

The Definition and Description of Hermeneutics by Dan Fabricatore

As Robert Thomas points out in his article on current hermeneutical trends, definitions of terms in the area of biblical interpretation are changing at an alarming rate (JETS 39/2; pp. 242-249). Defining “hermeneutics” used to be relatively easy. But today, as Silva points out, “some readers have been known to suffer attacks of anxiety as they seek, in vain, to pin down and figure out what it means” (*Introduction To Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 15).

Definition

Hermeneutics has to do with interpretation. The Greek verb ἐρμηνεύω is used several times in the New Testament where it has a range of meaning that includes “explain, interpret, translate” (cf. Lk 24:27; 1 Cor 12:10). My own working definition has been that it is the “science and art of biblical interpretation.” But this doesn’t really pin down the perspective of such a task (author/text/reader). Hermeneutics, from my own perspective, is a bit broader than just figuring out what the text is saying; exegesis helps me do this. Hermeneutics ought to stress both what the text *meant* (original audience) and what the text *means* (contextualization), to borrow a bit from Osborne (*Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 5). Hermeneutics seeks to determine what the author meant in the text when he wrote it (cf. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, pp. 24, 47 for strong view of single meaning of text). It also seeks to apply the message of God to the people of God today.

Description

In order to accomplish this task, hermeneutics seeks to bridge many gaps between the writer’s word and the audience today. In effect, hermeneutics is a very broad concept, encompassing several other disciplines that together make up the process of determining what the text meant and what it means, including exegesis. Hermeneutics, in order to properly interpret the meaning of the text that the author intended, takes a close look at several issues. It first determines the most accurate text available (Textual criticism). It also studies the author, if he is known. The more that it is known about the author and his tendencies, the more helpful it will be to determine what he meant by what he said in the text. The historical, geographical, and cultural background in which the text was written can also be a source of valuable information in the hermeneutical process. In addition, the purpose for why an author penned his text helps as well (e.g. John 20:31).

Hermeneutics then takes the meaning of the text that the author intended and attempts to apply that message to a contemporary audience. Hermeneutics is interested in both meaning and relevance. However Furnish makes a good case that exegesis and exposition are virtually synonymous (“Some Practical Guidelines,” *Perkins Journal*, Spring, 1973, p. 2).