

Introduction and Learning Outcomes

This module introduces students to the contemporary art of reading the Scriptures. To live is to interpret. There is no such thing as a pure event which speaks for itself. This is true also for the Scriptures which came down to us through the centuries in the life and interpretations of communities of faith. Taking account of the history of these traditions as well as the emergence of critical approaches in this area in the late 18th and 19th centuries, students will acquire knowledge of principal methods of contemporary critical approaches to the Bible as tools to highlight specific aspects of our readings in the contemporary context.

Particular attention will be paid to the fact that in the area of Biblical Interpretation the hegemony of the historical methods for interpretation has been increasingly challenged over the last twenty years from various perspectives. A vast variety of approaches has been developed which can be broadly divided into 'historical' and 'literary' approaches. A basic difference which can be found between them lies in their differing assumptions about the relationship between texts and history.

Historical methods such as source criticism, form criticism, tradition-historical criticism, and redaction criticism emphasize the historical, archaeological, or literary *backgrounds* of a text and the development of a text *through* time. Historical-critical methods are thus also referred to as *diachronic readings*. Historically oriented approaches tend to regard the intention of an author as an important element in the process of what a text meant originally as well as for what it means today.

Literary methods such as narrative criticism, reader-response criticism and post-critical approaches focus rather on *the text* in its final form itself, the variety of textual elements and their relationship, as well as on the interaction between text and readers. Literary approaches are thus also referred to as *synchronic readings*. Distinct from historical approaches authorial intention is often viewed as irretrievable or irrelevant to the interpretive process.

This broad distinction to some extent finds expression in the structure of this module, in that units 2 and 3 are introducing the student to historically oriented approaches to the Bible whereas units 4 and 5 provide introductions to more literary oriented approaches. But these distinctions, helpful as they are to some extent, have their limitations in that a number of methods and an even greater number of scholars cannot be easily listed under one or the other category. Many scholars use a combination of historical and literary approaches rather than being 'theoretical purists'. And some critical approaches, such as rhetorical-critical, feminist or postcolonial approaches do not easily fit the one or the other category, but include a number of aspects of both categories. Thus, in unit 5 approaches 'from both sides' are included, whereas unit 6 provides an outlook on the significance of the ethical dimension in any particular approach.

Structure

The module contains six units which guide the student from a general awareness of interpretation and its hermeneutical presuppositions to the peculiarities of some of the most important contemporary approaches and their significance.

Each unit consists of :

- an introduction to the unit (Section A)
- a list of 'Essential Readings' (**scans included on the VLE are marked with ****)
- a list of 'Further Readings' (if you wish to read more about a particular topic)
- questions which help you to understand what you have read
- Scans of the 'Essential Readings'
- References to 'Essential Readings' in the two main text books J.Barton ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998 and P.Gooder, *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*. London: SPCK 2008 (you are expected to have access to these)

It is anticipated that you work through all the material provided with this module. You are advised to study each unit sequentially but unit 6 you may cover at any time.

Unit 1	Biblical Interpretation and Hermeneutical Presuppositions
Unit 2	Historical Critical Approaches
Unit 3	Social – Sciences Approaches
Unit 4	Literary Approaches
Unit 5	Contemporary Contextual Approaches
5.1	Feminist Interpretation
5.2	Postcolonial and Cross-Cultural Interpretation
Unit 6	Post-Critical Interpretation
Unit 7	Jewish Interpretation
Unit 8	The Ethics of Reading

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the module the student should be able to:

- evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in biblical interpretation
- evaluate methodologies and their hermeneutical presuppositions and critically interact with them in their own approaches
- offer a comprehensive understanding of the methods of interpretation as practised in contemporary biblical research
- display the ability to apply contemporary methods of interpretation in their interpretation in an informed way

Assessment

The assignment consists of

- 1. one detailed textual analysis (1500 words) 25%**
- AND**
- 2. one essay (3500 words) 75%**

Detailed Textual Analysis:

1. Provide a detailed interpretation of Lk 2.1-20 or 1 Sam 18.1-8 applying insights from a narrative critical perspective.
2. Provide a detailed interpretation of Lk 10.38-42 or Ezek. 16 applying insights from a social-scientific perspective.
3. Provide a detailed analysis of Rom 16.1-16 applying insights from a feminist perspective.
4. Provide a detailed analysis of Gal 3.27-28 in light of one of the approaches discussed in this module.

Essay Titles

1. Discuss and critically evaluate the diversity of contemporary biblical interpretation with reference to at least two of the approaches discussed in this module.
2. The historical-critical approach has lost its previous dominating position in biblical interpretation. Discuss and critically evaluate its role in the context of contemporary biblical studies.
3. In social-scientific approaches models derived from contemporary societies are applied to societies of antiquity. Critically discuss and evaluate the merits and limitations of this application.
4. The authority of the Bible does not absolve the interpreter from his/her ethical responsibility for the outcome of his/her interpretation. Discuss with particular reference to a contemporary issue.

