

Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

BI-525 Principles of Biblical Interpretation II (Assessing Critical Methodologies and Developing Helpful Strategies)

(2 units)

Spring, 2010

Prerequisite: BI-505 (or by special permission)

Tim Geddert, Ph. D.

Bible Department

(559) 452-1716 (Office # 8)

tgeddert@mbseminary.edu

Office Hours: By appointment (or drop by!)

Course meets 8:30 – 11:30 Thursdays on the following dates: Feb. 4, 11, 18, 25, Mar. 4, 11, 25, Apr. 8, 15, 22. (Note, we are starting the second week of the semester and finishing before the end of the semester, since we meet only 10 times during the semester.)

A. Course Description

Preamble:

As Christians we confess that the Bible is a unique, God-inspired book. It is both divine and human, since God used humans in particular circumstances to contribute to a book of divine revelation. Ordinary Christians as well as academic Bible scholars have struggled to understand how best to hear God's Word as they study the Scriptures. Some have advocated studying the book as one would study any other book, finding the uniqueness of Scripture in the *message* it teaches, not in the *form* of the book, nor in the *means of its interpretation*. Others have tried to articulate ways in which the uniqueness of Scripture demands unique interpretive techniques that take into account the "spiritual nature" of Scripture.

In the "modern age" various critical scientific methodologies were developed. These methods have often focused on the historical backgrounds to biblical texts, the development and transmission of oral traditions, the earliest written texts and the development of the written tradition. As "modernism" began to yield to "postmodernism" these scientific methods were expanded to include critical literary and ideological techniques for reading Scripture. These newer methodologies often focus on the structure and content of the finished literary products and on the process of discerning meaning in the act of reading. Students of Scripture, both in the church and in the seminary, are influenced by these methods, whether or not they fully understand or approve of the assumptions behind, and the use of, these methodologies.

Today some Bible scholars are calling for a return to some pre-modern (sometimes termed "Patristic") approaches to Scripture, sometimes quite consciously abandoning some of the principles of Biblical interpretation that the Reformation (and particularly Martin Luther) advocated. Some of these scholars advocate typological and allegorical readings; they try to tune

into the “fourfold senses” of Scripture, etc.

This is a time of great creativity in Biblical interpretation. Old paradigms are being reconsidered. It is a time of great opportunity for Christian biblical scholars to influence the future direction of Biblical studies as they carefully evaluate the available options and aim to shape biblical scholarship in ways that serve the church and its mission.

This is also a time of great uncertainty among lay readers of Scripture. Most people discover sooner or later that a naïve flat reading of Scripture (“Just take everything literally!”) does not really work. Nor is it adequate to uncover the depths of the Scriptures’ meaning or to guide the church to apply its message faithfully. Many Christians are also unsure how to “read” Scripture effectively and faithfully. What is the role of academic scholarship? What is the role of the Holy Spirit? What is the role of the interpretive community? Which “hermeneutical strategies” are both faithful to the very nature of Scripture as God’s Word, and also fruitful in the task of understanding and applying Scripture to contemporary issues faced by the church and the world?

Nature of the course:

This course will use lectures, discussions, readings, written projects and class presentations to explore all these issues. The course aims to help students gain some expertise in the various fields alluded to above, but also to make room for students to explore one or two of these issues in greater depth.

Students are encouraged to focus on one of three areas of special focus. Your focus should determine the topic you select for your research paper and also influence the books you choose for your additional reading. During the course the professor will seek to provide guidance in each of these three areas.

Focus # 1: Critical methodologies for studying Scripture (recommended for students working on M.A. degrees in O.T. or N.T.)

Focus # 2: Theological issues in studying Scripture (recommended for students working on an M.A. in Theology or those with a special interest in theological reflection, regardless which degree they are pursuing.)

Focus # 3: Interpreting Scripture in the church (recommended for students whose primary concern is to learn strategies for interpreting Scripture in church ministry settings, especially M.Div. students.)

This course assumes that the basic principles for biblical study (including word studies, structural analyses, etc.) have been learned in BI-505 (Principles of Biblical Interpretation I).

B. Desired Outcomes of the Course

This course has as its desired outcomes . . .

1. That students are able understand a range of methods used by biblical scholars.

2. That students are able to identify the theological (and sometimes philosophical) assumptions that lie behind the use of various critical methodologies.
3. That students gain ability to evaluate these methods critically, not only in terms of their effectiveness as scientific tools, but also in terms of their appropriateness for use on the divine-human Scriptures.
4. That students learn to understand and evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of what are sometimes called “spiritual methods” of interpreting Scripture.
5. That students gain personal convictions about which methodologies are consistent with the study of the Bible as authoritative Scripture.
6. That students continue developing their own strategies for creative and faithful biblical interpretation.
7. That students develop strategies for actualizing the biblical text in ways that free Scripture to speak an authoritative word into contemporary issues facing the church and the world.
8. That students learn to discern which approaches to Scripture are most helpful in their own unique ministry contexts, and which ways of interpreting and applying Scripture can be effectively used to speak into an increasingly postmodern cultural context.

It is the goal of MBBS to ensure that through the courses we offer, every student shall:

1. Demonstrate commitment to live as a disciple of Jesus in Christian community
2. Articulate commitment to a biblical theological Christian perspective
3. Interpret diverse cultural contexts of ministry using theological perspectives integrated with social scientific approaches
4. Practice leadership skills.

In this course the first objective is fostered as students develop their abilities to draw Scriptural resources to nurture their own discipleship walk, and to minister to others within their faith communities in ways that facilitate faithful discipleship. It also facilitates reflection on a series of ethical issues that Christians are wrestling with in our time and culture.

The second is fostered as students reflect on the nature of Scripture as God’s Word and as they learn how to draw on biblical resources as they reach convictions about their understanding of Christian theology.

The third is fostered as students learn how our historical and social locations influence our perspectives on Scripture and on its teaching. It also reflects on how historical, social scientific and literary strategies can be brought to bear on faithful interpretation of the Scriptures.

The fourth is fostered as students learn to exegete and apply Scripture faithfully in their own personal biblical research and in preparation for public church ministries.

C. General MBBS and Specific Degree Objectives

This course is designed to lead to the following outcomes desired for MBBS students:

- To gain ability to articulate commitment to a biblical theological Christian perspective: This includes exegeting biblical texts within a design that includes the

- descriptive, synthetic, hermeneutical, and pragmatic analytical tasks. It also includes gaining ability to analyze, synthesize, and engage contemporary church and world issues from a biblical theological perspective
- To learn to assess the significance of cultural context for interpreting Scripture within and across cultures
 - To apply biblical theological perspectives in serving and leading in culturally and religiously diverse ministry contexts
 - To practice specific leadership skills in pastoral ministry. E.g. to do exegetical work designed to help prepare and proclaim sermons that are faithful to the biblical text and relevant to God's people in their cultural contexts.
 - To meet objectives set for specific degree programs, such as:
 - learning the assumptions and principles of biblical interpretation;
 - gaining ability to distinguish between primary and derivative teachings of Scripture;
 - gaining knowledge of the historical, political, intellectual, social, economic, and religious world of the biblical texts;
 - acquiring general knowledge of the Bible;
 - strengthening commitment to the inspiration and authority of the Bible;
 - learning personal and communal application of the biblical texts;
 - growing in ability to practice biblical exegesis and biblical theology;
 - gaining ability to use the biblical texts in a relevant fashion in the church and society.

D. Course Textbooks

Required Texts:

Davis, Ellen F. and Hays, Richard B. (editors). *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Eerdmans, 2003. (325 pp.) This collection of contributions by a range of scholars explores what it means to read the Scriptures "confessionally" (*as Christians*). It includes general considerations related to interpreting Scripture, a study of the Christian tradition of interpretation, proposed interpretations of a sample of "difficult" texts, and a series of short sermons (with commentary on them) that illustrate "confessional readings" of texts in the church.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. (91 pp). This short book explores what it means to read Scripture and preach its subversive message in the post-modern world.

Geddert, Timothy J. *All Right Now*. Herald Press, 2008. (available through the professor)

Geddert, Timothy J. *Double Take* MBBS (Fresno, CA) and Kindred Press (Winnipeg, Manitoba), 2007. This book is available for purchase at the main desk in the MBBS administration building. (cost: \$11.95 plus tax)

Note: I want to make a disclaimer here – Individual chapters of both of these last two books are also sometimes used in other courses (especially courses like Mark, Luke, Parables of Jesus, etc.)

Students in this course may have encountered the interpretations in other courses, or may do so in the future.

Other Recommended Books:

McKenzie, Steven L. and Stephen R. Haynes, eds. *To Each Its Own Meaning. An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Westminster: John Knox, 1999. (ca 300 pp)

John Barton (Editor) *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation (Cambridge Companions to Religion)*. Cambridge: C.U.P., 1998.

Joel B. Green (Editor). *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

Ewert, David. *How to Understand the Bible*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000.

E. Course Outline (subject to amendment)

Part I: The first part of the course will introduce a range of issues relevant to the interpretation of Scripture in the church. Required readings: “Living Responsibly” – Introduction and Chapter 1 and “The Art of Reading Scripture” – Introduction and Part I (pp. 1-65). DUE DATE FOR READING THESE SECTIONS: Feb. 11 (8:30 am)

Part II: Next we will survey the critical methodologies that characterized biblical scholarship during the modern era and the newer methodologies that are being promoted today.

Part III: Then we will study a variety of issues that help students shape an understanding of the nature of the Scriptures and the most appropriate methods of interpreting and applying them. These will include topics such as “inspiration”, “inerrancy”, “flat book” vs. “theology-on-the-run”, “authorial intent”, etc.

Part IV: Bringing together the pieces – In this part we will evaluate the interpretive strategies represented in the text books as well as aim to articulate our own personal convictions about the nature of Scripture and about appropriate and effective ways of interpreting it personally and in the life of the church. Here students will make short presentations, sharing with the class what they have learned in the course to this point.

F. Course Assignments

Regular class attendance and participation is required.

Students will choose one of three areas of specialization. Their choice will determine the focus of some of their assignments.

Reading: (TIME REQUIRED: approx. 36 hours)

1. Read the Davis/Hays text book. (325 pages) = ca 10 hours
Due date: Introduction and first chapter before class on Feb. 11. The rest of the book before class time on Feb. 25.
2. Read “Double Take.” = ca 4 hours
Due date: before class time on March 25.
3. Read “All Right Now.” = ca 6 hours
Due dates: before class time on April 8.
4. Read Brueggemann (91 pages) = ca 2 hours
Due date: before class time on April 15.
5. Additional reading: (500 pages) = ca 14 hours
Keep a log of additional reading (which material? how many pages? how much time invested?). Your reading should focus specifically on the area of your special focus and much of it on the specific topic of your study project.
Due date: April 29 (or by special permission)

Written Assignments: (TIME REQUIRED: approximately 20 hours)

1. **Reading notes:** (ca. 2 hours of work in addition to reading time)
 - As you read for this course, jot down key insights and questions raised by what you are reading. These will be submitted at the end of the course to be spot checked by the prof. However, their main function is not for grading purposes. The main functions are to keep you focused while reading, to help you distill the most important contributions of the texts, to give you resources to be used in class discussions and in your research work, etc. (no suggested length, but I would expect a minimum of a half page for each book you read, including your “additional reading.”)
 - Due date: While reading (see due dates for reading) Please submit your reading notes no later than April 29.
2. **Research project:** (ca. 12 hours work in addition to reading time)
 - Write a 6 - 8 page paper on a specific topic within your area of special focus.
 - Regardless which focus you have chosen, this paper is about the interpretation of Scripture. Here are some suggestions for each focus area:

Focus # 1 (critical methodologies)

- Study a particular critical methodology (e.g. redaction criticism, canonical criticism, reader-response criticism), explaining what it is/does, how it contributes to understanding Scripture and illustrate its use on one or more texts.
- OR Study a text of Scripture, self-consciously exploring how various critical methodologies shed light on the text (discuss the methodologies and show where

and how they are being used.)

Focus # 2 (theological issues)

- Write a paper on the concepts of “inerrancy” and “infallibility”
- OR Write on the nature and significance of “inspiration”
- OR Write on the basis and the nature of “biblical authority”, etc.

Focus # 3 (interpreting Scripture in the church)

- Write a paper about the role of the “community,” and/or of “teachers,” and/or of “discernment given by the Holy Spirit,” and/or of “church traditions / creeds / denominational guidelines” etc. in the act of interpreting Scripture.
- OR Write a paper about strategies that a church might helpfully use in interpreting Scripture on controversial issues.
- **Note:** This is NOT to be a paper about “What the Bible teaches about the Church” or “What the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit” etc. It is about how the church, the Holy Spirit, etc. contribute to the act of interpreting Scripture. It is also not to be a paper on “*What* the church concludes when it studies a particular topic”, rather it should be on *how* the church goes about studying important topics. Somehow I have not yet figured out how to say this clearly enough. Every year someone misunderstands the point I am trying to make. We will talk about this in class.
- Due date: You are to pick your topic and share it as part of your presentation on April 22. The paper is due on May 6 (or by special permission)

3. **Course response paper** (ca. 5 hours).

Write a 5-page paper in which you provide your own personal answers to the following questions:

- What is the role of critical methodologies for studying Scripture? Which of the methods discussed seem most fruitful?
- What roles are played in biblical interpretation by “other factors” such as the Holy Spirit, the hermeneutical community, etc.?
- How has your own view of the nature of Scripture and of the appropriate methods of interpreting and applying it been confirmed or modified through this course?
- If you were describing a personal strategy for interpretation Scripture, what would it include?
- DUE DATE: May 6 for graduating seniors; May 13 for non-graduates.

Class Presentation: (TIME REQUIRED: approximately 1 hour)

- During one of the last class session (Apr. 22), each student will make a short (2-3 minute) presentation in which you present to the class the following:
 1. One issue that the course has provoked you to re-consider and/or study more carefully.
 2. One issue on which you have changed your mind about something through course reading, class lectures, or some other part of the course.
 3. Your proposed research paper topic and why you chose it.

G. Grading

- You will be graded on your written assignments and presentations.
 - Reading notes (10%)
 - Research project (50%)
 - Reflection paper (35%)
 - Presentation (5%)
- After your grade is determined by these assignments, it will be adjusted downward if you do not complete your reading on time and/or if your class participation and attendance are inadequate.

Class Participation is one of the most significant parts of the shared learning experience at MBBS. Any student who misses more than 25% of the class time in a course may have their grade reduced by a full letter grade and may be at risk for failing the course. Exceptions to this policy may be considered because of medical or family emergencies; but all exceptions must be approved by the faculty member and the Academic Dean.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

MBBS academic policies (as well as other school policies) are described at <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/>. These policies provide guidance on academic integrity and plagiarism, accommodations for disability, incomplete course work, extensions, dates for changing registration, non-discriminatory and inclusive language, appeals, grading templates, etc. Students are expected to be familiar with these policies and will be held responsible for adhering to them. If you have questions about how these policies relate to you or to a situation that you face in your studies, please speak to your professor or consult the Registrar.

Course evaluations are to be completed online and are due one week after the completion of the course. Official grades will not be posted until the student's evaluation of the course is completed.

Formatting specifications for research papers. On questions of style and citation form, consult Carole Slade's, *Form and Style: Research Papers, Reports, Theses*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997 or later. The preferred documentation format is the parenthetical citation style, either the MLA or APA.

G. Course Bibliography:

Methodology

I. General

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- Analecta Biblica 139. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1998.
- Barton, John, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
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- Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
- Coggins, R. J., and J. L. Houlden. *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990.
- Culley, Robert C. *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation and Biblical Interpretation*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999.
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- Dyck, Elmer. *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
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- Green, Joel B., ed. *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
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- Patte, Daniel. *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1995.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Biblical Hermeneutics." *Semeia* 4 (1975): 29-148.
- Ryken, Leland. *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987.
- Sandy, D. Brent and Ronald L. Giese. *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*. Nashville: Broadman, 1995.
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- Thiselton, A.C. *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Tuckett, Christopher. *Reading the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.
- Wenham, Gordon J. *Torah as Story: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*. Edinburgh: T&T

Clark, 2000.
Yee, Gale A. *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

II. Historical-Critical Methodologies

Critical/Historical Method:

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Harvey, Van A. *The Historian and the Believer*. London: SCM, 1966. (ch. 1)
Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996.
Krentz, Edgar. *The Historical-Critical Method*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973. (chs. 1-5)
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Marshall, I.H., ed. *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*. Exeter: Paternoster, 1977.
Miller, J. Maxwell. "Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian's Approach." In Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R Haynes (eds.), *To Each Its Own Meaning*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999.
Wink, Walter. *The Bible in Human Transformation*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973. (ch 1)

Source Criticism:

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Beardslee, William A. *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970.
Friedman, Richard E. *Who Wrote The Bible?* New York: Harper & Row, 1987
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Habel, Norman C. *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.
Marshall, I. Howard, ed. *New Testament Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977. (ch. 8)
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Tradition Criticism:

- Bultmann, Rudolf. *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev. ed., trans. John Marsh. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, n.d.
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Redaction Criticism:

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III. Other Critical Methodologies

Social-Scientific Approaches:

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