EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Story Topic: Biblical Interpretation, Part 2 Fall 2023 Introduction The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His world for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This fall, we are spending twelve weeks studying the Christian Story. Last week, we introduced the concept of biblical interpretation and discussed a key foundational belief necessary for faithful interpretation: the inspiration and authority of Scripture. In this week's lesson, we will discuss the canon of Scripture, some general interpretive principles, and the literary genres found in the Bible. The Biblical Canon The Old Testament Canon Long before the New Testament books were written or canonized, the books that comprise our Old Testament were considered the inspired Scripture of the earliest Christians. By the second century nearly all Christians were exclusively using the Greek version, which is called the Septuagint. The earliest Christians argued that the Old Testament was a book about Jesus, and that when it was read the right way it always pointed to Christ (Luke 24:25-27, 44-45 and John 5:39-40, 46). They argued that first-century Jews misinterpreted their own Scripture, because if they had read them correctly, they would have embraced Jesus as their Messiah. No major church leaders considered the Apocrypha to be Scripture in the same sense as the canonical Old Testament. The New Testament Canon There was general agreement that the four canonical Gospels and Paul's epistles were inspired Scripture, but



some professing Christians also claimed there were other Gospels, other epistles, or they circulated edited versions

of Paul's writings.

Marcion wanted to distance Christianity from its Jewish roots. He taught the God of the Old Testament was not the God of the New Testament.

To defend his anti-Jewish version of Christianity, Marcion assembled a rule or "canon" of Scripture that excluded the entire Old Testament and every New Testament book except for ten of Paul's letters and an edited version of Luke's Gospel. Marcion's canon forced orthodox Christians to settle the matter of which books were inspired and which were not inspired.

Various canons circulated in different regions, but by about 200 there was general consensus on which books comprised the New Testament. Some books were debated in some places before finally making the canonical cut, while others were widely read and appreciated, but ultimately rejected as Scripture. Eventually, the early church adopted the canonical list and book order circulated by Athanasius in 367.

Although there was no formal process of recognizing which books were inspired, several different criteria became important in the canonization process:

- Apostolicity: only books that were written by apostles or individuals closely associated with apostles were authentic Scripture
- Catholicity: only books that were widely accepted by most mainstream Christians were authentic Scripture
- Orthodoxy: only those books that accurately represented the consensus of mainstream Christians were authentic Scripture

General Interpretive Principles

In his excellent book 40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible, Rob Plummer offers several general principles that help us to interpret the Scriptures.

- 1) Read the Bible from a posture of faith
- 2) Read the Bible prayerfully and meditatively
- 3) Read the Bible as an inspired book that speaks authoritatively
- 4) Read the Bible as a book that points to Jesus

- 5) Read the Bible in Christian community especially our church 6) Let Scripture interpret Scripture 7) Pay attention to the authorial context, but never at the expense of the unity of Scripture 8) Pay attention to biblical genres, but not at the expense of the unity of Scripture 9) Pay attention to the historical context, but never at the expense of the text in front of you 10) Pay attention to the redemptive-historical context, but never at the expense of the text in front of you 11) Use good tools to help you interpret the Bible faithfully Literary Genre We know from our everyday reading experiences that the "rules" for interpretation vary depending upon the literary genre we are reading. The same is true for the Bible. Knowing some basic information about the biblical genres will help us to avoid some of the most common errors when it comes to biblical interpretation. Though the Bible is always literally true, it is not always meant to be interpreted literally! Historical Narratives More than half of the Bible is historical narrative. This includes most of the Pentateuch, all the historical books of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles. Historical narratives are meant to recount past events. However, historical narratives are not meant to be neutral or exhaustive. Historical narratives are theological history. Pay attention to what the authors state or imply about their context. Look for key verses that are intended to
 - Look for key verses that are intended to communicate the major theme for a book or section of Scripture.
 - Look for repetition, which was a common way to note emphasis in ancient writings.
 - Distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy characters in the narrative.

Prophecy

There is a sense in which the entire Old Testament is prophetic because it prepares readers to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, some writings are intended to be prophetic because they offer a word directly from the Lord through a prophet whom He has chosen specifically for this task. Some prophetic writings were written by the prophets themselves, while others recount the words of prophets. Sometimes prophetic utterances are found within other biblical genres.

- Pay attention first and foremost to the original audience.
- Pay attention also to how later Scriptures interact with earlier prophecies.
- Expect much of the language to be figurative.
- Pay attention to which prophesies are conditional and which are unconditional.
- Note which prophesies are fulfilled and which are unfulfilled.
- Remember some prophesies have layers of fulfillment that are progressively revealed over both redemptive history and post-biblical history.
- Recognize that all biblical prophesies find their ultimately fulfillment in Christ, the one new covenant people of God, and the new creation.

Apocalyptic Writings

Apocalyptic writings are intended to unveil (apokalupto) how God is providentially working behind the scenes, and will continue to work in the future, to bring about his sovereign purposes. Apocalyptic writings are characterized by seven themes:

- The expectation that God is working in unexpected and dramatic ways to bring our present fallen age into complete alignment with the perfect age to come
- The use of angelic mediators to communicate God's message to a chosen human spokesman (who might also be a prophet)

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- 3) The human spokesperson being allowed to see into the heavenly realms, thus gaining a glimpse of God's "behind-the-scenes" intentions
- Symbolic visions and dreams that creatively describe both current hidden spiritual realities and future divine interventions
- Visions of God's coming judgment on human sin, including the final judgment at the end of the present age
- 6) Warnings of future trials God's people will face
- 7) Encouragement for God's people to remain faithful and persevere, looking to the future with hope that is rooted in faith

Numerous extrabiblical writings are apocalyptic, but two canonical books fit this genre: Daniel and Revelation. Other biblical writings include apocalyptic passages that are embedded within works that are mostly historical narratives or prophecy.

- Interpret apocalyptic passages in light of other Scriptures, not vice versa.
- Be very cautious in how closely you identify symbolic language with past or present events.
- Remember that at least certain symbols are clearly pointing to the future.
- Though apocalyptic writings often point to the future, there are also many principles that can be applied to present faithfulness.
- Remain humble, teachable, and agreeable.

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature collects the sayings of those whom the biblical authors consider to be wise. The sayings might be debates between wise and foolish characters, short sayings about wise living, or reflections on significant issues. Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are part of this genre. Many other books of the Bible contain individual "wisdom statements" that should be interpreted similarly to wisdom literature.

 Remember that this genre focuses upon general principles and normal patterns more than promises.

- Often, wisdom literature is best interpreted thematically rather than sequentially.
- Interpret wisdom literature in light of other Scriptures, which can help provide a framework for rightly understanding and applying principles and patterns.
- If sayings seem to contradict themselves recognize they are speaking to two different valid principles that can each be applied faithfully, depending upon the circumstance.

Poetry

Poetry is common in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and frequently crosses over into other genres, including proverbs, historical narrative, prophecy, and psalms. Normally, biblical authors write poetry for one of three reasons: (1) because it makes the words more memorable; (2) to express the author's emotions; (3) or to induce strong emotions from readers. As in other languages, Hebrew and Greek poetry uses figurative or hyperbolic language, symbolic images, and mnemonic devices such as acrostics, repetition of similar sounds, and various types of parallelism.

- The original poetry is sometimes lost in English translation.
- Poetry is rarely intended to be interpreted literally, but rather points to general principles and/or means to evoke an emotional response from readers.
- Interpret poetic language in light of other Scripture, while also allowing the emotions of biblical poetry to prevent us from being too abstract or clinical in how we formulate biblical doctrines and principles.

Parables

Biblical parables are short, normally fictitious stories that illustrates a spiritual principle by way of comparison with earthly examples. Approximately one-third of Jesus's teaching is in the form of parables, normally illustrating kingdom priorities and ethics.

- Identify the main point or points rather than getting bogged down on the details of the story.
- Look for recurring imagery in Jesus's parables.
- Allow the context of where the parable occurs in the Gospel to help you understand the point Jesus was making.

Epistles

Most of the books of the New Testament are epistles written by apostles and others who were closely connected to apostles. Epistles are letters that were written to individuals, churches, or groups of churches. Epistles can have a main theme or themes, or they can be less thematic and more topical. Epistles are intended to be didactic.

- Understand the historical context of both the author and the recipients.
- Break the epistle into units (often paragraphs) to help us understand how each section relates to the whole.
- Look for key verses, as well as words or phrases that either recur or seem to carry significant importance within the epistle.
- Understand the logic of sentences, then paragraphs, then larger sections like chapters, then the entire epistle.
- Apply many of these same principles to groups of epistles written by the same author.

Recommended Resources

Gregory Lanier, A Christian's Pocket Guide to How We Got the Bible (Christian Focus, 2012).

Matt Rogers and Donny Mathis, Seven Arrows: Aiming Bible Readers in the Right Direction (Rainer Publishing, 2017).

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word:* A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible, 4th ed. (Zondervan, 2020).

Robert L. Plummer, 40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible, 2nd ed. (Kregel Academic, 2021).
