

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 4

Approaches to Meaning

Lesson Guide



thirdmill

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

© 2013 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ABOUT THIRDMILL

Founded in 1997, Thirdmill is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Thirdmill has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters and satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of countless video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including materials on how to start your own learning community.

Thirdmill is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit www.thirdmill.org.

CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE	1
NOTES.....	2
I. INTRODUCTION (0:20).....	2
II. OBJECTIVE (3:25)	2
A. Background (5:52)	3
B. Influence (10:15).....	3
III. SUBJECTIVE (17:02)	4
A. Background (18:19)	4
B. Influence (22:18).....	5
IV. DIALOGICAL (27:23)	6
A. Background (30:16)	6
B. Influence (33:30).....	7
C. Comparison (38:55)	7
1. Authority-Dialog and Objective (40:06)	7
2. Authority-Dialog and Subjective (42:03).....	7
V. CONCLUSION (49:04).....	8
REVIEW QUESTIONS.....	9
APPLICATION QUESTIONS.....	13
GLOSSARY	14

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

- Objects of Knowledge: The things that we try to understand.
- Subjects of Knowledge: The people that do the studying.

When we interpret the Bible, we are the subjects, and the object of our study is the Bible.

Three major approaches towards the objects and subjects of knowledge:

- Objectivism: It is possible to arrive at impartial knowledge.
- Subjectivism: Knowledge is always influenced by personal biases.
- Dialogism: Emphasizes the interplay between objectivism and subjectivism.

II. Objective (3:25)

Objective scholars believe that they can interpret Scripture impartially.

A. Background (5:52)

Scientific Rationalism:

- René Descartes (1596 – 1650), the father of modern rationalism, promoted reason as the supreme judge of truth.
- Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the father of modern science, applied rational, logical thinking to the study of the physical world.

Structuralism:

Structuralists tried to use rational and scientific objectivity to obtain an exhaustive understanding of everything they studied.

B. Influence (10:15)

- Critical Biblical Studies: Evaluate Scripture with rational investigation only, and therefore reject many of Scripture's claims and teachings.
- Evangelical Biblical Studies: Affirm that Scripture is absolutely true and authoritative and that all scientific findings are subject to its teachings.

III. Subjective (17:02)

Subjectivists recognize that human beings, the world, and matters of faith, are often too complex to be discerned by scientific rationalism.

A. Background (18:19)

Modern subjectivism gained prominence partly in response to the objectivism of the Enlightenment.

- David Hume (1711-1776), Scottish skeptic, believed that our emotions, desires and mental categories always influence our thinking.

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German philosopher, believed that we process our perceptions of the world through the rational categories or concepts that already exist in our minds.

Romanticism: Argued that poetry, drama, music and visual arts provide an understanding of reality that is far superior to rational scientific discourse.

Post-Structuralism: Emphasized that objective claims of knowledge can't be trusted because of subjective prejudices, feelings and existing beliefs.

Subjective interpreters argue that the meaning of art and literature, including the Bible, must be located within us.

B. Influence (22:18)

- **Critical Biblical Studies:** Argue that no objective meaning can be found in a biblical text and encourage readers of the Bible to create their own meanings by using the Scriptures to suit their own purposes.
- **Evangelical Biblical Studies:** Acknowledge that the Bible is God's Word and its meaning is determined by God rather than by interpreters.

Preachers and Bible teachers frequently read contemporary interests into Bible passages, without any concern for the historical setting of the text.

IV. Dialogical (27:23)

"Dialogical" refers to the idea that interpretation involves a type of dialog or discussion between the reader and the text.

A. Background (30:16)

- Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) offered a well-known model of interpretation called the “hermeneutical circle.”

- Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) argued that scientific knowledge results from interactions between objective reality and our paradigms of understanding.

- Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) spoke of interpreting meaning in terms of the fusion of two horizons.

B. Influence (33:30)

Evangelicals emphasize that reading the Bible is different because, unlike other books, the Bible has absolute authority over us (“authority-dialog”).

C. Comparison (38:55)**1. Authority-Dialog and Objective (40:06)**

The authority-dialog model acknowledges that objective truth can be found in the text of Scripture.

The authority-dialog model helps us avoid thinking that we can be utterly objective when we approach the Scriptures.

2. Authority-Dialog and Subjective (42:03)

The authority-dialog model acknowledges that our perspectives and beliefs influence the way we interpret Scripture.

If we don't submit our subjectivity to the authority of Scripture, our interpretations of the Bible will be severely hindered.

Investigating the Bible is a lifelong process in which Scripture changes us and causes us to grow and mature in our Christian faith.

V. Conclusion (49:04)

Review Questions

1. List and explain the three major approaches toward the objects and subjects of knowledge?

2. Explain the philosophical and cultural background of objective approaches to interpretation?

3. What influence have objective approaches had on biblical interpretation?
4. Explain the philosophical and cultural background of subjective approaches to interpretation?

7. Compare and contrast the authority-dialog and objective models and the authority-dialog and subjective models.

Application Questions

1. What methods have you developed, or do you currently follow, to study the Bible? How do these methods help you? How could they be improved?
2. Is it possible to arrive at a strictly objective understanding of the Bible? Explain your answer.
3. How do you guard against a narrow emotional or intuitive reading of the Bible?
4. What are some ways you have encountered subjectivism in regard to biblical interpretation?
5. How has subjectivism influenced your understanding and interpretation of Scripture?
6. What is the danger in letting your personal experiences and preconceptions influence your understanding of Scripture?
7. What benefits have you received from prayerfully interacting with the Bible?
8. How should you adjust your dialog with Scripture to improve your understanding of the Bible?
9. How do you deal with your questions and opinions when studying the Bible?
10. How has your personal, subjective input been valuable to your interpretation of Scripture?
11. What are some specific ways you can influence others to engage the Scriptures in accord with the authority-dialog model?
12. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?

Glossary

authority-dialog – A model of interpreting Scripture in which the reader asks questions of the text while recognizing that both objective and subjective judgments must be viewed in submission to the authority of Scripture

Bacon, Francis – (1561-1626) English philosopher, statesman, and Lord Chancellor of England from 1618-21; often called the "father of modern science"

Descartes, René – (1596-1650) French philosopher and mathematician; often called the "father of modern rationalism"

dialogism – Approach to meaning that emphasizes the constant “dialog” or interplay between objective reality and subjective perspectives

Ding an sich – German phrase meaning "a thing itself"; used by Immanuel Kant to assert that we cannot know objective reality as it really is but can only perceive the world as it appears to us and then process our perceptions through the rational categories or concepts that already exist in our minds

empirical – Based on or proven by observation, experience, or experiment rather than on theory or abstract principal

Gadamer, Hans-Georg – (1900-2002) Influential German philosopher, best known for his dialogical model of hermeneutics, who spoke of meaning in terms of the fusion of what could be seen or understood from a particular point of view

hermeneutical circle – A model of interpretation offered by Friedrich Schleiermacher in which we attempt to understand a text by first interpreting its parts through our presuppositions and developing an interpretation of the whole that then refines our interpretation of the parts, and by repeatedly interacting with the text, go beyond our earlier presuppositions into greater understanding; sometimes called a “hermeneutical spiral”

hermeneutics – The study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture

Hume, David – (1711-1776) Scottish philosopher, writer, historian and skeptic who wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*; argued, among other things, that reason and scientific study cannot lead to objective knowledge and that our emotions, desires and mental categories always influence our thinking

Kant, Immanuel – (1724-1804) Influential German philosopher who proposed that all knowledge involves both perceptions developed from observation or experience and subjective processing through categories or concepts that already exist in our minds

Kuhn, Thomas – (1922-1996) American historian and philosopher of science who argued that scientific knowledge results from interactions between objective reality and the paradigms of understanding that we bring to scientific investigation

objectivism – Philosophical belief that reality and truth exist independently of human knowledge or perception and that it is possible to arrive at impartial or objective knowledge without being influenced by personal feelings or biases

paradigm – Model or example; pattern of interrelated ideas or concepts that constitute a shared system of belief; theoretical framework commonly accepted by the scientific community

Post-structuralism – Broad intellectual movement that emerged in the mid-20th century in France; characterized by a skepticism towards structuralism and a focus on language, power, and subjectivity; challenged the idea of stable structures or systems underlying human experience and argued that meaning is always deferred, contingent, and context-dependent

romanticism – Philosophical and artistic movement from the late 18th to the mid-19th century that stressed individual human characteristics like intuition, imagination and emotion over objective approaches to meaning; argued that expressive poetry, drama, music and visual arts could provide an understanding of reality far superior to rational, scientific discourse

Schleiermacher, Friedrich – (1768-1834) German philosopher, theologian and linguist, often called the father of modern hermeneutics

scientific method – Systematic approach to knowledge and problem solving that entails observing, hypothesizing, testing, analyzing, and adjusting as necessary to prove a theory or result

scientific rationalism – Philosophical belief that human reason is the supreme judge of truth

structuralism – Broad philosophical outlook of the 20th century built on the linguistic insights of Ferdinand de Saussure; theory that linguistic structures were capable of rational and objective descriptions of the real world because all aspects of reality and knowledge are governed by universal laws and can be understood by their relationship to established structures or systems that underly all human experience

subjectivism – Philosophical belief that the nature of reality depends wholly on the consciousness or perception of the individual mind and that knowledge is always influenced by personal feelings or biases