

Hermeneutica Sacra and its Implications For Old Testament Theology



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ABSTRACT

Scholars have used different hermeneutical approaches to interpret the Holy Scriptures. A scholar's background, the gap between the author and the reader, and scholars' diverse context and worldview are possible problems that affect a unified approach in handling Hermeneutica Sacra. From this perspective, this paper argues that no method is superior to another; instead, integrating some approaches to interpreting the Holy Scriptures is perhaps the better option. The researcher used the descriptive method in this paper. The findings reveal that the Christological and typological approaches can be used integratively to interpret the Old Testament. Also, allegorical, literal and symbolic methods can possibly be used to interpret signs, symbols, and imageries. The interpretation of these signs, symbols, and imageries is essential for understanding Old Testament Theology. African scholars should promote integrative methods for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars over the years have used different hermeneutical tools to exegete the Holy Scriptures. As a converging point for Christians, the interpretation of the Bible has generated several disagreements among scholars. Olusayo B. Oladejo notes that several controversies may have resulted in diverse approaches coined by scholars today. The interpreter's presupposition is supposedly one of the factors that led to the multiple interpretations.¹ Interpreters are constrained by their backgrounds to either stretch a text to bring out what may be of necessity or proof-text a passage to defend a point. This may suggest that as numerous as there are interpreters of the Holy Scriptures, many diverse approaches are possible.

In line with Oladejo's submission on diverse approaches, Bart Ehrman acknowledges that history has proven how interpreters and scholars within their respective contexts have engaged the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The processes involved in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures are different among biblical scholars.² Ehrman traces the issue of 'meaning and contexts' to vary depending on readers. John Goldingay submits that "Scripture has a variety of ways of speaking, and the process of interpretation requires a variety of hermeneutical approaches, corresponding to this variety in types of texts."³ Goldingay

¹ Olusayo B. Oladejo, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Decision-Making: A Critique of the Dispensationalist Approach," *International Journal of Current Research*, 8, no. 2 (February, 2016): 27039-27043.

² Bart D. Ehrman, *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective* Mark S. and Paul Rorem (ed.) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 21.

³ John. Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 1.

acknowledges that the types of texts lead to many different hermeneutical approaches. The types of texts may not necessarily be a problem; instead, the readers and their presuppositions may account for the various methods.⁴

Berkhof suggests that the gap between the author and his readers is another reason that constitutes the various interpretative approaches.⁵ Interpreters' diverse contexts and worldviews are other factors that militate against a unified approach in handling *Hermeneutica Sacra*. Thus, this researcher argues that no method is superior to others; instead, integrating some approaches can help address the Holy Scriptures. This researcher used the descriptive method in this paper. Conceptual clarification, the elements of *Hermeneutica Sacra*, and implications for Old Testament Theology are the themes discussed in this paper.

Conceptual Clarification

The Hebrew word for hermeneutics is coined from the term פָּתַר (*Pathar*) 'to interpret', and פִּתְרוֹן (*Pithron*) 'interpretation'. The Greek equivalent is ἐρμηνεία (*hermeneia*) 'interpretation' and ἀρμονικός (*harmonious*) 'to interpret'.⁶ Zuck Roy notes that "Hermeneutic is the science (principles) and arts (task) by which the meaning of the biblical text is determined."⁷ Similarly, Grant Osborne also acknowledges that "Hermeneutics is a science since it provides a logical, orderly classification of the laws of interpretation. Secondly, hermeneutics is an art, for it is an acquired skill demanding both imagination and ability to apply the laws to a passage or book."⁸ Others scholars like Carl Robert and Bernard Ramm describe hermeneutics as the 'art' and 'science' of interpretation.⁹ Scholars like Anthony Headley Benjamin Zeller also believe that hermeneutics is a science of interpreting the sacred text.¹⁰ To this effect, the writer agrees with Ramm and Roy that hermeneutics is both an art and science of interpreting because it involves both principles and tasks in interpretation.

Elements of Hermeneutica Sacra

The Bible is the primary object of *Hermeneutica Sacra*. The description and character of the Bible determine the principles that should control its interpretation. Berkhof submits that the inspiration of the Bible, the unity and diversity of the Bible, and the unity of the sense of Scripture are possibly some principles that control *Hermeneutica Sacra*.¹¹ Bernard Ramm aligns his thought with Berkhof and traces further 'the spiritual factor', 'Progressive revelation', 'the self-interpretation of scripture', and 'theological exegesis' as other essential principles.¹² Robert Cate still traces the divine nature of the Bible, especially the inspiration of the Bible and the unity of the Bible as the primary principles of *Hermeneutica Sacra*.¹³ Berkhof and Ramm have stated what one may consider hermeneutical principles that should be the premise for which various interpreters and their thoughts are assessed and validated today.

⁴ Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scriptures*, 1.

⁵ L. B. D. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation (Sacred Hermeneutics)* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1950), 11.

⁶ Oladejo, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Decision-Making, 27039-27043; Hendrik Birus, "Hermeneutics Today Some Skeptical Remarks," *New German Critique*, 42 (Autumn, 1987): 71-78. Jose Angel Garcia Landa, "Theories of Interpretation: Classical to Romantic Hermeneutics," *Electronic Journal* (January, 1993).

⁷ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Illinois: SP Publication Inc., 1991), 27; J.C.K. von Hofmann, *Interpreting the Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), 18.

⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 6.

⁹ Cate L. Robert. *How to Interpret the Bible*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1983), 14; Bernard L. Ramm, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 10.

¹⁰ Anthony J. Headley, "Hermeneutics: Interpreting Sacred and Living Texts," *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 6 no.1 (Winter, 2019):87-118; Benjamin E Zeller, "Extraterrestrial Biblical Hermeneutics and the Making of Heaven's Gate," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 14, no. 2 (November 2010): 34-60.

¹¹ Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 41.

¹² Ramm, *Hermeneutics*, 20-24.

¹³ Cate, *How to Interpret the Bible*, 21-28.

Advocates of Hermeneutica Sacra

Some scholars argue that Hermeneutica Sacra is probably the only better option for an adequate proper interpretation. They base their arguments on the aforementioned principles of Hermeneutica Sacra.

Clement of Rome: David Dockery suggests that Clement of Rome used the Christological approach for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. He was not very much concerned about understanding what the Old Testament says concerning Christ; instead, his interest was to use the picture of Christ as a basis for what is known as moral obedience.¹⁴ Another approach in interpreting the Holy Scripture is the typological method. **Justin Martyr:** Justin Martyr used typology as an approach for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The typological approach of Justin was hinged on the Christocentric tenets. He believed that the OT in its whole pointed to Jesus Christ. Justin used words like ‘mystery’, ‘announcement’, ‘signs’, ‘parable’, ‘symbol’, and ‘type’ to describe his approach.¹⁵ Robert Grant notes that typology as a method “is based on the presupposition that the whole of the OT looks beyond itself for its interpretation.”¹⁶ This suggests that to interpret the OT using the typological method, one must have a vivid connection to the New Testament. Martyr used typology as an approach, while Irenaeus and Tertullian applied authoritative hermeneutics.

Irenaeus believed that “the rule of faith preserved the apostolic tradition in the Church and functioned as the normative guide for interpretation. The rule of faith could best be expressed as the Church’s belief in one God.”¹⁷ This rule of faith laid the groundwork during the early church period in combating false teachers and perhaps became the premise for the ‘Apostle Creed’ that some churches recite during worship services in unionism. James Kugel highlights that Irenaeus, the father of authoritative exegesis, believed that the church faith rests on “the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures and identity of Christ. These issues were crucial to the debate with Gnosticism.”¹⁸ Barton Payne traces that Irenaeus valued the illumination of men and the inspiration of men. He conceived the idea of progressive revelation in doing theology.¹⁹ John Bright opines that exegesis precisely follows the ‘grammatico-historical method’, which seeks to understand the language (Greek or Hebrew) of a text within its proper contexts. Bright traces further that the explanation of a text is qualified as theological because the interpretation stems from the interpreter’s theological presupposition.²⁰ This may suggest that every text has a theological connotation and should be treated that way. However, Tertullian argued that the “Apostolic Scriptures belong to the Apostolic Church, as did apostolic tradition contained in the rule of faith.”²¹ Tertullian was careful not to discard the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures from the rule of faith, which to him belonged to the apostolic Church. This may imply that any interpretation that falls short of the Apostolic Tradition should be queried in the Church and, if possible, discarded. Another critical approach is the allegorical interpretation.

Philo of Alexandria is described as a prominent Jewish scholar who used allegory in the first century to interpret the Holy Scriptures. He was influenced by ‘Stoic and Platonic’ ideas. Philo tenaciously used allegorical interpretation to interpret every text in the Holy Scriptures, especially the OT, which he treated as a body of symbols God gave to man for his spiritual and moral blessing.²² Besides, Philo, who applied allegorical interpretation to interpret the Holy Scripture, is a college of scholars like the Palestinian Jews (Hillel and Shammai, Clement of Alexandrian, Origen and Augustine).

Hillel is one of the Palestinian Jews who had respect for the Holy Scriptures. The Palestinians treated the Torah over and against the Prophets and the Holy Writings. It is assumed that the more significant

¹⁴ David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 102.

¹⁵ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 103.

¹⁶ Robert Grant and David Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible 2nd ed* (ed)(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 37.

¹⁷ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 106.

¹⁸ James L. Kugel, and Rowan A. Greer. *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 156.

¹⁹ Barton J. Payne, *Inspiration and Interpretation* John F. Walvoord, (ed.). (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 30.

²⁰ John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 170.

²¹ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 107.

²² Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period 2nd ed*. (Grand Rapid, Michigan: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 30-31.

objective was to ensure that the *Torah* was adequately interpreted.²³ Hillel, the Elder, happened to be one of the best Jewish interpreters. He introduced seven rules that were used to interpret the Holy Scriptures, namely “(a) light and heavy, (b) equivalence, (c) deduction from special to general, (d) an inference from several passages, (e) inferences tracing general to special, (f) analogy from another passage (g) an inference from the context.”²⁴ Hillel’s seven rules communicate an intentional and careful search for meaning in the Holy Scripture.

Rabbi Shammai, a Jewish interpreter was a contemporary to Rabbi Hillel. The personality and hermeneutical approach of Shammai differed from that of Hillel. It is assumed that Rabbi Shammai was a man with a violent temper. He rigidly interpreted the law. The teaching of Shammai and Hillel often directly conflicted with each other. The school of Hillel is presumed to have gained popularity and influence over and against the school of Shammai after the fall of Jerusalem (A. D 70).²⁵

Clement of Alexandria used allegorical interpretation to insinuate that every text in the Holy Scriptures has more than one meaning. He taught that there is a deeper meaning to a text that is uncovered by allegorical interpretation. Also, Dockery argues that this approach begins with literal observation and later moves to the allegorical interpretation proper.²⁶ Origen is another church father who used allegorical interpretation and is described as a prince of Christian allegorical interpretation. It is assumed that Origen was so interested in the “literalistic in his interpretation of the sacred text, that he strongly affirmed the literal inspiration of every word of Scripture.”²⁷ Allegorical interpretation denotes that every text has a hidden meaning. It also connotes that nothing unworthy should be attributed to God. The text should be interpreted in consideration of the rest of the Holy Scriptures, and the rule of faith should be affirmed in interpretation.²⁸ Bostock states that Origen used “symbolism against the background of Christian Platonism, to transform the facts of history into images of experience.”²⁹ Bostock’s assumption suggests that Origen used both symbolism and allegory as methods in interpreting the Holy Scriptures.

Augustine is another church father and theologian who applied symbolism and allegory to interpret the Holy Scriptures. Augustine used both the literal and symbolic interpretations to bring out meaning in the Holy Scriptures. Augustine made use of the sign or symbol in decoding how God was understood. It is assumed that he did not discard allegorical interpretation. Augustine used allegory in interpreting the Psalm and demonstrated the ability to compare Scripture with Scripture than anyone else.³⁰

Form Criticism: Hermann Gunkel is the proponent of Form Criticism. The primary object of Form critics is first to identify the earliest oral form of a periscope, precisely the smallest unit of text that constitutes the whole. Secondly, they attempt to determine how the piece was used in the lives of the people, described as the situation in life (*Sitz im Leben*).³¹ Literary criticism is another fundamental modern basic principle used in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

Advocates against Hermeneutica Sacra

Some scholars and theologians do not support the Hermeneutica Sacra as an idea pattern of interpretation. They argue that Hermeneutica Sacra is not the only way of interpretation. Roger Dickson opines that “there is no systematic method of Bible study revealed in the scriptures. Therefore, no methodology of hermeneutics must ever be made doctrine. The Bible was not written in a manner that needed a special

²³ Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 15.

²⁴ Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 16.

²⁵ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 29.

²⁶ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 109.

²⁷ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 110.

²⁸ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 111.

²⁹ Gerald Bostock, “Allegory and the Interpretation of the Bible in Origen.” *Literature and Theology*, 1, no.1 (March 1987):39-53.

³⁰ Dockery, *Christian Scripture*, 121.

³¹ Rick Johnson, “Modern Old Testament Interpretation,” *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, Corley, Bruce. Steve Lemke and Grant Lovejoy (eds.) (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 105. Tremper mentioned literary criticism as another approach - Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation Vol. 3*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 3.

revealed hermeneutic to be understood.”³² Firstly, Dickson denies the authenticity of any hermeneutical approach. Secondly, he argues that no particular interpretative approach is needed to uncover meaning from the Holy Scriptures. This suggests that the interpretation and application of the Bible are not restricted to a selected few; instead, everyone has the liberty to interpret it as they deem fit. However, Grant Osborne is right to note that hermeneutics, when used to interpret scriptures, is considered a spiritual act that depends on the Holy Spirit. But, he affirms that most modern scholars ignore the sacred dimension of the Bible and turn to approach it as literature.³³ Feminist hermeneutics, Black theology and deliverance hermeneutics are other approaches.

Phyllis Bird assumes that feminist theologians and scholars do approach the task of interpreting the Holy Scriptures with “built-in suspicious of claims to absolute truth as well as reluctance to grant authority to a tradition that has neglected or misrepresented their experience; as women.”³⁴ The hermeneutics of suspicion is common among most feminist scholars. This approach shares some commonality with the ‘sceptic’ approach of David Hume³⁵ and the rationalistic approach of Benedict Spinoza.³⁶ Bird denies the authority of the Holy Scriptures on the ground that it is predominantly a patriarchal document and a source of women’s oppression and a false witness to their ‘nature and character’.³⁷ This suggests that the authority of the Holy Scriptures may not mean that much to some who have considered other avenues like faith community behind a Bible text as the source of authority. The patriarchal concept of the Bible to many feminists is not welcome in their context.³⁸ Amador acknowledges that feminist interpreters are more concerned to tackle the Holy Scriptures with the primary objective to unravel the “structures of exploitation and oppression.”³⁹

Another feminist scholar is Musimbi Kanyoro, who begins her argument on the premise that “Biblical hermeneutics, as a theological subject, permits people from one generation to another to reinterpret scriptural texts in the light of their times and cultures. All interpretation bears the bias of the interpreters... the semantics value of symbols and words are culturally determined.”⁴⁰ The emphasis here is on reinterpreting scriptural texts according to the time and culture of the interpreter. The culture and time may seem to control the interpretation of any text. This suggests that the cultural analysis, according to Kanyoro, leaves the interpreters with the liberty to impose their interpretation on a biblical text. She traces the fact that cultural hermeneutics uses the culture and its value system as a premise for interpretation in most contexts today.⁴¹ This suggests that culture influences the way many turn to interpret scriptures within the community of faith. The historical facts and settings of the text are completely ignored and discarded by many in the process of interpretation. Thus, cultural hermeneutics is another method that traces the good aspects of the culture over and against the bad.

Leron Shults is another scholar who traces the post-foundationalist approach of Wolfhart Pannenberg. He argues that the task of post-foundationalist is “to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue within the current postmodern culture while both are maintaining a commitment to intersubjective, transcommunal theological argumentation for the truth of Christian faith, and recognizing the provisionality of historically embedded understandings and culturally conditioned explanations of the Christian tradition and religious experience.”⁴² Shults’s suggestions imply that a post-foundationalist goal is to strike a balance between the traditional approach to interpretation and the non-traditional approach.

³² Roger E. Dickson, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Africa International Missions, 2017), 5.

³³ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 10.

³⁴ Phyllis Bird, “Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Text,” *Neotestamentica*, 28, no. 2 (1994): 323-337.

³⁵ Robert A. Lamer, “Interpreting Hume on Miracles,” *Religious Studies* 45, no. 3 (Sep. 2009): 335-338.

³⁶ Graeme Hunter, “Spinoza on Miracles,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 56, no. 1 (Aug., 2004): 41-51.

³⁷ Bird, “Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Text,” 333.

³⁸ Bird, “Authority and Context in the Interpretation of Biblical Text,” 333.

³⁹ J.D.H. Amador, “Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: A Failure of Theoretical Nerve.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 66, no.1 (Spring, 1998): 39-57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1466240> accessed April 22, 2021.

⁴⁰ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 9.

⁴¹ Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, 9.

⁴² Leron Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 18.

An Appraisal and Synergy of the Approaches

Scholars may differ in approach yet still have a common ground to blend their ideas, particularly on Hermeneutica Sacra. The Christological approach used by Clement of Rome to interpret the Holy Scriptures is related to the typological approach of Justin Martyr. The typological approach applies Christocentric values to interpret the Old Testament. Another approach is the authoritative approach by Irenaeus, who argues for the rule of faith that preserved the Apostolic tradition. This approach upholds the Apostolic tradition as the basis for interpretation. Allegory is another hermeneutical approach that most church fathers and scholars used in time past, and it is still used today. The allegorical approach incorporates the literal and symbolic aspects for interpretation. These two approaches have some close affinity in connection to the Hermeneutica Sacra. The advocates of this view argue that there is a hidden meaning to every text in the Holy Scriptures. The hermeneutics of suspicion common among feminist theologians has some affinity with the sceptic and rationalistic approach. These approaches are closely related to the allegorical approach. Another approach is cultural hermeneutics by Musimbi Kanyoro. Cultural hermeneutics and post-foundationalist are some post-modern approaches that are used for interpretation today. These approaches emphasize that individuals are at liberty to decide per their contexts the meaning of a text.

These approaches are interconnected in several ways. Firstly, they use the Holy Scripture as their text of reference to affirm or disclaim its message. Secondly, these approaches align with source criticism, form criticism and literary criticism in various ways. The type of genre used in a particular passage of the Holy Scriptures is another essential concern. This writer observes that the methods are closely related.

Implications for Old Testament Theology

The Christological and typological approaches are used to interpret the Old Testament. These approaches give the impression that every text in the Old Testament has something to do with the person of Christ; in other words, Christ is their yardstick to interpret the OT. They used the Christological and typological approaches to develop a Christocentric theology in the OT. This writer agrees that Christological and typological approaches are possible ways that one may use to interpret the OT. Genesis 3:15, 21 is one of such passages that the typological approach interprets as a proto-type to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to forgive sin. However, the shortcoming of these approaches is the inability to recognize that not everything is a 'type' of Christ in the OT. The Christological approach has its limit, and if it is stretched beyond bounds, it may lead to heresy.

In addition, there are several signs, symbols and imageries in the OT. The interpretation of these signs, symbols, and imageries is essential for understanding Old Testament Theology. Allegorical, literal and symbolic approaches help decode the meaning of such components in the OT. The staff of Moses in Exodus 14:16 is an example of a symbol of authority. The Holy Scriptures are a point of reference for the validity of truth today. However, the implication is that inadequate understanding of what some signs, symbols and imageries represent may lead to faulty interpretations. Some people have interpreted the five stones (1 Sam. 17:40) that David used against Goliath to build a theology that the five stones represent Jesus. Another passage that many have used allegory overtimes to interpret is Isaiah 5:1-7; where the vineyard and vine metaphors could mean anything to different interpreters. However, the text emphasises God's dissatisfaction with the attitude of Israel and Judah (Isa.5:1-7).

Finally, the OT describes the religions of the Israelites and their relationship with God and the neighbouring nations. This relationship between God and Israel climaxes with the cutting of a covenant in Exodus 19:1-6. There are many, specifically some feminist theologians, who argue that the OT is highly patriarchal. These scholars turn to be suspicious with every text that seems to project males over females. The implication is that they see the OT as gender-biased. However, the OT is inclusive; for instance, Zelophehah's daughter pleaded for their share of the inheritance, and the LORD granted their request. Hence, it is clear that various passages in the Bible are interpreted using various approaches. An intergration of the approaches in the interpretation of the Bible is always the better option to foster cohesion.

CONCLUSION

The writer focused on Hermeneutica Sacra and its implications for Old Testament Theology. The aim was to examine the various approaches that have been used overtime to interpret the Holy Scriptures. The researcher argued that no hermeneutical approach is superior to others; instead, integrating some of the approaches to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures is a better option for now. The findings revealed that the Christological and typological approaches have the same essence. These two are closely related to the authoritative approach and the rule of faith, literal and symbolic approaches. The cultural context may better serve as a platform for applying the derived truth from the Holy Scriptures than as a hermeneutical tool. Therefore the integrative methods appear to be the better option for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

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