

Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 7, Early Interpretation—Bacon to Kant Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 7, Early Interpretation—Bacon to Kant, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from a hermeneutics course traces the historical development of interpretive methods, focusing on the influence of Enlightenment thinkers. **Francis Bacon** and **René Descartes**, champions of rationalism and empiricism, emphasized objective observation and rigorous methods to uncover meaning. **John Locke's** concept of the mind as a blank slate furthered this objective approach. **Immanuel Kant**, however, challenged this notion by highlighting the mind's inherent structures that shape perception, thereby emphasizing the interpreter's role in constructing meaning. Finally, **Friedrich Schleiermacher**, reacting against the limitations of pure reason, stressed understanding the author's intention and introduced the hermeneutical circle.

2. 25 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 7 – 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).



**Mathewson_Herme
n_Session07.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts on the history of interpretation:

Briefing Document: Influences on Hermeneutics - Bacon, Kant, and Beyond

I. Introduction:

- The lecture series is exploring the historical influences on hermeneutics (the study of interpretation), with a specific focus on the Enlightenment and its aftermath.
- It emphasizes that interpretation is not a recent phenomenon but has existed since the Old Testament, where writers reinterpreted older texts for new audiences. This approach was continued by New Testament authors, Rabbinic Judaism, and early Church Fathers, all of whom sought to make texts relevant to their contemporary readers.
- Interpretation does not happen in a vacuum; it is shaped by a long historical stream and influenced by broader intellectual movements and thinkers.

II. Key Enlightenment Thinkers and Their Influence:

- The lecture highlights that during the Enlightenment, reason and the ability to think and reason was highly valued as a way to understand both scientific data and texts.
- **Francis Bacon (1561-1626):** A proponent of the **inductive scientific method** and rationalism, which emphasizes the human mind's ability to deduce meaning.
- Argued for the rigorous, empirical study of data by an objective observer, free from personal biases. The goal is to reveal laws governing facts through rigorous method.
- Advocated for breaking with tradition and doubting pre-conceived notions.
- His influence can be seen in modern biblical studies that emphasize an inductive approach, where the text reveals its meaning through rigorous methodology.
- **Key Quote:** "by a rigorous application of proper methods of interpretation, by rigorously examining the data, one can reveal its true meaning, one can understand its true meaning, the text will reveal its meaning."

- **Rene Descartes (1596-1650):** Also a product of rationalism, emphasizing that knowledge derives from logical reasoning.
- Insisted that scientists must rid themselves of preconceived notions and traditions to interpret data objectively.
- Assumed a direct correlation between knowing and reality. By using rational methods, we can understand things as they actually are.
- He introduced a **dualism**: a mechanistic, deterministic material world and the free, autonomous thinking self, raising questions about the extent to which the mind determines how we understand things. This paved the way for later focus on the reader's role in interpretation.
- His idea that through a rigorous method, a neutral observer can understand something as it actually is, which corresponds directly with what is in the text.
- **John Locke (1632-1704):** Proposed that the mind is a "blank slate" (tabula rasa) that receives sensations from the external world.
- This influenced early hermeneutical thought, suggesting the interpreter could approach the text objectively, with a mind like a "sponge waiting to soak up data."
- However, this position is criticized because it's unclear how understanding is possible without any pre-existing categories or perspectives.
- The interpreter could come to the text as a purely objective observer, with a blank mind, the mind is a blank slate, just like a sponge, just waiting to soak up data in a purely inductive and purely objective manner.
- **Immanuel Kant (1724-1804):** Responded to skepticism, arguing that the human mind is the ultimate source of knowing and that objective reality is known only as it conforms to the mind's knowing structures.
- Furthered Descartes' dualism, asserting that objective reality can only be known through categories already in the mind (time, space, etc.). Thus, we can never know a thing as it truly is in itself.
- **Key Quote:** "the mind, the structures of the mind determine what I see. So how I perceive and understand this book, I cannot be certain that I understand it objectively, or as it really is, because it's the categories and structures of the thinking and rational mind that determine how I perceive it."

- Established a dualism between freedom (faith, religion, God) and causality (the scientific world, history), arguing that these spheres should be kept separate. Faith is personal and independent of facts, while history and science are deterministic.
- His ideas led to the dichotomy between faith and history and the idea that theological writing is not historical, a tension seen in Old and New Testament studies.
- He emphasized that the interpreter is the center of meaning; the "knowing self" determines how things are seen.
- He paved the way for more reader-centered approaches to interpretation, suggesting that "meaning is in the eye of the beholder"
- His concept of the grid through which the mind perceives data, filtering what is there, and how the structures of the mind determine what we see, and thus, we can never know something as it actually is.

III. Key Figures Post-Enlightenment:

- **Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834):** Considered the "father of modern hermeneutics" and of theology.
- Reacted against Enlightenment rationalism, emphasizing creativity, experience, and piety in the pursuit of knowledge.
- Argued that hermeneutics should overcome the gap between the interpreter and the author, focusing on understanding the author's thought process through psychological interpretation.
- Emphasized the recovery of the past act of the author as the primary goal of interpretation.
- Introduced the idea of the **hermeneutical circle**, in which understanding occurs in stages by moving back and forth between the whole and the parts of a text.
- His influence on author-centered approaches, with the goal of understanding the author's intent.
- **Key Quote:** "the main goal of understanding and interpretation was not so much understanding the biblical text, or understanding a text, as much as it was understanding an author, or understanding another person, that is the human author."

IV. Summary and Responses:

- The Enlightenment thinkers (Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Kant) emphasized **empiricism and human reason**. Bacon, Descartes, and Locke thought one could objectively interpret something through rational methods, but Kant emphasized that the autonomous thinking self is central to meaning.
- Kant's legacy, especially, highlights the idea that there is no pure induction or objective interpreter as we all come with biases and pre-conceived notions.
- Christian interpreters would argue that God has created us in his image, giving us the structures and categories to perceive things as God created them, though our understanding is imperfect due to human sinfulness.
- Despite these limitations, the lecture argues that an adequate and substantial understanding is still possible.
- The lecture notes that these non-biblical thinkers and movements have had great influence on hermeneutics, impacting not only how we interpret scientific data but also how we approach texts.
- The thinkers looked at as part of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on human reasoning, human rationality, and human thinking.

V. Looking Ahead:

- The next session will explore more recent hermeneutical thinkers, beginning with Hans-Georg Gadamer, to continue to explore the roots of hermeneutical theory and approaches.

VI. Key Concepts:

- **Inductive Method:** Using observations and data to form conclusions.
- **Rationalism:** Emphasizing reason and logic as the primary source of knowledge.
- **Dualism:** The concept of two separate entities or principles, especially the split between mind and body, or freedom and causality.
- **Empiricism:** The idea that knowledge comes primarily from sensory experience.
- **Hermeneutical Circle:** The understanding of a text by moving back and forth between the whole and the parts.
- **Authorial Intent:** The meaning that an author intended.

This briefing document summarizes the core ideas from the lecture excerpts. It highlights the progression of thought from the Enlightenment to the early 19th century and lays the groundwork for understanding contemporary hermeneutics.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 7, Early Interpretation—Bacon to Kant

Hermeneutics Study Guide: Bacon, Kant, and Beyond

Quiz

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

1. How did Francis Bacon's approach to scientific study influence later hermeneutical theory?
2. What did Rene Descartes mean by the phrase, "I am a rational thinking self," and how did it shape his views of interpretation?
3. Explain the concept of dualism that Descartes introduced, and how it relates to interpretation.
4. According to John Locke, what is the state of the human mind at birth, and how does this affect the process of interpretation?
5. How did Immanuel Kant's views challenge earlier notions of objectivity in interpretation?
6. Explain Kant's concept that objective reality is filtered through the structures of the mind.
7. Describe Kant's dualism between freedom and causality, and how this duality impacted interpretations of faith and history.
8. According to the lecture, how did Kant's emphasis on the "knowing self" as the center of meaning anticipate later approaches to hermeneutics?
9. What is Schleiermacher's hermeneutical goal and how does it relate to the author?
10. Explain Schleiermacher's concept of the "hermeneutical circle" and what it reveals about the nature of understanding.

Quiz Answer Key

1. Bacon emphasized an inductive scientific method, arguing for rigorous, empirical study of data without personal bias. This influenced hermeneutics by encouraging interpreters to treat the text as objective data, from which meaning can be derived through careful observation and application of method.

2. Descartes meant that the human mind possesses the power to reason and deduce meaning from the world. This view led him to believe that one could use logic to interpret both the material world and texts, provided that one had rid oneself of preconceived ideas and biases.
3. Descartes' dualism suggests a separation between the mechanistic material world and the autonomous thinking self. This implies that the observer's understanding is not necessarily a direct reflection of reality, raising questions about the influence of individual perspective on interpretation.
4. Locke argued that the mind is a blank slate, receiving sensations from the external world. In relation to interpretation, this suggests one can approach texts as a neutral observer, allowing the meaning to be imprinted directly upon the blank mind through objective methods.
5. Kant argued that objective reality can only be known as it conforms to the structures of the mind. This challenged the idea that interpretation is simply about accessing an external, objective truth, suggesting that the interpreter's framework influences what is understood.
6. Kant theorized that our experiences of reality are always filtered through innate mental categories such as time and space. Therefore, human understanding of objective reality is always mediated by the human mind's inherent structures.
7. Kant's dualism divided reality into the realm of freedom, including faith and religion, and the realm of causality, including science and history. This division led to the view that religious faith is a personal matter, separate from scientific and historical facts, which he felt were not compatible.
8. Kant emphasized the reader's role in constructing meaning, thereby shifting away from a purely text-centered approach. This laid the groundwork for later reader-centered theories in hermeneutics, focusing on how the reader's individual framework and experiences shape interpretations.
9. Schleiermacher saw the goal of hermeneutics as understanding the author and their intentions. He believed this was achieved by placing oneself in the author's mind, seeking to psychologically reconstruct the author's act of creating the text.
10. The "hermeneutical circle" suggests that we understand the parts of a text by understanding the whole, and vice versa. It explains that understanding comes in stages and is a circular process between the various pieces of the whole.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Answer each essay question thoughtfully and thoroughly.

1. Compare and contrast the hermeneutical approaches of Bacon and Kant. How did their views of the nature of knowledge and interpretation differ, and what lasting impact did their ideas have?
2. Analyze the influence of rationalism on the development of hermeneutical theory during the Enlightenment. How did figures like Bacon, Descartes, and Locke promote rationalism, and how did it influence interpretations of the Bible?
3. Discuss the role of the interpreter in the hermeneutical theories of the Enlightenment figures discussed in the text. How did their ideas affect the view of the reader as either a neutral observer or an active participant in constructing meaning?
4. Explain Schleiermacher's contributions to hermeneutics and how he reacted to the legacy of the Enlightenment. In what ways did he challenge the primacy of human reason, and what alternative approach did he propose?
5. Explore the tension between faith and history as presented by Immanuel Kant. How did his dualism affect subsequent interpretations of the Bible, and how do these effects still influence contemporary perspectives in biblical studies?

Glossary of Key Terms

Autonomous Thinking Self: The idea, emphasized by thinkers like Descartes and Kant, that the human mind is capable of independent thought and reason, not reliant on external authority.

Causality: The concept that events have causes and follow natural laws; one of two poles in Kant's dualistic view of the world, pertaining to science, history, and the physical world.

Common Sense Realism: The view that the world is essentially as it appears to us through our senses and that we can know reality accurately; associated with Bacon, Descartes and Locke.

Dualism: The philosophical concept of two distinct and often opposing realms or principles; used by Descartes and Kant. For Descartes, it was a separation between the material world and the thinking self, and for Kant, it was between freedom and causality.

Empiricism: The idea that knowledge comes from sensory experience and observation; emphasized by Francis Bacon and John Locke.

Enlightenment: A philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized reason, individualism, and skepticism, profoundly influencing Western thought and hermeneutical theory.

Hermeneutical Circle: The concept that understanding of a whole text comes through understanding its individual parts, while simultaneously, the individual parts are understood in relation to the whole text; developed by Schleiermacher.

Hermeneutics: The theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly of written texts.

Inductive Method: A scientific approach that moves from specific observations to general conclusions; advocated by Francis Bacon. In hermeneutics it is the concept of drawing the text's meaning by observing its words and structures.

Objective Observer: The idea of an interpreter who can approach a text without personal biases or preconceived notions, like a "blank slate" or a "dry sponge"; a concept challenged by Kant.

Rationalism: The philosophical view that knowledge is primarily derived from reason and logical thinking; emphasized by Descartes and Kant.

Reader-Centered Approaches: Hermeneutical approaches that emphasize the role of the reader in constructing the meaning of a text, often arising from Kant's idea that our minds filter our reality.

Skepticism: The philosophical position that knowledge is uncertain or impossible; a viewpoint that influenced the thinking of Kant.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 7, Early Interpretation—Bacon to Kant, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ: Influences on Hermeneutics

- **What is the main idea behind the historical approaches to biblical interpretation mentioned in the beginning of the lecture, and why is it important to understand them?**
- Historical approaches to biblical interpretation, extending back to the Old Testament, the New Testament, Rabbinic Judaism, and early Church Fathers, demonstrate that interpreters have always aimed to make biblical texts relevant to their contemporary audiences. It's not about blindly repeating old methods but recognizing that people throughout history have grappled with how God's Word remains pertinent, treating it as a living message rather than a mere historical artifact. Understanding these approaches highlights that interpretation is not a new concept and is shaped by a long tradition. It emphasizes the continual effort to apply the text's message to new contexts and that we are part of that historical continuum.
- **How did Francis Bacon's ideas on the scientific method influence approaches to interpreting the Bible?**
- Francis Bacon, a proponent of the inductive scientific method, advocated for rigorous, detailed study of empirical data without personal biases. He believed that by observing facts objectively and applying human reason, the laws governing those facts would naturally emerge. This approach influenced some biblical scholars to view the Bible as data that should be studied empirically and objectively, assuming that rigorous methods of interpretation would reveal its true meaning without the interpreter's biases. The idea is to approach the text as a "blank slate," allowing the data to speak for itself.

- **What is the role of doubt in the hermeneutics of Rene Descartes, and how does it relate to Bacon's method?**
- Like Bacon, Rene Descartes emphasized rationalism and the importance of logical reasoning to derive meaning. He advocated that interpreters must discard preconceived notions, traditions, and biases, approaching data with a position of doubt and starting afresh. He believed that a rational, empirical, scientific approach could help one understand things "as they actually are". This aligns with Bacon's emphasis on objective observation, where both thinkers believed that a rigorous method could lead to a true understanding of the data, whether scientific or textual. This focus on overcoming biases and approaching the text with a clear mind greatly influenced subsequent hermeneutical thought.
- **What is the concept of dualism introduced by Descartes, and how did it impact later hermeneutics?**
- Descartes introduced a dualism between the mechanistic material world governed by natural laws and the autonomous, free-thinking self. This raised the question of whether our understanding is determined more by our perspective than the data itself. This idea was further developed by Immanuel Kant, leading to modern approaches that focus more on the reader and their interpretation rather than the objective meaning within the text. It raised the question of whether the human mind shapes what we perceive, even when engaging with the Bible.
- **How did John Locke's view of the mind as a "blank slate" influence hermeneutical approaches?**
- John Locke argued that the mind is a "blank tablet" that receives sensations from the external world. This idea led to the assumption that interpreters can come to a text as objective observers, free of presuppositions, and inductively derive meaning by simply soaking up data. Many early hermeneutics textbooks reflected this view. However, critics argued that a completely blank mind cannot understand anything at all, highlighting that some framework is necessary for interpretation. This critique points to the inherent challenges of truly objective interpretation.

- **How did Immanuel Kant challenge previous approaches to interpretation, and what is the significance of the "grid of the mind"?**
- Immanuel Kant challenged the idea that we can know things as they actually are, asserting that the human mind is the ultimate source of knowing. He argued that objective reality can only be perceived and known as it conforms to pre-existing structures and categories in our minds. This concept, described as the "grid of the mind," suggests that our interpretation is filtered through our inherent understanding of time, space, and other categories. This means we can never be sure that what we understand correlates directly with an objective reality, leading to a more reader-centered approach to interpretation where meaning is constructed by the reader. This shift is a major departure from the more objective approaches of thinkers like Bacon and Descartes.
- **How does Kant's separation between "freedom" and "causality" affect religious interpretation?**
- Kant's dualism between "freedom" (faith, religion, God) and "causality" (science, history, the natural world) created a sharp divide, suggesting that they operate independently and cannot influence one another. This led to a view that faith and religion are personal matters that are not dependent on historical facts or scientific evidence. It also resulted in a dichotomy between theology and history, where theological texts are not considered to be historical. This division is still influential today, seen in some approaches to biblical studies that emphasize the theological message over historical accuracy.
- **How did Friedrich Schleiermacher's focus on authorial intent and the "hermeneutical circle" shift the focus of hermeneutics?**
- Friedrich Schleiermacher reacted against the purely rationalistic and scientific approaches, emphasizing human experience, creativity, and piety. He argued that the main goal of hermeneutics is to understand the author, not merely the text, through reconstructing the author's thought process and intentions. The "hermeneutical circle," his idea that we understand the whole by understanding the individual parts and vice versa, meant that understanding happens gradually, not all at once. This shifted the emphasis to the author and their intention, laying the groundwork for author-centered interpretations which remains a significant part of hermeneutical thought today.