

# Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 1, Introduction and Definitions Resources from NotebookLM

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

## 1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 1, Introduction and Definitions, Biblicalearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt introduces biblical hermeneutics, **the theory and practice of interpreting texts**. It distinguishes hermeneutics from related terms like exegesis and interpretation, explaining that **hermeneutics broadly examines understanding itself**, while exegesis focuses on extracting meaning from a text's original context. The lecture emphasizes the **importance of considering the author's intent, the text itself, and the reader's perspective** when interpreting scripture. Finally, it highlights the need for hermeneutics because of the **significant temporal, cultural, historical, linguistic, geographical, and literary distances** separating modern readers from the biblical texts.

**2. 35 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 1 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).**



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### 3. Briefing Document

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpt on hermeneutics:

#### Briefing Document: Introduction to Hermeneutics

##### Overview:

This lecture introduces the concept of hermeneutics, particularly within the context of biblical interpretation. It emphasizes that hermeneutics is more than just applying rules to understand the Bible; it's a broader inquiry into the very nature of understanding itself. The lecture also differentiates hermeneutics from interpretation and exegesis, and highlights the multiple "distances" that exist between modern readers and ancient texts, making hermeneutics necessary.

##### Key Themes and Ideas:

###### 1. Defining Hermeneutics:

- **Broad vs. Narrow Definitions:** Hermeneutics is often misunderstood and can mean different things to different people. Some see it as *simply applying correct interpretative methods* to arrive at the right meaning. Others equate it with *the study of the text itself*. However, the lecture argues that hermeneutics is more accurately defined as *the philosophy of how we understand and the process we undergo when trying to understand something*.
- **Beyond Biblical Studies:** Hermeneutics is not confined to biblical studies, but applies broadly to all disciplines like the sciences, literature, and history. How we understand in those disciplines affects how we interpret the Bible.
- **Hermeneutics as a Mediator:** Drawing from the Greek god Hermas, hermeneutics is described as a "go-between" or mediator between the text and the interpreter, helping to bridge the gap and facilitate understanding.
- **Core Question:** At its heart, hermeneutics asks: *"What does it mean to understand something? How do we understand?"* (p.3). This involves considering what we are doing when we read and interpret a text.

## 1. Hermeneutics vs. Interpretation vs. Exegesis:

- **Exegesis:** This is the *specific application of principles* to draw out the original meaning of a text, considering its literary, historical, theological, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. It focuses on "probing a text from various angles" and attempting to understand the author's original intent (p.4). Exegesis seeks to understand the text in its original context.
- **Interpretation:** This refers to the *actual practice* of understanding a text, applying methods and making sense of it. It is the practical application of the theories of hermeneutics.
- **Hermeneutics (again):** Hermeneutics is the theoretical, philosophical inquiry behind both exegesis and interpretation. It deals with the question of "how do we understand?" and the methods of interpretation. Hermeneutics focuses on *the theorizing about how we understand* (p.5). It examines the *process* of interpretation, not just the application.

## 1. The Triad of Author, Text, and Reader:

- **Author:** Focusing on the *authorial intent* involves going "behind the text" to discern what the author meant to communicate (p.5). This approach assumes that the author's intentions are the primary locus of meaning.
- **Text:** Text-centered hermeneutics emphasizes the text as *the primary locus of meaning*, with the text having "a life of its own" (p.6). This approach prioritizes understanding the finished product itself, irrespective of the author's intention.
- **Reader:** Reader-centered approaches contend that *meaning resides in the reader's* interpretation and ability to make sense of the text (p.6). This perspective acknowledges that readers bring their own backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives to the text, which will influence interpretation. The lecture suggests that the historical order of these approaches was author, text, then reader.
- **Relationship:** The lecture raises the question of the relationship between these three features - author, text, and reader. Is one more important than others?

## 1. The Necessity of Hermeneutics:

- **Bridging the Gap:** Hermeneutics is essential because it "provides a bridge between a text produced at a time and during a time in a culture...that is very, very different than our own" (p.7). It acknowledges that our modern perspectives

can easily lead to misunderstanding of ancient texts. Without hermeneutics we are prone to misunderstand.

- **Commonalities and Differences:** The lecture notes that understanding is still possible because there are commonalities that allow us to understand; it isn't impossible to overcome this gap.
- **Multiple Distances:** Hermeneutics helps to bridge various "distances" between the modern reader and the ancient text. These include:
  - **Temporal Distance:** The texts were written in the distant past, 2000 years ago and before (p.8). The example of the old newspapers demonstrates the challenge in understanding texts from even relatively recent time periods.
  - **Cultural Distance:** Biblical cultures (Ancient Near East, Greco-Roman) have very different values compared to our modern, often individualistic, technology-based cultures (p.9). Examples include Paul's instructions on head coverings (1 Corinthians 11), John's portrayal of the Roman Empire as a beast in Revelation 13, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 11) and of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15).
  - **Historical Distance:** Biblical texts assume and record historical events far removed from our own (p.13). Examples include the conflict between Jews and Samaritans.
  - **Linguistic Distance:** The Old and New Testaments are written in ancient languages that don't always translate directly to modern languages, such as English. For instance, words like "man", "brother" may have had broader meanings and Greek verb tenses aren't primarily temporal (p.14).
  - **Geographical Distance:** Geographical features of the biblical world can influence how we understand texts. Examples include the story of Jonah fleeing to Tarshish, and the interpretation of the hot/cold/lukewarm passage in Revelation 3 by examining the geography of Laodicea (p.16).
  - **Literary Distance:** The literary types (e.g., apocalypse, prophecy) and literary media used in the Bible are different from modern ones. We can't always assume that familiar genres like narratives or letters were the same as today (p.20).
- 1. **Hermeneutics as Reflection:** Hermeneutics is presented as a way to *reflect on how we understand*, prompting us to be more intentional about our reading and interpretation of texts. It's not just about applying rules, but about understanding the entire process.

**Concluding Thoughts:**

This first lecture lays the groundwork for a deeper exploration of hermeneutics. It establishes that interpreting the Bible is not a simple, straightforward task. Instead, it involves a complex process of bridging various gaps between the ancient text and the modern reader by employing appropriate principles and methods. The subsequent lecture will address the assumptions we bring to the text, particularly concerning the nature of inspiration.

## 4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 1, Introduction and Definitions

### Biblical Hermeneutics Study Guide

#### Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer each question in 2-3 complete sentences.

1. How does the lecture define hermeneutics broadly, and how does that definition go beyond just biblical studies?
2. Explain the etymology of the word "hermeneutics." What role did the Greek god Hermas play, and how does this relate to the idea of hermeneutics?
3. How is exegesis different from hermeneutics and interpretation? What does exegesis seek to accomplish?
4. What are the three primary foci in the process of interpretation according to the lecture, and what role does each play?
5. According to the lecture, why is hermeneutics necessary for understanding biblical texts? What happens if a reader does not consider these factors?
6. What does the lecture mean by the term "temporal distance" and how does it affect the interpretation of the Bible?
7. How does the concept of "cultural distance" impact biblical interpretation? Give at least one specific example mentioned in the lecture.
8. Explain the "linguistic distance" that can affect interpretation of Biblical texts? Give one specific example from the text.
9. In the lecture, how does the example of the church in Laodicea illustrate a "geographical distance?"
10. How does "literary distance" impact the study of the Bible?

#### Quiz Answer Key

1. Hermeneutics, broadly, is the philosophy of how we understand things, not just the application of correct interpretive methods. It extends beyond biblical studies to encompass how we understand in sciences, literature, history, or any discipline, asking, "What does it mean to understand?"

2. The term "hermeneutics" comes from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, meaning "to translate, understand, explain, interpret." The Greek god Hermas acted as a mediator between the gods and humans, a go-between, and is a metaphor for how hermeneutics can be seen as a go-between between the text and the interpreter.
3. Exegesis is a specific application of sound principles and techniques to draw out the original meaning of the text, analyzing literary, historical, theological, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. Hermeneutics is broader, focusing on the philosophy of understanding and what we do when we try to interpret a text, going beyond just the application of principles and techniques.
4. The three foci are the author, the text, and the reader. Some approaches emphasize understanding authorial intent by going "behind the text," others focus on meaning within the text itself, and still others focus on the reader and their ability to make sense of the text, acknowledging the role of reader perspective and culture.
5. Hermeneutics is necessary because biblical texts were produced in vastly different times, cultures, and languages from our own, leading to gaps that can cause misinterpretations. Without hermeneutics, readers are prone to misunderstand the text by imposing their own modern perspectives and values on ancient documents.
6. "Temporal distance" refers to the gap in time between when the biblical text was written and when it is being read today. This distance affects interpretation because the context of the original text is different and it is not possible to consult the original authors.
7. "Cultural distance" refers to the difference in cultural values between the time period and culture of the Bible and our own culture today. For example, the significance of head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 might be misunderstood without cultural knowledge of the first-century world.
8. "Linguistic distance" arises because the original biblical texts are written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, languages that do not correspond exactly with modern languages like English. For instance, the English word "hope" does not have the same connotations as the Greek word "elpis".
9. The church in Laodicea lacked a good water supply and had to pipe it in, resulting in lukewarm water that was not good for anything. This geographic information

helps us understand why Jesus used the metaphor of being "lukewarm" to criticize their spiritual condition.

10. "Literary distance" arises from differences in literary types and communication media between the biblical world and today. Many of the biblical literary forms are unfamiliar to modern readers. The Bible's literary types, such as prophecy, or even common forms like narrative and letters, do not correspond exactly to modern writing.

## Essay Questions

**Instructions:** Answer these questions in a detailed essay format.

1. Discuss the relationship between hermeneutics, interpretation, and exegesis. How do these concepts overlap, and how do they differ? Why is it important to understand each when studying the Bible?
2. The lecture identifies three foci in interpretation: the author, the text, and the reader. Choose one of these foci and argue why it is the most important in the interpretive process, or if you disagree, argue why all three should be given equal consideration.
3. According to the lecture, what are the main "distances" that separate modern readers from the biblical text? Explain these in detail, using examples from the text and explaining how each impacts interpretation.
4. How can the awareness of temporal, cultural, and historical distances help readers to understand difficult biblical texts? Include some specific examples of where these considerations are essential to understanding the biblical message.
5. The lecture suggests that one of the reasons that hermeneutics is necessary is that the Bible was written in different languages and has literary forms that may be unfamiliar to us. What are the implications of these linguistic and literary distances for how we approach the Bible today?

## Glossary of Key Terms

**Hermeneutics:** The philosophy of interpretation, focusing on the nature of understanding and what we do when we try to interpret something. It examines the principles and methods of interpretation across various disciplines.

**Interpretation:** The actual practice of understanding a text, involving the application of methods and techniques to comprehend its meaning. It's the process of making sense of a text and applying it.

**Exegesis:** The specific application of sound principles and techniques to draw out the meaning of a text in its original context. It's a detailed study of a text, focusing on the author's original intention and the text's literary, historical, cultural, and linguistic dimensions.

**Authorial Intent:** The idea that the meaning of a text is primarily determined by what the author intended to communicate.

**Temporal Distance:** The gap in time between when a text was written and when it is being read, affecting interpretation because of different historical and social contexts.

**Cultural Distance:** The differences in cultural values and practices between the world in which a text was written and the world of the reader.

**Historical Distance:** The gap between the historical events that a text describes and the time of the reader. It affects interpretation because it requires understanding the historical context of the text.

**Linguistic Distance:** The differences between the languages in which a text was written and the languages in which it is read. Word meanings and grammatical structures do not always correspond.

**Geographical Distance:** The difference in geographical setting between the world of a text and that of its reader. Understanding the geography of the biblical world can be crucial for interpretation.

**Literary Distance:** The differences in literary forms and conventions between the way texts were written in the past and how they are written today. This affects how we understand the literary nature of biblical texts.

## 5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 1, Introduction and Definitions, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### FAQ on Biblical Hermeneutics

1. **What is hermeneutics, and why is it necessary for understanding the Bible?**

Hermeneutics is the study of how we understand and interpret texts, particularly focusing on the philosophy behind understanding. It goes beyond just applying correct methods and techniques to a text, and delves into the process of understanding itself. It is necessary for interpreting the Bible because the biblical texts were written in a time, culture, language, and historical context that is significantly different from our own. These differences create "gaps" that can lead to misunderstanding if not carefully considered. Hermeneutics provides a bridge to help us overcome these distances and arrive at a more informed understanding.

2. **How does hermeneutics differ from interpretation and exegesis?** While these terms are often used interchangeably, they have distinct meanings. Exegesis is the careful and detailed study of a text to draw out its original meaning within its original context, paying close attention to linguistic, historical, cultural, and literary elements. Interpretation is the actual practice of understanding and applying a text based on various methods and techniques. Hermeneutics, in contrast, is a more theoretical field that examines how we understand, the process of interpretation itself, and the philosophy behind it. It asks fundamental questions about meaning, the role of the author, text, and reader in the interpretive process, and the relationship between these three. In short, exegesis is the work done with the text, interpretation is the practice, and hermeneutics is the theory behind how we understand and interpret.

3. **What are the three primary focal points in the interpretive process, and how do they influence our understanding?** The three primary focal points in interpretation are the author, the text itself, and the reader. An author-centered approach prioritizes the author's intention, aiming to understand what the author meant to communicate in their original historical and cultural context. A text-centered approach focuses on the text as a finished product, with meaning residing within the text's own structure, literary devices, and narrative elements. A reader-centered approach, on the other hand, emphasizes that the reader's background, experiences, and perspectives play a significant role in making sense of the text, arguing that without a reader, the text lacks inherent meaning. Understanding which focus is prioritized has significant implications for how one interprets a text.
  
4. **Why can't we simply sit down and read the Bible without hermeneutical principles?** Although it may seem sufficient to simply read the Bible, this approach assumes a naive view of interpretation. It neglects the fact that we bring our own pre-conceived notions, biases, and cultural assumptions to the reading of any text, influencing the way we make sense of it. Additionally, the Bible is an ancient text, produced within different cultures, historical contexts, and linguistic environments. Without hermeneutical principles, we might be projecting our modern understanding onto the text, potentially misunderstanding its original message. Hermeneutics encourages us to become more self-aware of our assumptions and the differences between our world and the world of the Bible.

5. **What are some of the 'distances' that separate us from the biblical text, and how does hermeneutics help us bridge these gaps?** There are several key distances that separate us from the biblical text: temporal, cultural, historical, linguistic, geographical, and literary. *Temporal distance* reflects the fact that the texts were written thousands of years ago. *Cultural distance* is the different social, political, and religious environments of the biblical world compared to ours. *Historical distance* refers to the events and circumstances the texts reference, which may be unfamiliar to modern readers. *Linguistic distance* relates to the use of ancient languages with unique grammar and vocabulary that must be carefully translated. *Geographical distance* acknowledges the setting of the Bible in specific geographical locations which are necessary to understand certain texts. *Literary distance* pertains to the various literary forms used in the Bible, which may be unfamiliar to modern readers. Hermeneutics and interpretation provide the methods and principles to bridge these distances, enabling us to better grasp the original intended meaning.
6. **Can you provide some specific examples of how cultural differences can impact our understanding of the Bible?** Several examples illustrate the challenge of cultural distance. For instance, the issue of head coverings for women in 1 Corinthians 11 can be misunderstood if we do not take into account the cultural practices of the first century. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) can lose its impact if we do not recognize the deep-seated animosity between Jews and Samaritans in the first century. Or, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, (Luke 15:11-32) understanding the social and cultural dynamics of a typical Middle Eastern village can make the father's actions all the more impactful. Understanding the communal orientation versus individualistic worldview between Biblical culture and North America can change how some texts are approached. The Book of Ruth also includes an example of how men meeting at the gate was an act of leadership and decision making for a community. These examples demonstrate that assuming modern culture is the same as the biblical culture can lead to misinterpretations.

7. **How does geographical knowledge affect the understanding of a text like Revelation 3:15-16 about the church of Laodicea?** The passage in Revelation 3, where Jesus says, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold or hot...So because you are lukewarm," is often misinterpreted as being about spiritual fervor (hot), apathy (cold), or indifference (lukewarm). However, geographical knowledge of Laodicea reveals that the city lacked its own good water source. It piped water in from nearby Hierapolis, known for its hot medicinal springs, and Colossae, known for its cold, refreshing water. By the time the water reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm and unpleasant. This geographical context shows that Jesus was using lukewarm as a metaphor for worthlessness. Knowing this informs us that the passage isn't about spiritual fervor but rather about the church's lack of effectiveness and purpose.
8. **How does an understanding of literary genres impact our interpretation of the Bible?** The Bible uses various literary genres such as narrative, poetry, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic literature. Each genre has its own conventions and intended purpose, so we cannot interpret them all the same way. If we read a prophetic book as a strict historical narrative, for instance, we might miss the symbolic language and spiritual message. Similarly, if we apply a literal reading of apocalyptic literature we might misunderstand the intentions of the author. Understanding literary genre conventions enables us to interpret the text more accurately, taking into account the author's intent and the message they aimed to convey.