Community: Old and New Testaments with Apocrypha. Depending on the Catholic community, the Vulgate may be the appropriate text or the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts.
  - Jewish Community: the Masoretic Text.
  - First-century Christians: The Septuagint or a reconstructed text from the time of stabilization, c. 100AD.

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed summary of canonical criticism, see Corrine L. Carvalho's article "Canonical Criticism" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Steven L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Also see Marvin A. Sweeney's two articles "Canonical Criticism: Childs' Approach" and "Canonical Criticism: Sanders' Approach" in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter (New York: Routledge, 2007).



- Ancient Israel: the earliest textual evidence from the third-century BC or a reconstructed text from an earlier time.
- Reconstruct the text using textual criticism. Significant differences between ancient manuscripts may allude to a development in the canonical understanding of a passage.
- Read the text in its canonical context and shape for the purpose of looking for its canonical meaning. For example, the Gospel of Matthew stands as the first book of the Protestant and Catholic New Testament. The placing of the Gospel of Matthew as the first book of the New Testament provides a transitional link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew points back to the prophets, linking it to the Jewish Scriptures, while also providing the necessary link to the Acts and the Letters of the New Testament through its proclamation of Jesus crucified and risen, which the Acts and the Letters presuppose. When one reflects on Matthew's place in the canon, numerous areas of investigation open, such as the continuity/discontinuity between the two Testaments and the continuity/discontinuity between Paul and the Gospel writers.
- Many procedures employed by literary criticism can be employed by canonical criticism at this point in determining the meaning of the text, but an eye must always be set on the entire canon.
- Ask what other passages or books in the canon shed light on a text's meaning. This is where intertextuality can come into play. For example, it is unclear in the immediate context to whom or what Isaiah 52:13–53:12 refers. However, passages later in the canon, such as the passion of Jesus in the four Gospels, Acts 8:32–35, and 1 Pet 2:22–25 reveal that Isaiah 52:13–52:12 refers to Jesus' passion. A canonical approach will use these later passages to help interpret Isaiah 52:13–53:12.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed exposition as to how Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is interpreted canonically, see Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*. The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 407–23, especially pages 422–23.

# Rhetorical Criticism

## Definition

Rhetorical criticism is a tool/method which focuses on the communication between an author and reader by analysing the strategies an author employs in order to influence a reader's view or shape a reader's response.

## Assumptions

Rhetorical criticism assumes

- That language seeks to persuade an audience
- That the audience responds to the language
- And that all language occurs within a given rhetorical situation.

## Aims

To explore how an author/speaker creates a text/speech in order to impact/persuade an audience.

- Involves three elements: author, text, audience

Rhetorical Criticism is a “pragmatic analysis that seeks to reveal the mutual relationship of the author(s), the text, and the audience” (Gitay, 1993).

## Procedures

Different types of methodology used in rhetorical criticism – some use classical rhetoric, some use literary tools, some focus on historical aspects, others use only modern perspectives. What follows is a rhetorical approach – not *the* approach. Tries to be general enough to cover both OT and NT.

### **1. Identify the rhetorical unit to be studied**

- Look of integrative devices which mark the boundaries of the unit
  - Word or phrase etc at beginning or end
  - Development in theme or plot running through a unit
  - A central character

### **2. Define the rhetorical situation**

- What situation gave rise to the discourse: a rhetorical situation is one in which there is an imperfection/defect, something wanting to be done, something other than what it should be. The orator's response is to get the audience to respond appropriately – i.e., the orator is trying to influence the audience.
- The rhetorical situation includes not only the orator, the audience, and the issue, but also past discourse.

### **3. Determine the rhetorical problem (main question at issue)**

- What is the author trying to do?
- What stand does the author take in relation to the rhetorical situation?

### **4. Analyse how the rhetorical unit seeks to persuade the audience**

- How does the text seek to bring the audience into agreement with the thinking of the author? E.g.,

- Basic strategy is one of appeal: start with a premise with which everyone agrees
  - Depart from premises only when they are adequately accepted
  - Otherwise, work to get first premise accepted through reinforcement
  - Then move the audience to agree to new premises by establishing a bond between accepted premises and the new thesis
  - Rhetoric is a bridge building exercise: join the audience then move them step by step to the new ground
  - For this step, you can use classical rhetoric
    - Note how the sympathies of the audience are engaged (ethos)
    - Assess the appeals to emotion (pathos)
    - Note the use of logical argument (logos)
    - You might note the use of traditional rhetorical genres
      - Judicial: designed to elicit judgment
      - Deliberative: aimed at effecting a decision
      - Epideictic: aimed at fostering assent to or dissent from a particular stance
  - Identify the different parts of the argument/text – what is the persuasive effect of these parts? How do they work together (or not) into a unified whole?
  - Complete a line by line analysis of the text, including assumption, topics, literary/style devices, seeking to determine function in context
  - What other voices can you hear being addressed by the text (and affirmed or refuted, expanded or silenced)?
  - Does the text dialogue with the audience? How?
- 5. Analysis of elements of style**
- 6. Evaluate the rhetorical effectiveness of the unit in addressing the rhetorical situation**
- Is the argument convincing? For the original audience? For contemporary audience?
- 7. Consideration of the theological insights from the analysis**

# Tradition Criticism

## Definition

The Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation suggests that each of the terms

- tradition history
- history of tradition
- tradition criticism

refers to an approach to texts which seeks to ascertain the history of motifs, themes or other constituent parts of the text before they came to be fixed in their final form.

## Method in General

- The depth and extent of the method will vary according to the nature of the text under examination. Some genres lend themselves to this method more readily than others; for example narrative genres, especially where there is evidence of a long pre-history.
- The method focuses on two related but distinct questions
  - The circumstances and manner of transmitting the material
  - The characteristic content of the material.
- Circumstances and Manner
  - Important to know whether a text is passed down orally and when and under what circumstances it shifted to written form
  - Important to know the values, goals, prejudices etc of the people involved in the transmission as these would have shaped the tradition
- Characteristic Content
  - Can help deal with at least two distinct subjects
    - The identity and significance of recurring motifs (i.e. a word or pattern of words, a concept, a problem that recurs etc): these motifs can have their own existence as a stereotyped pattern, quite apart from their use in any particular text. TC can help an interpreter determine the general characteristics as well as the peculiar use of a motif in a given text.
    - The identity and interpretation of larger units of tradition that may carry unique significance for some community.
      - These units may appear as stories, speeches, poems or other forms of communication, bound together by common motifs.
      - May also occur as a theme: broader than motif – may include series of motifs, episodes and significant words: for example exodus theme and wilderness theme

## Steps

Two distinct stages: the analytical process followed by an outline of the history of the text

### 1. Analysis

- Comparison with parallel examples in the tradition field
  - For example, a comparison of the three stories of the wife/sister episodes in Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18 and 26:6-11.
  - This might also include parallels in ancient Near Eastern or Graeco-Roman texts

- Look for evidence of oral pre-history of the biblical text being explored (see form-criticism for help here). Questions that can be asked at this stage include:
  - What was the original extent of the oral form in contrast to the present written text? What lines have been added secondarily in the later oral and written transmission?
  - What was the shape of the original oral form? Is there a discernible outline or pattern? Does this pattern conform to a genre that would have been recognized by its audience, such as epic, hero-tale, legend, myth, chronicle, fable, song, etc. (as in the narratives) or as lament, parable, lawsuit, disputation, salvation oracle, taunt, etc. (as in prophetic oracles)? The form communicated as much to the ancient audience as the actual content.
  - What was the original message and how might it be different from the messages the text communicated in later oral and written stages?
  - Who spoke the original oral form (priests, Levites, bards, prophets, etc.) and why did this form originate with them?
- To whom was the oral form addressed, and what were their needs to which this form spoke (i.e., form-criticism)? For the traditio-historical critic it is now one stage in the process of exegesis.
- Find the earliest example of the tradition under investigation
  - This does not necessarily mean in Genesis or Matthew. Rather, one must be familiar enough with the chronological development of the Bible that he or she can determine where the earliest reference to a tradition is. For example, Hosea was written well before Exodus; thus the earliest reference to the Exodus is in Hosea, and not in Exodus!
- Describe the relationship between the parallels – primary concern to determine significant differences and whether the differences reflect a diachronic (i.e., through time) relationship
  - For example, in Jeremiah the wilderness period is viewed as a time of faithfulness and obedience while in Numbers it is seen as a period of constant disobedience. Why the differences? What could the theological or historical reason for these differences be?
- Other possible questions include
  - a. What is the "word" which embodies the tradition- and what is the broader "word field" used to describe the event? For example, "passover" is also called the "feast of unleavened bread". Are these the same? Or different?
  - b. Is there a formulaic structure which is always used when the tradition is described? i.e., when the Prophets speak for God, the text generally says "thus says the Lord". Is this formula always present in the prophetic traditions? Is it left out? Why?
  - c. Are there parallels?
- Determine how the tradition moved from one stage to another, and what changes occurred as a result.
  - How did the text become connected with other texts, and how did that evolve through stages?
  - Focus not only on the transformation of meaning, but also how the passage fits into a wider cycle of texts in terms of meaning
- This process is easiest where parallel texts exist – is more difficult where narratives elements are intertwined (i.e., here using the results of source criticism)

## **2. Reconstruction**

- The results of the previous stage form the basis of the reconstruction of the tradition history.
- Part of the aim here is to explore possible causes for the changes in the tradition – for example, the use of a text in different settings in life.

# Narrative Criticism

## Definition

“Narrative criticism is a method of interpreting biblical narratives with the help of modern and ancient literary theory. It approaches the biblical narrative not as a historical source for something that lies behind the text but as a literary text that may be analysed in literary terms (plot, characterisation, point of view in narration, etc) like other works of literature.”<sup>7</sup> Alongside this, narrative criticism also focuses on the role of the reader in constructing meaning.

A narrative may be defined as any work of literature which tells a story. Narratives have two aspects: story and discourse.

The story refers to the content of the narrative and consists of such elements as

- Events
- Characters
- Settings

The interaction of these elements constitutes the plot.

The discourse refers to the rhetoric of the narrative, i.e., how the story is told.

Narrative criticism is interested in the story-as-discourse. It is interested in how the implied author guides the reader in understanding the story.

Devices used by the implied author to guide the reader include

- Point of view
- Narrator
- Symbolism and irony
- Narrative patterns

## Process

### 1. Characters

Who are they? How are they introduced and presented? Who is/is not given speech? How do they speak? (Dialogue, narration etc.) What is the effect of the speech? Whose perspective of them do we see? What is the relationship between the roles of divine and human characters? What value systems are communicated by way of characterization? Who never focuses? Are any of the characters representative of a character group that fulfils a single role in the story? Whose point of view is presented?

This answers the question **WHO?**

### 2. Events

What happens in this passage? What are the key actions? Who performs them? Who does not

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<sup>7</sup> R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden, *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, Trinity Press Int., 1990, 488.

act? How do others respond/react to actions? Whose perspective of actions do we see? What value-systems guide the presentation of actions? How is the event related to other events in the story? Does it represent a turning-point? What elements of conflict are discernible?

This answers the question **WHAT?**

### 3. Settings

What are the spatial, time and social settings and how do they constitute the mood of the narrative? Do they have symbolic connotations?

As regards spatial settings, can relevant oppositions be discerned with regard to any of the settings (e.g., inside/outside, above/below) or do the settings provide boundaries between such oppositions?

As regards time settings, what sort of chronological or typological references are used? What connotations are associated with this kind of time?

As regards social settings, what is the cultural context for what transpires? What knowledge is the reader assumed to possess concerning political institutions, class structures, economic systems and social customs?

This answers the questions **WHERE** and **WHEN?**

### 4. Language

Are there key words or phrases repeated throughout? What words or phrases are set in contrast with each other? Can symbolism or irony be detected? What narrative patterns are used in structuring the passage and its immediate context? What does the episode within the context of the entire narrative reveal about the implied author? What values, ideas, priorities or preferences seem to govern the way in which the story is told? What effect does the narrative seem to assume that this episode will have on the reader?

This answers the question **HOW?**

### 5. Theology

Because the story is scripture, what theological reflections occur as the reader considers the implications of the story? Why this story?

This answers the question **WHY?**

### Steps

1. Identify the plot. What is its orientation, its turning-points, its resolution? (Some help here will be gained from the questions addressed in the section below).
2. Answer the questions **Who, What, Where, When, How, Why.**
3. Discern the writer's intended outcome.

Narrative Criticism should work hand-in-hand with Reader Response. Reader Response cannot be done without an understanding of the Narrative, and Narrative Criticism lacks meaning without Reader Response.



Use contemporary commentaries, collections and monographs.

## Reader Response Criticism

### Definition

1. A pre-eminent concern for the reader and the reading experience
2. A critical model of the reading experience, which itself has two major aspects
  - a. An understanding of reading as a dynamic, concrete, temporal experience, instead of the abstract perception of spatial form
  - b. An emphasis on meaning as event instead of meaning as content.<sup>8</sup>

Reader-response criticism focuses on the dynamics of the reading process in order to discover how readers perceive literature and on what bases they produce or create meaning for any given work,

### Process

Reader-response works hand in hand with narrative criticism. Helpful to look at the issues of characters, plot, action etc as part of the process. Reader-response builds on narrative criticism and discerns the role of the reader/listener in engaging the text proclaimed or read.

1. Distinguish the following features
  - a. Real author: the actual writer of the story
  - b. Real reader: the person who actually engages the story (if you are the real reader, what presupposition etc do you bring to the text – be honest about this and see if you can state your assumptions and your biases)
  - c. Implied author: the writer of the story imagined by the reader
  - d. Implied reader: the reader of the story implied by the reader

The Real Author intends through the story to bring the Real Reader to react as, and become like, the Implied (ideal) Reader.

2. Distinguish also:
  - a. The narrator: the voice of the one telling the story (different to the author – may or may not share the same point of view)
  - b. The narratee: the one to whom the story is directed
  - c. The story: speaks of what happens
  - d. The plot: speaks of why something happens; the structure of actions in a story which shape the outcome
  - e. The genre of the story: this will offer guidance in understanding the “literary language”

### Steps/Questions

1. Identify your own stance as a Real reader
  2. Identify your pre-understandings
  3. Identify the plot
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<sup>8</sup> R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*, 25.

4. Identify the perspective of the narrator
5. Identify the perspective of the characters: who does or says what to whom
6. Discern the Real Author's intended outcome on the Real Reader
  - a. How do you identify or fail to identify with the characters in the text?
  - b. How are you affected by the mood of the text?
  - c. How are you affected by the rhetoric of the text (persuaded by the text)?
  - d. How is your point of view challenged by the text's point of view?
7. Do you conform to the Implied Reader by accepting the ideology of the Implied Author?
8. Have you discovered that the role demanded of the Implied Reader is so foreign or ideologically unpleasing that you have refused to become the Implied reader?
9. Consult relevant commentaries – ones which focus on narrative commentaries will be helpful here.

Finally, look at the theological insights that have gained from this process.

# Source Criticism

## Definition

Source Criticism seeks to establish, in so far as this is possible, the written and oral sources which lie behind an extant piece of biblical writing.

## General Principles/Presuppositions

1. That many books of the bible have a complex history of development
2. Source criticism assumes that our understanding of the text is facilitated through an understanding of the historical context.
3. Seeks to identify probable author, date of composition, historical context and concerns of the sources as a means of understanding the meaning of the text.
4. Assumes that authors exercise consistency in their use of terminology, style and perspective, and that changes in these indicate the presence of earlier sources.<sup>9</sup>

## Questions

1. Is there evidence that earlier sources have been used within this text?
2. What sources have been used?
3. How much of the document under study is based upon the source whose existence has been discerned?
4. How much of the source material has been incorporated in the passage being studied?
5. How has the New or Old Testament author made use of the source material?
6. Has the author cited the material *verbatim* or freely?

**The following criteria** indicate the possibility that the author has used a source:

1. Variation or changes in vocabulary and perspective
2. Contradictions and inconsistencies within or between passages
3. Abrupt interruptions that break the continuity of a passage
4. The presence of duplications or repetitions.

## Steps

1. Read the passage carefully
2. Situate the passage within the overall literary structure of the biblical writing
3. Apply the four criteria (above)
4. Discern the source of the material by reference to other biblical material within the Old Testament for OT texts and the Old and New Testaments for NT texts.

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<sup>9</sup> P.A. Viviano, "Source Criticism." In S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticisms and their Application*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999, 37.

# Redaction Criticism

## Definition

“Redaction criticism is a method of biblical study which examines the intentions of the editors or redactors who compiled the biblical texts out of earlier source materials. It thus presupposes the results of source and form criticism and builds on them.”<sup>10</sup>

Redaction criticism seeks to clarify the nature and extent of an author’s own contribution to the work that has come from his/her hand, and to discern the activity of the biblical writer as a creative redactor or editor who formalizes the tradition in its present form. It presupposes that the biblical writer is working from a literary tradition.

## General Principles/Presuppositions

Redaction criticism presupposes both source and form critical analysis. It begins with the principle that the biblical authors were not simply compilers of the tradition but were authors who collected, arranged and edited traditional material in a particular historical context and with a definite objective in mind. In so doing they were proposing a particular theological point of view.

Redaction criticism identifies the changes made by the redactor by discerning the various layers or stages of material with which the biblical writer has worked. This enables the exegete to illuminate more easily the new meaning of the story or tradition which the writer has given the redacted text.

## The contribution of the Redactor as author can be seen in the

- Selection of materials
- Arrangement of the materials
- Modification of the materials
- Additional features which come from the editor’s experience/creativity

Redaction criticism focuses on the final editing which makes of the various units of tradition a single literary work.

Redaction criticism attempts to draw inferences about an author’s point of view and the situation of the author’s community from the presentation of a Gospel or other New Testament work taken as a whole.

## Redaction Criticism examines

1. An author’s selection and omission of traditional material
2. The modifications of this material
3. The arrangement of this material
4. Contributions from the author’s own creativity

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<sup>10</sup> J. Barton, “Redaction Criticism (OT)”. In D. N. Freedman (ed.) *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5. New York: Doubleday, 1992, 644.

## **Process**

1. Identify the literary source/s used by the biblical writer.
2. Compare the final form of the passage (i.e., the current biblical text) with the source identified.
3. Note any differences, alterations etc in the text which might suggest the theological emphasis of the redactor to the source.

The following example helps to demonstrate this process.

Read through Genesis 12:10-20 and Genesis 20:1-18. Some of the differences you might notice between the passages include

- The location of the deception (Egypt versus Gerar)
- The reason given for the deception
- The fate of Sarah in the harem
- The means by which the king finds out about the deception
- Timing of the prosperity which the reason given for the gift, etc.

Through a comparison you might notice, for example, that the redactor of Genesis 20 portrays Abraham's actions on a more favourable light, and also clears up any possibility of Sarah having had sexual relations with the foreign king.

# Feminist Approaches

## Definition

Feminism and feminist methodology concentrates on the political, social and economic rights of women. Although feminism has its origins as a secular discipline, it has been widely applied to biblical texts. Feminist biblical interpretation offers an alternative assessment of the biblical text as seen through the eyes and experience of women readers and theologians.

## Presuppositions

1. The bible is a product of patriarchal culture and as such serves patriarchal interests.
  - This point recognises that biblical texts are not only formed in the context of patriarchal cultures but have been subsequently translated, interpreted and preached in a patriarchal context.
2. There is no such thing as “value free” exegesis. “What you see” depends on where you stand, and therefore the interpreter must declare his or her bias.
3. Feminist interpretation brings women’s experiences to the centre of biblical interpretation.
  - This is not to say that women’s experience is any more valuable than men’s, but acknowledges both that the experience is different, and that this experience has too long been neglected in the interpretation of the text. Note also that women’s experiences are diverse – can’t claim universalism

## Aims

1. To expose the patriarchal character of biblical literature, and where possible to recover women’s insights, perspectives and knowledge that have been marginalised or denied articulation.
2. To show how traditional forms of biblical interpretation are implicated in discrimination against women and how the resources of biblical interpretation may nevertheless be employed in the service of women and others.
3. To secure for women the equal right of self-expression and self-determination within the domain of biblical scholarship, the academy, the church, and society in general.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist biblical interpretation seeks to give voice to what has been silenced or ignored and what is necessary for any complete understanding of God, scripture and humankind.

## Broad Approaches

One of the fundamental questions faced by feminist biblical interpreters relates to the status and role of the bible itself as a source and norm for faith. “Should the bible be viewed with suspicion as an oppressive product of a patriarchal culture or be recovered as a source of authority, empowerment, and belief?” (Soulén and Soulén). In response to this question we can identify four broad approaches to the text.

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<sup>11</sup> From R. N Soulén and R. K Soulén, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, 58.

**Rejectionist:** this position sees the bible as hopelessly patriarchal and beyond redemption. Biblical scholars who have taken this position are generally known as post-Christian feminists (e.g., Mary Daly).

**Loyalists:** this position sees that there is no problem with the biblical text itself; exclusion of women has occurred only at the point of the interpretation of the text (e.g., Susan Foh).

**Revisionist:** this position acknowledges that the biblical text is patriarchal but searches for positive role models and liberating traditions within the text that challenge other patriarchal material (e.g., Phyllis Trible).

**Liberationist:** this position acknowledges the patriarchal nature of the bible and its subsequent interpretations. The central concern of this approach is the liberation of women from all forms of oppression. Exponents of this approach would maintain that if a text is oppressive to women or an interpretation of the text is oppressive, it cannot claim the authority of divine revelation (e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza).<sup>12</sup>

## Two Key Principles

**Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** arises from the assumption that biblical texts and many of the interpretations reflect patriarchal culture and interests. Because of this, most feminist analysis refuses to accept the text or biblical scholarship at face value, but suspects it of being androcentric and patriarchal in its orientation. This suspicion leads to the question “whose interests are being served by this text or this interpretation?”

**Hermeneutics of Remembrance/Retrieval:** A hermeneutics of retrieval has a more positive role of retrieving biblical traditions that are liberating for women. A hermeneutics of remembrance searches for and keeps alive the memory of women’s struggles against oppression, which are recorded and preserved in biblical texts.

## Procedures/Guiding Questions

1. What role does (do) the woman (women) play in the story? What happens to her? What is happening around her?
  - Who speaks?
  - Who never or rarely speaks?
  - Who is spoken to or spoken about?
  - Who acts?
  - Who is acted upon?
  - Who never or rarely acts?
  - Whose viewpoint is presented?
  - Whose viewpoint is not presented?
  - If they had a viewpoint, what might that be? (i.e. can you recover the voice of the woman/women in the text)
2. Who benefits from the story (particularly, which characters come off well?) [Hermeneutics of suspicion]
3. Is there anything positive or liberating that can be retrieved from the story or anything important about women’s struggle against oppression that should be recovered or remembered? [Hermeneutics of retrieval/remembrance]
4. Do we have any other references to this woman in scripture? – if so, what do we know about her? How does this contribute to our understanding of this passage?

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<sup>12</sup> C. Osiek, “The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives”. In Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.) *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*. SBL, 1985.

5. Explore feminist and other interpretations of this text in dialogue with your own insights.
  - Consult feminist commentaries about this text.
  - Consult “mainstream” commentaries about this text and look at what they say about the woman in the story.
  - Check your own insights from the above analysis against theirs.
6. Draw out possible theological insights in the light of the above explorations.



# Hermeneutics

## Definition

Hermeneutics is the study of how we interpret a text. Biblical hermeneutics is a subset of the philosophical field: how we make sense of the Bible, and how we bridge the gap between the meaning of a biblical text in the ancient world and the meaning of that text today.

The name derives from Hermes, who in ancient Greek mythology was the messenger between the gods and humanity and was able to interpret meaning between different 'worlds'. From the Greek words *hermeneuein*, *hermeneia*, we have the following meanings:

- To interpret, interpretation (Hebrews 7:2)
- To explain (Luke 24:27)
- To give meaning to
- To translate (John 1:42, 9:7)
- To come to know

## General Principles/Presuppositions

Meaning is shaped by the context. The better our understanding of the original context and of our own context, the better equipped we will be to render the meaning of a text from one to the other.

A 'Text' is not limited to the written word; it can also refer to art, music, or even an experience. When we refer to a biblical passage as 'text', we are indicating a respectful engagement with it. A text mediates between two events of understanding: the one which produced the text and the one flowing from interaction with the text.

## Hermeneutical Spiral Process

This is also known as the hermeneutical circle. One begins at a certain point with a preunderstanding shaped by one's own context and experience. One then moves out to engage with the text, which challenges and shapes us. In a spiral or circular movement we return to our earlier understanding to find that it has been changed by the engagement.

The methods outlined in this booklet seek to shed light on the context of the earliest audience of the text and refine our understanding of how their context may have differed from our own. Hermeneutical methods seek to make the move between the world behind the text, the world in the text and the world in front of the text as accurate, nuanced and engaging as possible.