

Introduction: Why Study Biblical Hermeneutics?

Why is there a need for Biblical Hermeneutics? Can we not understand the Bible by just reading it? Besides, studying Biblical Hermeneutics maybe a waste of time and effort. Reading though seemingly enough to approach the Bible is very inadequate and misleading. This may be illustrated by the following short story:

There was a couple who decided to go on a Forest Trip. In preparation for the very exciting experience, they wore forest suits and brought camera (on the right hand of the husband) for picture taking and shotgun (on the left hand of the husband) for protection against any attack from the wild animals. As they entered the forest, a beautiful and colored feather peacock surprised their attention. To her surprise, the wife shouted at her husband "Shoot it honey, shoot it!" So the husband took a picture of the peacock. The couple continued walking until they reached the habitat of the giraffes and faced one of them. Again the wife shouted at her husband "shoot it honey, shoot it!" Immediately the husband took a picture of the tall giraffe. They went on all over the forest taking pictures of different animals. When they were about to go out of the forest, suddenly, there came a lion In front of them roaring aloud. The wife fearfully shouted at her husband "Shoot it honey, shoot it!" The husband softly answered "I can't do it". The wife asked, "Why can't you shoot it? The husband calmly replied "I can't shoot it because I ran out of film."¹

By just Reading alone, one's own Pre-understanding tends to dominate the Bible.

Pre-understanding is the prior conception of an interpreter about the subject to be interpreted. Anyone who reads the Bible carries Pre-understanding into it. No one approaches the Bible with an empty mind (see Figure #1).

There are four categories of Pre-understanding namely: Informational; Attitudinal; Ideological; and Methodological.² **Informational Pre-understanding** refers to the ideas and concepts learned. These are information accumulated by an interpreter from his childhood until the present. For examples, everybody has been taught that a ball is round and a light is bright. However, one is wrong in saying that all balls are round and lights are bright because an American football is not round (but oblong shaped) and a dim light is not bright (but dim). Another example is that many presume that there were only three kings who visited Jesus when he was born. This is based on the three kinds of gifts (myrrh, incense and gold) the Wise men brought to Jesus and the institution of the Feast of Three Kings (by the Roman Catholic Church). But the Bible does not explicitly records only three kings. The Greek term 'Magi' (Wise men, Kings), plural of 'Mago' cannot be limited to only just three.

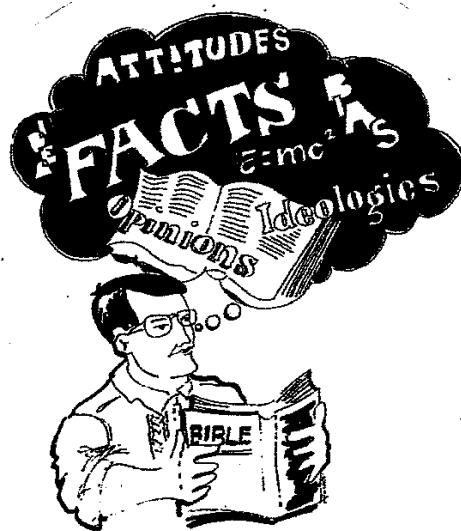
¹ This short story has been revised and was taken by the writer from an issue of the 'Reader's Digest', author and date are unknown

² Ferguson, Duncan, Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1987), 13-20

Attitudinal Pre-understanding is any bias or disposition developed by a person that affects the interpretation of the Scriptures: a greedy person may question God's command to give generously to the works of God (2 Corinthians 9:6-15); Those who have developed hatred and resentment against others in their hearts may doubt the truthfulness of Jesus' instruction to Peter about forgiving offenders seventy seven times seven (Matthew 18:21-22); People with superiority complex may be critical to the Biblical teaching of servanthood.

One's own worldview or philosophy influences Bible interpretation. This **Ideological Pre-understanding** is reflected on the meaning given to any passage of the Scriptures. For example, Lesbianism and Homosexuality are not sinful for those who believe and practice them, so that Paul's inspired words (in Romans 1:26-27) condemning Lesbianism and Homosexuality have no effect. Another example is evident in a person with a communistic ideology who considers Jesus as a political revolutionary basing on his negative attitude towards the religious leaders of Israel. This is a contradiction to the testimony of the Gospel that Jesus did not fight against the civil and religious leaders of Israel and Rome but rather submitted to their prosecution and execution.

Methodological Pre-understanding is the method of interpretation an interpreter learned from his denominational and theological heritage: Liberals interpret miracles in the Bible as mere myths and legends because their mindset is critical to supernaturalism; Christians who agree with Cessationism³ believe that the Miraculous Gifts listed in I Corinthians 12:7-11 do not anymore exist or not operational today; Many who read the Scriptures use the method 'Spiritualization' or 'Allegory' in that they give spiritual meanings to literal truths.



**Figure # 1: One's Own Pre-understanding At Work
During Bible Reading and/or Interpretation**

³ A view that propounded the Cessation of the Miraculous Gifts of the Holy Spirit after the Apostolic Period.