BS 820 History of Interpretation

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Catalogue Description:
Intensive reading of examples of biblical exegesis representative of selected major trends and problems in biblical interpretation. Specific topics and texts will vary, but typically stress the early christian era through the reformation.

Context of the Course at Asbury Theological Seminary

The courses “Research Methods in OT Interpretation” and “Research Methods in NT Interpretation” introduce contemporary methods in biblical studies. This course provides an orientation to the preceding centuries and the relationship between Christian theological hermeneutics to simply general hermeneutics applied to Christian texts.

The place for this course emerges in a statement by John Wesley in his "Address to the Clergy:

No less necessary is a knowledge of the Scriptures, which teach us how to teach others; yea a knowledge of all the Scriptures; seeing scripture interprets scripture; one part fixing the sense of another. So that, whether it be true or not, that every good textuary is a good Divine, it is certain none can be a good Divine who is not a good textuary. None else can be mighty in the Scriptures; able both to instruct and to stop the mouths of gainsayers…in order to do this accurately, ought [the minister] not to know the literal meaning of every word, verse, and chapter; without which there can be no firm foundation on which the spiritual meaning can be built? 1

In this statement, Wesley aligns himself with a tradition of biblical reading reaching back to the earliest Christian commentary on the OT, namely, the recognition that the "literal sense" of the Bible is not the same as its "spiritual (or normative) meaning" and yet, paradoxically, it is the essential matrix from which the latter must come. The validity of this linkage has been the essence of the claim to be "biblical." This tradition of distinct but vitally related "literal" and "spiritual" senses of scripture had a significant history in the 1700+ years between the last NT writing and the birth of Mr. Wesley. Wesley was grounded in this tradition and, despite confessing himself to be "a man of one book," Wesley's exegesis frequently retraces the steps of earlier readers of the Bible. Therefore a Wesleyan vision of scriptural study of necessity faithfully respects and critically appropriates this historical interpretive tradition.

But the very tradition drawn upon by Wesley was larger than the methodist movement, and larger than even biblical studies. The distinction between literal and spiritual or normative reading emerged from ancient and early medieval theories of language and the mediation of meaning. These theories were debated by philosophers, pondered by church fathers, and refined

in medieval universities, not merely in the study of the Bible, but even in the study of texts such as the codification of Roman law by Justinian in the 6th century. So the study of the history of this pivotal interpretive concept—the dialectic of literal and normative readings—embraces not only the Wesleyan tradition, and not only the tradition of theology, but links Christian reading to the widest horizons of classical, liberal-arts intellectualism. To study the history of exegesis is to see the best minds in human history engaging one of the greatest tasks of human learning under the imperative of heeding the divine word.

Beyond tradition and intellectual pursuits, though, few questions press upon the parish minister, teacher, counselor, or leader, than how the Bible functions normatively for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17). But the formative role of scripture often stands in contrast to the rigorous study of its plain, or literal sense in Christian intellectual culture. Moreover, many contemporary hermeneutical programs contrast "theological exegesis" with historical-critical interpretation, critiquing the latter as "modernist" and out of step with classical Christian reading of the Bible. To clarify the movement between these two moments of reading brings sharpness and confidence to the normative use of scripture in the contemporary church. Moreover, studying the history of interpretation, especially premodern interpretation, demands of contemporary readers that we grapple with the cultural conditioning and social location of interpreters who heard God's voice in scripture in the midst of social, political, religious, and spiritual realities different form our own. To open conversation with Hippolytus, Augustine, Origen, or Aquinas is to experience a theological exchange across the boundaries of time, space and culture. As such, this enterprise takes on a missional quality as we ponder how to discuss substantive scriptural, theological, and spiritual issues cross culturally, both as listeners and as speakers.

**Course Objectives:**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Describe by reference to biblical texts the principle exegetical difficulties that have engaged interpreters of the Bible;

2. Narrate the principle processes and conclusions of representative interpreters of a chosen text from the post-apostolic era through the magisterial reformers;

3. Describe and illustrate the range of definitions and functions given to the concept of "literal sense" (sensus litteralis, "plain sense," etc.) through the pre-modern period of interpretation

4. Describe and illustrate the range of definitions and functions given to the concept of "spiritual sense" (in its varied forms) through the pre-modern period of interpretation

5. Present an analysis of the history of pre-modern interpretation for a particular passage, identifying specific learnings for contemporary exegesis.
Course Requirements

Reading forms the heart of the course. Students will work carefully through selected biblical passages in translation and with reference to the original text. Students will read (in translation) specimen interpretations of all or part of the biblical units selected that are representative of the trends of exegesis that shaped subsequent interpretation. Selected reading of analytical and secondary sources will establish context and fill in gaps between the primary examples. Reading will be assigned weekly and must be completed if students are to be allowed to speak in class. Students who have not completed the readings for a class day may attend, but may not participate in class discussion.

Seminar Discussions: Seminars will follow a structured format. Students will be assigned specific readings for which they will present summaries in class, followed by their moderating a discussion about the reading. All students are expected to complete all readings and be prepared to treat their main topics seriously in the seminar.

Preparation for Seminar Discussion

Students will find it necessary to prepare their contributions to the seminar sessions, based on the reading material. For the study of a given reading, students should formulate rough answers, with reference to the assigned texts, to questions such as the following:

1. What does this interpreter understand the task and goals of interpretation to be?

2. What skills, knowledge, preparation, and personal qualities does the interpreter seem to think are necessary for successful reading of the text?

3. What actual assumptions, ideas, knowledge, and processes does the interpreter employ in handling the text?

4. What is the role of the audience of the interpretation? How are the "consumers" of the exposition expected to respond?

5. What claims and proposals about the text does the interpreter present?

6. How does the social location and cultural context of the interpreter shape the exposition? Where/how does the interpreter reach beyond these horizons?

Written Assignments

Students will write a major paper due on the last day of class. The paper will focus on the history of interpretation of a text chosen by the student, analyzing how representative interpreters of the chosen text work with the literal and normative senses of scripture. In order to address the full range of Christian hermeneutical concern, the text must come from the Old Testament. This paper is expected to demonstrate a knowledge of the general history of interpretation and the context(s) in which various readers worked.
Evaluation of Student Work

Grades will be based on a "total points" system.

Reading: ........................................50 points
Seminar Participation: ..........50 Points
Paper .................................50 Points
Total Points: .................. 150 Points

Letter grades correlate to total points according to the following table:

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Required Texts:
Selected Additional Reading

Schedule of Readings and Assignments: TBA

No assignment due on the first day, which is an organizational and introductory session.