

SYLLABUS: HERMENEUTICS (06ON5100)
SUMMER 2026, RTS WASHINGTON

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE

The goal of this class is deceptively simple: to learn to read the Bible well. Of course, reading the Bible well is a challenging task that covers a wide range of topics. What attitudes and skills make for good reading? What is the goal of reading? Should the Bible be interpreted like other great works or does its divine character require special procedures for interpretation? How does the Bible fit together, and how does that affect how we approach a particular book or passage? How should knowledge of the original languages affect the interpretative process? How do we appropriately move from what the text meant in its original context to its modern-day application? All these questions, and more besides, get at the complexity of our stated goal, but the goal is nevertheless a good and necessary one (1 Tim 3:16), and it is my hope that at the end of our time together we are better prepared to hear the word of Christ in all the Scriptures.

B. LEARNING GOALS

Upon conclusion of this course, the student will:

- Be better able to interpret a text within its literary, historical, redemptive, and canonical contexts.
- Appreciate the Christocentric focus of the Old and New Testaments in all their variety and diversity.
- Utilize a variety of linguistic tools to the interpretation of words, sentences, paragraphs, and discourses, with a particular focus on the use of the original languages in exegesis.
- Apply the biblical text to contemporary pastoral and social issues in a manner that is historically sensitive, Christ-centered, and concrete.

C. TOPICS COVERED

We will attempt to accomplish the stated learning goals by comprehensively addressing the central issues in biblical interpretation, including the following:

- The history of hermeneutics as an independent discipline (with a particular focus on biblical hermeneutics)
- Biblical theology: its definition, methods, and usefulness for biblical interpretation
- The nature of biblical application and exhortation
- The unity of diversity of the Old and New Testaments The nature, character, and limits of human language, with specific application to exegesis.
- Lexical semantics, discourse analysis, genre criticism, and other exegetical tools for unpacking the meaning of biblical texts, with an emphasis on the role of the original languages.

D. INSTRUCTOR

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E. CLASS TIME

Class will meet every day as listed on the website. Unless otherwise noted, all assignments will be due 7 weeks after the last day of class.

F. COURSE WEBSITE

The RTS course website will contain the latest version of this syllabus, selected course readings, and outlines, slides, and notes related to the course. All assignments should be submitted via Canvas.

II. CLASS PROCEDURE

Our class time together will be comprised of lecture and discussion. The intensive nature of our time together will require us to move quickly, but learning how to read well does not occur in a vacuum. It arises as we dialog and reason together. So please ask questions, make comments, throw out case studies or problem passages. I will be asking you questions as well. In all this your active engagement (attendance and ongoing participation) is not only appreciated but required!

Overall, the class will move from the general (and philosophical) to the specific (and concrete). (1) We will begin by asking some overarching questions about the nature of meaning. What does “meaning” mean? How does one determine the meaning of any text? (2) While these questions are important for reading any text, the Bible presents special challenges that need to be addressed, and so we will then turn to specifically biblical hermeneutics. What is the Bible? Does divine authorship change how we should approach *this specific* text, and if so, how? Is there a unity to the Bible and how does that affect interpretation? (3) These “macro-hermeneutical” issues will then bring us to more “micro-hermeneutical” questions. How do authors use words, sentences, and paragraphs to communicate? Where do I go to find out what a word means? What tools are there for figuring out the “main point” of a book? (4) There will be a heavy emphasis throughout the course on concrete biblical (and pastoral/practical) case studies, attempting to apply what we have learned to specific (and sometimes problematic) passages in the Old and New Testaments.

III. CORE READING

The following list is organized topically and then alphabetically to assist you in reading in related chunks. While all the items on this list are required, most are short articles in journals or a chapter in a book, and therefore need not be purchased (a reading packet will be made available). I have used a star (*) to indicate books (or articles in books) that you will need to either purchase or borrow (they will not be in the reading packet). I will make further remarks on this reading list on the first day of class, but students eager to get ahead should consider reading Poythress and Goldsworthy.

There are a number of optional readings. They will be included on your reading list, and for each one you complete you will be rewarded with an additional 5-10 points to your “Reading” grade (depending on the length of the reading).

A. GENERAL HERMENEUTICS

*Brown, Jeannine K. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021.

Poythress, V. S. "Dispensing with Merely Human Meaning: Gains and Losses from Focusing on the Human Author, Illustrated by Zephaniah 1:2-3." *JETS* 57/3 (2014) : 481-499. <http://www.frame-poythress.org/dispensing-with-merely-human-meaning-gains-and-losses-from-focusing-on-the-human-author-illustrated-by-zephaniah-12-3/>

OPTIONAL: Thiselton, A. C. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

You may substitute this reading for Brown if you so choose; alternatively, you may read it in addition to Brown as part of the "book review" component of this class.

B. BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL METHOD

OPTIONAL: Bartholomew, C. G., and W. G. Goheen. *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pages 15-27.

A good place to start for the uninitiated; recommended if the term "Biblical Theology" means nothing to you.

Beale, G. K. "Positive Answer to the Question Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?." Pages 387-404 in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?: Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*. Edited by G. K. Beale. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

Dillard, R. B. "Harmonization: A Help and a Hindrance." In *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, 151–164. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988.

Gaffin, Richard B. "The Redemptive Historical View." Pages 89-110 in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*. Edited by Stanley Porter and Beth Stovell. Downer's Grove: IVP, 2012.

*Goldsworthy, G. *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006.

Vanhoozer, K. J. "What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible." Pages 19-26 in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by C. G. Bartholomew, et. al. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Vos, G. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948. Pages 3-40.

Another great orientation to Biblical-theological method.

C. LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE

You can read either (1) *Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. 2nd ed. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996. OR (2) *Silva, Moisés. *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*. Rev. and expanded ed. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1994.

Students looking for a more immediately practical approach to text linguistics should choose Carson. Those who want to explore the matter more theoretically should use Silva.

D. EXEGESIS AS APPLICATION

Baldwin, Bill. "Biblical Theology and Counseling." *Kerux* 16, no. 1 (2001): 41-60. Available online: <http://www.kerux.com/doc/1601A3.asp>

Bettler, J. "Application." In *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, 331-49. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986.

Gaffin, R. B. "The Usefulness of the Cross." *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1979): 228-46.

IV. ASSESSMENT AND ASSIGNMENTS

A. READING RESPONSE: 10%

There is a lot of reading. I am not requiring you to turn in notes or digests or "book-reports," but I do expect you to engage the readings. To that end I will require you to fill out a form listing the percentage of reading that you completed and a one or two sentence description of what you "got out of it." This is really to help you—I want you to get credit for the work you put into this material.

B. CLASS ENGAGEMENT: 10%

Discussion and conversation will be a major component of this class. There will also be occasions throughout the class when you are given brief "preparation for next week" homework assignments. Your general class participation and engagement with assignments is assessed here.

C. TYPOLOGY DEBATE: 10%

At some point during the first third of the class you will be required to read an article-length position paper on the appropriateness of "typological exegesis" in Biblical interpretation and debate that article's relative merits. In this debate you should "appreciatively represent" your respective author's viewpoint on the subject, endeavoring to speak in "their voice" to the rest of the class in a *disputatio* format. Further details will be discussed in class. (This debate *may* take place through online forums on the course website.)

D. BOOK RESPONSE: 10%

Provide an "appreciatively critical" review/response to an additional book-length reading of your choosing (see below). The requirements are as follows:

- First and foremost, your review should be "appreciative." You may not agree with the author, but you should engage their argument, accurately represent their viewpoint in your analysis, and seek to learn from their perspective in substantive and tangible ways.
- Secondly, your review should be "critical," by which I mean "probative and investigative" (rather than "polemical and argumentative"). Your goal here is not to demolish but to critique and improve. What about the argument is praiseworthy? Are there flaws in the overall argument? How might those flaws be addressed? What was missing that can be added? What was lacking that could be improved? In cases where the author's viewpoint is antithetical to a Christian worldview, feel free to critique but focus on how an orthodox position might "further" the author's central concerns.
- 500 words (+/-), standard academic formatting (cite your sources, use formal language, etc.), great papers will use external sources (but this is not a research paper).

Choose your own adventure:

1. OPTION 1: ADDITIONAL READINGS IN HERMENEUTICAL THEORY

Select a reading from the corresponding list of “Additional Readings in Hermeneutics” (posted on the course website). These focus on specific areas of Biblical interpretation that we either did not explore deeply in class or provide an alternative viewpoint to the methods we focused on.

2. OPTION 2: READINGS IN LITERARY THEORY

Select a reading from the corresponding list in “Additional Readings in Hermeneutics” (posted on the course website). These are not focused on Biblical Hermeneutics but are more general in orientation. Your response should take the form of “How this book might impact my reading of biblical literature.”

3. OPTION 3: READINGS IN LITERATURE

Alternatively, you may select a substantive work of literature and offer an “appreciatively critical” response to that reading. This can take many forms. It could be a “The Gospel According to Harry Potter” style reflection, or “How the Poetry of Emily Dickinson reinforces and challenges a Christian worldview,” or “How Truman Capote affects my appropriation of the Bible.” The goal here is to explore the impact that contemporary literature and cultural ideas has, both positively and negatively, on our ability to read the Bible.

E. SHORT EXHORTATIONAL PAPERS: 30%

You will write two short **Biblical-Theological Exhortations** during the class. The first will be due on the fifth week of class and will be worth 10% of your final grade. The second will be due the 10th week of class and is worth 20% of your final grade.

Details:

- The purpose of these papers is to practice the hermeneutical methodology presented in the class. You should endeavor to utilize all the tools available to you, but you will be graded on effort and the degree to which you incorporate previous feedback.
- Your first paper will be on an OT text of your choosing. Your second paper will be on a NT text of your choosing.
- The central thesis of an exhortational paper should address the way in which your chosen text solves a pastoral/practical matter of the Christian life. How does the text solve the pastoral or practical problem that you would like to address? For more on this, consult the document “How to Write a Biblical-Theological Exhortation” on Canvas.
- Aim for 1500 words or less (excluding footnotes), standard academic formatting (cite your sources, use formal language, etc.), but this is not a research paper.
- You will receive extensive feedback on each paper, which you should pay careful attention to as you prepare for the next paper, culminating in the final Exhortational Research Paper (see below).

F. EXHORTATIONAL RESEARCH PAPER: 30%

The culmination of this class is a “Biblical-Theological and Exhortational” Research Paper. That may sound confusing and difficult and obscure, but as you approach the end of class I hope it will be clear what this means. You will have two opportunities to practice this kind of exhortational paper (see

above). You can consider this an expanded and more academic version of the previous papers you have written.

Details:

- 2500- 4000 words (excluding footnotes), standard academic format.
- Like the previous papers you have written for this course, the thesis of this paper should be centered around “the (pastoral/practical) problem that the text solves.”
- This is a research paper, so you should adequately engage relevant literature in all relevant areas that you address (that is, biblical exegesis, historical backgrounds, Christological interpretation, theological meaning, pastoral application, et. al). This will ordinarily require you to substantively interact with at least eight quality resources.
- The primary way that that this paper differs from the previous papers is that this paper is a research paper. That means that it will be more “academic” in tone, and it will also require more research in the areas of exegesis (“box 2” of the Clowney “Square”) and Christological interpretation (“box 3” of the Clowney “Square”). You may also want to engage contemporary authors in pastoral ministry, sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural analysis, etc. as you apply the text to your pastoral problem (“box 4”).

V. GRADING

96-100%: A

90-95%: A-

87-89%: B+

84-86%: B

80-83%: B-

Etc.

>60%: Fail