

Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 8, Gadamer to Bultmann Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 8, Gadamer to Bultmann, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt discusses the evolution of hermeneutics, focusing on the contributions of 20th-century thinkers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Rudolf Bultmann. **Gadamer's "new hermeneutic" emphasizes a dialogue between the interpreter and the text, resulting in a "fusion of horizons,"** acknowledging the unavoidable influence of the interpreter's background. **Bultmann's existential hermeneutics stresses an existential encounter with the text,** advocating for demythologization to reach the text's core meaning. The lecture also contrasts these approaches with earlier, more objectively-oriented hermeneutical traditions. Finally, the text introduces historical-critical methods, examining their underlying assumptions and principles.

2. 9 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 8 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).



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3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts, including relevant quotes.

Briefing Document: Hermeneutics - Gadamer & Bultmann

Introduction:

This document summarizes key concepts from a lecture on hermeneutics, focusing on the influential 20th-century thinkers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Rudolf Bultmann, as well as tracing some of the historical influences leading up to them. The lecture explores how these figures have shaped our understanding of interpretation, particularly in relation to biblical texts, and how they continue to influence modern hermeneutics. The lecture emphasizes that hermeneutics is not just about understanding texts but about understanding life and is cross-disciplinary.

Key Themes and Ideas:

1. Historical Context & Influences:

- The lecture traces the development of hermeneutics from the Enlightenment figures (Bacon, Schleiermacher, etc.) to the 20th century, highlighting that methods of thinking and understanding influence biblical interpretation.
- There is a shift from seeing understanding as purely objective and scientific to recognizing the role of the interpreter's context and pre-understandings.

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Philosophical Hermeneutics:

- **The "New Hermeneutic":** Gadamer's work, notably *Truth and Method*, is considered the foundation of "philosophical hermeneutics" and challenged previous views of interpretation as purely scientific or subject-dominated.
- *"Gadamer was also reacting to the scientific method and the pursuit of knowledge of objective truth by human reasoning and rational thinking."*
- **Critique of Objectivity:** Gadamer rejects the idea of a neutral, detached observer. He argues that our understanding is always colored by our "interests, our beliefs, our situation in life, our biases, our predispositions," and that this is necessary for understanding.

- *"We are so entangled and enmeshed in the world in which we live that whenever we try to understand something... our interests, our beliefs, our situation in life, our biases, our predispositions, all color our understanding."*
- *"there's no such thing as an objective, neutral observer or interpreter."*
- **Pre-Understanding:** Unlike Locke's "blank slate" idea, Gadamer asserts that we come to everything with pre-existing categories of understanding, making previous understanding a necessity.
- *"Apart from categories of understanding, apart from a previous understanding, how can we hope to grasp or understand anything?"*
- **Dialogue and the Fusion of Horizons:** Interpretation is not a passive reception of information but an active dialogue between the interpreter and the text. This involves a "fusion of horizons" where both the interpreter's and the text's perspectives are enlarged and modified.
- *"we actually enter into a dialogue with the text itself."*
- *"The horizons of the text and the horizons of the interpreter come kind of to a mutual consent, a mutual understanding, a common understanding between the text and the interpreter."*
- **No Single Correct Interpretation:** The goal is not to arrive at a single, definitive meaning of a text but to broaden the understanding of both the text and the interpreter.
- *"for Gadamer, this did not mean that the result of this process somehow was a correct final interpretation of a text, or a specific single correct meaning that came from the text."*
- **Hermeneutics as Dialogue:** Gadamer championed "a hermeneutics of dialogue," where the interpreter actively engages with the text, bringing their questions and assumptions, and being challenged and changed by the text's meaning.
- *"So for Gadamer, he championed what could be called sort of a hermeneutics of dialogue, again, where the interpreter enters into a dialogue with the text."*
- **Contributions of Gadamer:** Gadamer highlights the impossibility of a neutral observer.
- He emphasizes the dialogical nature of interpretation.

- He sees interpretation as an ongoing process that can yield new insights over time.
- **Questions Raised by Gadamer's Approach:** Are there limits to understanding?
- Is the dialogue a vicious circle, making objective meaning inaccessible?

1. **Rudolf Bultmann and Existential Hermeneutics:**

- **Pre-Understanding:** Bultmann, like Gadamer, emphasizes the crucial role of pre-understanding in interpretation.
- *"Bultmann emphasized that our understanding of a biblical text is conditioned by our prior understanding. In other words, there's no such thing as an objective neutral observer of the text, but instead, when we come to the text, influenced by our prior understanding."*
- **Circular Process:** Bultmann viewed the process of understanding as circular, beginning with pre-understanding which is then modified or rejected through engagement with the text.
- *"We begin with our pre-understanding, and that is either confirmed, rejected, or modified in dialogue with the text."*
- **Existential Encounter:** The goal of interpretation, for Bultmann, is to experience an existential encounter with the text, focusing on authentic human existence. Influenced by Martin Heidegger.
- *"According to Bultmann, the goal of hermeneutics is an existential encounter with the text...the goal was to be open to what this text says about the possibilities for authentic human existence."*
- **Demythologization:** Bultmann advocated for "demythologizing" the New Testament, removing what he considered outdated, pre-scientific worldview elements (miracles, demons, etc.) to get to the text's existential meaning.
- *"we have to strip away all the myth related to this outmoded worldview dominated by the miraculous...We strip away the myth to get at the true meaning of the biblical text."*
- For Bultmann, the resurrection of Jesus, for example, was not a literal event but an existential call to faith.

1. Summary of Historical Roots and Influences on Hermeneutics:

- The lecture summarized various influences on hermeneutics including:
- **Inductive Approach:** (Bacon) Emphasis on scientific inductive reasoning, extracting meaning from data in a neutral way.
- **Autonomous Thinker:** (Descartes, Kant) Emphasis on human reason, logic, and the ability of the autonomous thinker.
- **The Blank Slate:** (Locke) The mind as a blank slate that receives sensory impressions.
- **Author's Intention:** (Schleiermacher) Goal of interpretation is to understand the author's thoughts and intentions.
- **Fusion of Horizons:** (Gadamer) Interpretation as a dialogue and fusion of perspectives.
- **Existential Encounter:** (Bultmann) Goal of interpretation is an existential encounter with the text.
- **Legacies of these influences:**
 - Emphasis on inductive approaches and correct methods for discovering the meaning of the text.
 - Emphasis on uncovering the author's intended meaning by empathizing with the author.
 - Emphasis on the reader as the autonomous self.
 - Recognition that no one comes to the text without biases.
 - Recognition that interpretation is a dialogue.
- **Introduction to Historical Critical Method: Criticism Defined:** Criticism is presented in a positive way as providing justification for the position we hold and is different than gullibility or naivety.
- **Behind the Text Focus:** The lecture emphasizes that historical and author centered approaches look behind the text at the author, their historical circumstances, and the intended readers.

- **Traditional Practices:** Historical-critical methods are defined as expanding upon the standard methods of interpretation, such as looking at the background of biblical books, authors, time periods, and intended audiences.
- **Enlightenment Product:** The historical critical method is a product of the Enlightenment emphasis on human reason, human rational thinking, and a departure from dogma.
- **Principles of Historical Critical Method: Priority of Human Reason:** Human reasoning and common sense have a priority in the historical-critical approach to biblical texts.
- **Cause and Effect:** Events occur in a closed system where cause and effect are the driving principles. There are no supernatural interventions.
- **Analogy:** Historical knowledge proceeds from the known to the unknown. The principle of analogy dictates that events must have an analogous event to make them true.

Conclusion:

The lecture provides a valuable overview of the development of hermeneutics in the 20th century, focusing on the pivotal contributions of Gadamer and Bultmann. It highlights the shift from objective, scientific approaches to understanding, towards a more dynamic view that recognizes the role of the interpreter's context and the dialogical nature of interpretation. The lecture also previews an examination of the historical critical method and its place in biblical interpretation by emphasizing that methods and beliefs can be separated.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 8, Gadamer to Bultmann

Hermeneutics Study Guide

Quiz

1. According to Gadamer, how do our backgrounds influence our understanding of a text, and is this influence positive or negative? Our backgrounds, including interests, beliefs, and biases, color our understanding of a text. Gadamer believed this influence is necessary for understanding, rather than being negative.
2. Describe Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons." The fusion of horizons refers to the process where the interpreter's expectations and the text's meaning interact, forming a common understanding. It's a dynamic interplay, not a merging of horizons to arrive at a single correct meaning, but a mutual enlargement.
3. How did Gadamer view the process of interpretation, and what was his alternative to a neutral observer approach? Gadamer viewed interpretation as a dialogue or conversation between the interpreter and the text, rather than an objective observer analyzing the text. In this dialogue, both the text and interpreter challenge and revise their understandings.
4. What are the key differences between Gadamer's and Bultmann's approaches to hermeneutics? Gadamer emphasized a dialogical approach with a focus on the fusion of horizons, while Bultmann focused on existential interpretation through demythologization. Bultmann also emphasized the importance of pre-understanding, similar to Gadamer, but believed the text called the reader to a decision and authentic existence.
5. What is existential hermeneutics, and how does Bultmann use it? Existential hermeneutics is an approach focused on understanding how a text relates to the possibilities of authentic human existence. Bultmann used this approach to demythologize the Bible, interpreting it as a call to make an existential decision about one's relationship with God.
6. Explain Bultmann's concept of "demythologization," and why he felt it was necessary. Demythologization is the process of stripping away the mythical elements of the New Testament, such as angels, demons, and miracles. Bultmann felt this was necessary because the modern worldview is scientific and cannot

accept these supernatural elements as literal, and to allow the existential message to shine through.

7. According to the text, what is a key legacy of thinkers like Francis Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Kant? A key legacy of these thinkers is an emphasis on human reasoning, inductive methods, and the idea of the autonomous thinker. This includes the concept that the mind is a blank slate that receives sensory impressions, and that categories of understanding already reside within the mind.
8. What is the historical-critical method, and what are its goals in biblical interpretation? The historical-critical method seeks to understand the historical circumstances and influences surrounding the writing of the biblical text. It aims to uncover the author's intention, the historical setting of the text, and the situation of the original readers.
9. What are the three primary presuppositions of the historical-critical method according to the text? The primary presuppositions are the priority of human reason and common sense, the principle of cause and effect within a closed continuum, and the principle of analogy, where past events should have analogous events in the present.
10. What is meant by the text's definition of "criticism" in the context of hermeneutics, and what is its opposite? In this context, criticism refers to providing justification and reasons for why we interpret a text in a particular way. The opposite of criticism is not piety, but gullibility or naivety that does not provide any reasons for one's beliefs.

Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast Gadamer's and Bultmann's approaches to hermeneutics. Consider their philosophical influences, goals, and methodologies. How might their approaches affect the way one interprets a biblical text?
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the historical-critical method as described in the text. Consider its historical context, its presuppositions, and its impact on biblical interpretation. To what extent can it be a helpful tool for understanding scripture?
3. Analyze the concept of pre-understanding in both Gadamer's and Bultmann's hermeneutics. How does the role of the interpreter's biases and background knowledge influence the process of interpretation? Is it possible to achieve an "objective" interpretation given our subjective predispositions?
4. Explain the "fusion of horizons" as proposed by Gadamer. How might this dialogical approach to understanding a text differ from a more traditional approach emphasizing the recovery of authorial intent? Discuss the implications for how we understand the meaning of a text.
5. Assess the role of dialogue in interpretation as discussed in the text. How does engaging in a dialogue with a text affect the way we understand it? Does the dialogical method open up the possibility of multiple valid interpretations, or does it offer any hope of arriving at a coherent, singular meaning?

Glossary of Key Terms

Hermeneutics: The theory and methodology of interpretation, especially of biblical texts, literary works, and philosophical texts.

Philosophical Hermeneutics: An approach to interpretation that focuses on the conditions of understanding, often associated with the work of Gadamer and his *Truth and Method*.

New Hermeneutic: A term often applied to Gadamer's approach, emphasizing that understanding is not merely a process of obtaining objective knowledge but rather a fusion of horizons.

Pre-understanding: The prior knowledge, beliefs, and biases that an interpreter brings to the task of understanding. Both Gadamer and Bultmann emphasize the importance of pre-understanding in the process of interpretation.

Fusion of Horizons: A concept developed by Gadamer to describe the interaction and merging of the interpreter's perspective (horizon) with the perspective of the text or the thing being interpreted.

Existential Hermeneutics: An approach to interpretation that focuses on understanding a text in relation to human existence and the possibilities for authentic being. Rudolf Bultmann is a key figure in this method.

Demythologization: Bultmann's method of interpreting the New Testament by stripping away its mythical and supernatural elements in order to reveal its existential message.

Historical-Critical Method: A method of biblical interpretation that seeks to understand a text in its historical and cultural context, often focusing on issues of authorship, date, and literary style.

Inductive Approach: A method of inquiry that involves collecting data and drawing conclusions from the data, rather than imposing a pre-existing framework.

Autonomous Self: The idea that the self is an independent and rational agent capable of making decisions and understanding the world through its own reason, as highlighted by Kant.

Principle of Analogy: A principle of historical inquiry that assumes that past events must have an analogy or parallel in the present in order to be considered valid.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 8, Gadamer to Bultmann, Biblicalearning.org (BeL)

FAQ on Hermeneutics and Biblical Interpretation

- 1. What is philosophical hermeneutics, and how did Hans-Georg Gadamer contribute to it?** Philosophical hermeneutics, largely associated with Gadamer's work "Truth and Method," is an approach to understanding that emphasizes the role of our own pre-understandings, biases, and cultural context in interpretation. Gadamer argued that understanding is not simply objective and that our backgrounds necessarily shape how we perceive texts and the world. He also introduced the idea that interpretation is a dialogical process where both the interpreter and the text mutually influence each other.
- 2. What does Gadamer mean by the "fusion of horizons," and how does it relate to biblical interpretation?** The "fusion of horizons" is Gadamer's concept describing the process of interpretation as a merger between the interpreter's horizon (their background, beliefs, and presuppositions) and the text's horizon (its context, intended meaning). It's a dynamic interaction where the interpreter's understanding is challenged and expanded by the text and vice versa. It's not a merging into a single correct meaning but a mutual enlargement of perspectives and understanding. In biblical interpretation, this means recognizing that our current context and pre-understandings will interact with the world of the text, resulting in a new, unique interpretation.
- 3. According to Gadamer, why is it impossible to be a neutral or objective interpreter?** Gadamer asserts that no one can be a neutral or objective interpreter because we are all inherently shaped by our culture, personal experiences, and pre-existing beliefs. These factors act as a lens through which we perceive and understand the world. Instead of trying to eliminate these influences, Gadamer viewed them as necessary for engaging with a text because they provide the framework for understanding. Thus, rather than trying to see the text from a neutral perspective, Gadamer invites us to be aware of how we come to the text.

4. **How does Rudolf Bultmann's existential hermeneutics differ from Gadamer's approach, and what is "demythologization"?** While both Gadamer and Bultmann acknowledge the role of pre-understanding, Bultmann's hermeneutics is primarily concerned with the existential meaning of a text. Inspired by existentialist philosophy, he argues that the goal of interpretation is to enable a personal encounter with a text, prompting readers to consider their own existence and choices. "Demythologization," a key component of Bultmann's approach, involves stripping away what he saw as outdated, mythological elements of the biblical text (such as miracles and demonic influences) to reveal the underlying existential message. He argues that the bible presents a pre-scientific worldview that must be interpreted through an existential lens for it to make sense to the modern interpreter.
5. **What is the historical-critical method, and what are some of its core assumptions?** The historical-critical method is an approach to biblical interpretation that seeks to understand the historical context, authorial intent, and circumstances that produced the biblical text. It views the Bible as a historical document shaped by specific cultural and social contexts, applying the same rigorous principles of investigation used in other historical studies. Core assumptions of this method include: (1) *The priority of human reason*: that human reasoning and common sense is capable of understanding the world and historical documents. (2) *The principle of cause and effect*: everything happens within a natural, cause-and-effect system without supernatural intervention. (3) *The principle of analogy*: historical knowledge is based on comparing the past with the present, relying on events that have analogies to the modern interpreters experience.
6. **How does the historical-critical method's emphasis on the author's intention influence its approach to interpretation?** The historical-critical method often focuses on uncovering the author's original intention as the primary goal of interpretation. It seeks to understand what the author meant to communicate to their audience within their specific historical and cultural context. This typically involves examining the background, circumstances, and intended readers of the text to reconstruct the author's thought process. While the focus on an author's intent has often been influential, this has recently waned in favor of other methods like reader-response criticism, while other approaches prioritize a dynamic back-and-forth between authorial intent and present context.

7. **What are some of the limitations of solely relying on the historical-critical method?** The historical-critical method has limitations because it can sometimes reduce the Bible to a mere historical document, downplaying or ignoring its spiritual or theological significance. Its assumptions of human reason, cause-and-effect, and the principle of analogy, can often lead to the denial of supernatural events. Additionally, by primarily focusing on historical context and the author, it can neglect the importance of the reader and the dynamic, ongoing nature of interpretation.
8. **In the context of biblical hermeneutics, what does it mean to say interpretation is a dialogue and how does that inform biblical reading?** To say that interpretation is a dialogue means that it involves a dynamic interaction between the interpreter and the text, where both parties influence and shape the understanding. Rather than a one-way process where the interpreter simply extracts a fixed meaning from the text, the text can question or challenge our pre-understanding and our biases. This creates a more dynamic and surprising encounter where we come with certain questions and assumptions and are sometimes surprised to find ourselves challenged and forced to revise our perspective. This encourages an ongoing, iterative process of reinterpretation and a deeper appreciation for the complexity of both the text and the process of understanding.