

THE DILEMMA OF ACCURATELY INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

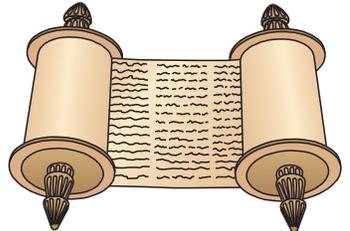
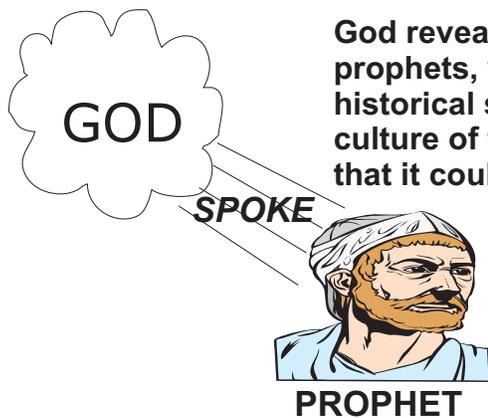
By Phillip David Mosher

The Task Before Us:

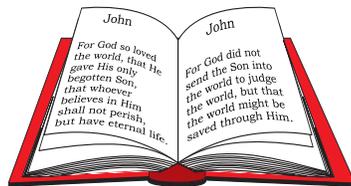
GOD

God revealed His message to people through prophets, who wrote it within the current historical setting using the language and culture of the recipients so that it could be understood.

SPOKE



PROPHET



Two millennia later, God's message was translated into our language, and it is studied and applied to our lives within our culture.



Missionaries take God's message to distant lands where it is translated into other languages and applied to the lives of people living in very different cultures.





I. BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

(The Science of Bible Interpretation)

There is no subject more important to the student of the Bible than hermeneutics. How one interprets the Bible is foundational to one's beliefs, behavior, and relationship with the Lord. It is my prayer that God will use this material to assist His children in their study of the Holy Scriptures and to give glory to His Son. May we become skillful in "accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

A sincere Bible student humbly seeks the Lord in prayer because he believes that God is the author of the Book. He keenly desires to know God and to understand what He was and is communicating through the Scriptures. Therefore, he is a willing worker who has habits that will hone his skills as an interpreter.

Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting written documents, especially the Bible.

"Science" is knowledge gained through study, observation, and testing within developed and proven guidelines with the goal of discovering and verifying truth. Hermeneutics is a science because it involves a method of research that is guided by principles and rules. A proper methodology is foundational to the sound interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and to our understanding and application of divine truth to our daily lives.

There are presuppositions.

- 1) We believe that the 66 books of the Bible are the inspired Word of God. The Scriptures are the work of the Holy Spirit. God led and guided "*holy men*" to give us the Bible. (1 Peter 1:20-21)
- 2) The Bible was written by 35 to 40 men of God over a period of approximately 1,500 years. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew with brief sections in Aramaic. The Septuagint¹ and New Testament were written in Koiné Greek. The culture of the Bible is basically that of the Jews. We believe that the central theme of the Scriptures is the Messiah, the Son of God who came to save lost man, and that the secondary theme is God's program for His chosen people, Israel, the nation of the Messiah's birth. The church (local and universal) is the subject of many New Testament books.
- 3) The human conscience and all of God's creation reveal God and basic morality, but they are inadequate in communicating God's purpose and plan for man and His work of grace to save fallen man from his sins. To communicate His plan for man, God gave us a written revelation, the Holy Scriptures. By using Koiné Greek, the language of the common people, and not the language of the elite, and the fact that the Bible is God communicating with man, causes us to conclude that *God spoke because He desires for man to understand truth and His will*. This does not mean, however, that the task of the student will always be an easy one (2 Peter 3:15-16).

¹ The Greek translation of the Old Testament made before Christ.

Proverbs 25:2 says, “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.” Bible interpretation is a full-time, never-ending job. The following principles are to guide the seeker of God in his/her search for truth and to guard him/her from error.

The Historical Chart outlines the three basic views.

The last two pages of this chapter present a simplified chart of the history of Bible interpretation. The proper method of Bible interpretation has been called the *literal school*. Literal means that since God used human languages and cultures to reveal Himself and His will to man, and since His apparent desire was and is that man understand His message, the Bible is to be interpreted the same way one would interpret other literature—by observing normal rules of grammar and writing styles, and by carefully understanding the cultural and historical context behind the text. The interpreter in the *literal school* studies the languages, culture, and historical setting of the passage in an effort to discern the author’s literary style, to understand the culture of the people, and to place the passage within its historical setting. These energies are spent in an effort to understand the message within its context after which the truth obtained can be applied to one’s personal life and to the lives of those he/she may influence. The students in this school build upon a firm foundation because the guiding rules are objective.

The *allegorical school* (or spiritual school) believes that behind the text of the Scriptures is a deeper and more spiritual sense that must be sought, much like that of an allegory. An allegory is a literary style that uses people, animals, events, etc., in an extended metaphorical sense to transmit a message or truth. Because the Bible is literature, it does contain allegories (e.g., Revelation 12), but such are easily recognized. A good example of an allegory is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* composed in 1678. Those in the “*allegorical school*” believe that God hid His message to man behind the literal, black-on-white words that recorded the events in the Bible; and it is that deeper, spiritual message that is the truth God intended to communicate. Though the allegorical method was developed a few centuries before Christ by those who sought to reconcile philosophy with the Old Testament, it eventually became the hermeneutics of the Catholic Church. The Catholic theologian, Saint Augustine, was the major personality behind the adoption of this hermeneutical method. As a result of his teachings, church councils passed laws stating that only the “church” and its leadership could interpret the Bible; thus, the laity was not to read the Scriptures. These regulations communicate that only the “spiritual” leadership possessed the special skills that were necessary to dig out the deeper truths in the Bible and that this was a task much too difficult for the common person. The *allegorical school* is purely subjective, lacking clearly defined guidelines for leading the interpreter. In this school competing interpretations are brought forth.

The *liberal school* is composed of those who do not believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God but that it is the work of men. They reject the supernatural and believe the Bible contains errors, fables, and the imaginations of men.

Principles for Sound Bible Interpretation

Rule #1: The Bible is an accommodation² of divine truths to the human mind. God is a limitless, eternal spirit. We are finite, subject to time, space, and multiple limitations. To reveal Himself and communicate His truths, God used human languages, cultures, experiences, and material objects. God chose to give us the Scriptures through select persons from His chosen people, Israel (Romans 9:4). The languages used were Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The culture is of the Middle East and primarily that of the Hebrew people.

Example: Compare Numbers 23:19 and John 4:24 with Psalm 34:15 and Isaiah 53:1.

Rule #2: The Bible is a divinely inspired revelation that is progressive in nature, becoming clearer as it reaches completion. The seeds for most Bible doctrines are found in the book of Genesis. They are developed over time as God imparted more truth through His appointed messengers whom He guided as they wrote the books of the Bible. Many revealed truths reach their culmination in the book of Revelation.

Example: Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3, 49:8; 2 Samuel 7:16; Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:26-38; Galatians 3:16; Revelation 12:1-5

Rule #3: The Bible is harmonious, containing no contradictions. The Bible contains 66 books written by 35 to 40 men of God (2 Peter 1:21) over a time-span of approximately 1,500 years, and yet it is harmonious. These facts show that the true author is One – the eternal God. If we were to ask just five people to each write a paper on one topic, we would discover gross conflicts in their opinions and presentations of facts, especially if the topic were religious or political.

Example: Are the teachings in Ephesians 2:8-10 in agreement with James 2:14-26?

Rule #4: The context must be kept in view when interpreting a specific text/passage. The skilled interpreter considers the whole when studying the parts, such as verses preceding and following a passage, as well as the book in which the passage is located and passages covering the same doctrine in other books of the Bible.

Example: The Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) say that there will be 144,000 who will live in the highest heaven and that these are/were the first 144,000 to have embraced the JW faith. Is that what Revelation 7:1-8 and 14:1-5 teaches?

Rule #5: To arrive at an accurate interpretation, the interpreter must consider the original languages, the culture of the people at the time of writing, and the historical setting of the passage. Scholars have written many books covering these three areas to assist one as he/she studies the Scriptures.

Example: 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 must be interpreted within its cultural setting. Read Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:27 and explain how applying our western ways can change the meaning of the agreement that existed between Mary and Joseph, causing a distortion of the historical facts.

² "Accommodation" is a willingness to adjust or modify one's actions in response to others. Because of the needs of the created, the Creator God, who is pure Spirit, bent down to communicate on the level of man.

Rule #6: When dealing with obscure and difficult passages, give preference to the interpretation that is obvious and that agrees with other texts on the subject. Choose the majority meaning over one in the minority. Ignorance as to the meaning of some passages must be admitted.

Example: 1 Corinthians 15:29. The Corinthian church that received these words knew what Paul meant, but today this passage has over 30 interpretations. Can one receive a ticket to heaven for his unsaved, dead relatives through the rite of Baptism? Compare John 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9 with John 6:44 and Romans 8:29-30. The first three passages are indisputably clear about God's desire for lost man. Should not those clearly revealed truths about God's will guide us in our interpretation of the seemingly unclear verses and similar passages?

Rule #7: Interpretation is one, applications can be many.³ Applying these rules, try to determine who is speaking and to whom the message was given. Because God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and is consistent in His dealings with man, ask if the passage contains a message that you can apply to yourself, to your circumstances, and to those to whom you minister.

Example: The Ten Commandments were given to Israel (Exodus 20) and are part of the Mosaic Covenant established between God and the twelve tribes at Sinai. That covenant is a contract that contains 613 laws. In one of those laws, God tells Israel to observe a Sabbath (Exodus 20:8 and 35:2), ending their six-day work week with a day of rest. As we study this, we learn there was also a law requiring a sabbatical year during which they were to rest the land and trust God to provide for their needs. The Sabbath was a sign to the nations around them (Exodus 31:13,⁴ "sanctify" means to be set apart and distinctively different), setting Israel apart and making them a testimony of God's blessing to the world. We conclude that the Sabbath was not given to the church. As a testimony to Christ's resurrection, Christians have observed the "first day of the week" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Can we apply the teachings about the Sabbath to our lives? Throughout her history, the church has observed Sunday as a day of worship and rest. It is good to have a day dedicated to God for worship, prayer, Bible study, and fellowship with those of like faith. Medical science teaches us that a periodic day off is wholesome. By going to church and abstaining from activities like mowing the lawn, we can be a testimony to our neighbors; but Sunday is not the Sabbath (such teaching comes from Catholic and Reformed theology). Some may ask, "Then the Ten Commandments are not for us to obey?" My reply is that they contain the moral law that is written on everyone's heart (Romans 1:18-32; 2:12-16); and except for the Sabbath commandment, all the others are repeated by our Lord and His Apostles as a moral obligation for everyone to obey.

³ "WE AFFIRM that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. WE DENY that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application." From The Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics, Summit I of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy took place in Chicago on October 26-28, 1978

⁴ "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.'" (Exodus 31.13)

Rule #8: Hermeneutics is a science. A good, healthy science is one that seeks truth and allows the evidence to speak for itself. A bad science is one that distorts truth. The practitioner of bad science imposes his prejudices upon the facts to present a half-truth or lie.⁵ **The Rule:** Allow the Scriptures to speak. Avoid approaching them with preconceived ideas. When interpreting the Bible, admit that one's cultural background, upbringing, past beliefs and experiences do influence one's interpretation of the Bible. Each person must strive to set aside the conditioning received through the myriad of life's experiences and training. One must study the Bible with an open mind. I believe that this is the most difficult principle to practice.⁶

Example: The men who gave us the King James translation believed in Covenant Theology and were Reformed theologians. Their theological bias caused them to mistranslate Matthew 28:19-20. Had they translated rather than transliterated the word "baptize," no longer could they have continued the practice of baptizing by sprinkling or pouring; and had they been faithful to the original and written "*make disciples of all nations*" rather than "*teach all nations*," they would have had to cease baptizing babies, because the command is to baptize disciples, those who have made a commitment to follow Jesus and His teachings.

Rule #9: The Bible is literature, the best ever produced.

The Rule: The various literary devices used in communication must be recognized and understood as one reads, studies, and interprets the Word of God. Some of these literary devices are listed below:

A. Allegory: An extended metaphor, a literary work in which the characters and events are used symbolically to express a deeper spiritual or moral meaning.

Example: *Pilgrim's Progress*

Biblical example: Revelation chapter 12 and Galatians 4:21-31 (In Galatians Paul uses an historical, true story as an allegory to teach that salvation is a free gift received through faith, not works. By doing so, he has not sanctioned the allegorical method of Bible interpretation.)

B. Apostrophe: A form of address or digression to someone not present (usually dead) or to a personified object or idea as though it were a living person.

⁵ "*WE AFFIRM* that any preunderstandings which the interpreter brings to Scripture should be in harmony with scriptural teaching and subject to correction by it. *WE DENY* that Scripture should be required to fit alien preunderstandings, inconsistent with itself, such as naturalism, evolutionism, scientism, secular humanism, and relativism." From the The Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics, Summit I of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy took place in Chicago on October 26-28, 1978

⁶ As a missionary in Brazil, I observed that in Brazilian culture there is very little black-and-white thinking. Violating laws and doing so without getting caught is an accepted part of that culture. In our ministry, it was difficult to bring Christians to an understanding that God's commands are absolute. Having taught cross-culturally in two cultures (Nambiquara and Brazilian) opened my mind to the truth that as an American from the South, I was carrying a lot of cultural baggage and that was impacting my understanding of the Bible. Working cross-culturally taught me a lot about non-biblical prejudices.

Biblical example: Psalm 114:3-6 “The sea looked and fled; . . . What ails you, O sea, that you flee?” Hosea 13:14 “O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting?”

C. Hyperbole: An exaggeration in which the speaker deliberately understates or overstates the facts for emphasis. Example: He ate a mountain of chocolate.

Biblical example: Joshua 11:4 “They came out, they and all their armies with them, as many people as the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots.”

D. Irony: Sarcasm, humorous or sadistic, absurd or laughable, where stating the opposite or an untruth is used to make a point.

Biblical example: 1 Kings 18:27, “It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, ‘Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.’”

E. Metaphor: A literary device that applies a word or phrase to a person or thing to make a comparison; a method of speaking that applies the properties of something (animal, person, plant, etc.) to another without using the word “like” or “as.”
Example: Joe is a bear of a man.

Biblical examples: In John 10:7 Jesus said, “I am the door.” In John 14:6 Jesus said, “I am the way [path or road].” By using these metaphors, Jesus was communicating that He was the only means to God.

F. Metonymy: A figure of speech in which something closely associated with an object is used in place of the object. Example: He spoke with the top “brass.” Brass stands for the leadership, usually military.

Biblical example: In Matthew 23:37 Jesus used “Jerusalem,” the capital of Israel, to indicate the nation of Israel. In Malachi 1:2-3 the Lord uses “Esau” and “Jacob” the names of brothers as a metonymy for the nations of Edom and Israel. In Revelation 14, 17, and 18, “Babylon” appears to be a metonymy to speak of an evil, ungodly government.

G. Simile: A simile has the same function as a metaphor except words that signal a comparison are employed, such as “like” and “as.” Example: He is like an elephant and as stubborn as a mule.

Biblical example: Psalm 103:12 “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

H. Personification: A figure of speech in which human capacities are attributed to something material. Example: That motor purrs. (An action of a cat attributed to a car motor.)

Biblical example: Luke 19:40, “. . . the stones will cry out . . .”

I. Parable: An extended simile, usually a short, simple story that symbolically employs events and characters to communicate a moral or spiritual truth.

Biblical example: Matthew chapters 13 and 25

J. Synecdoche: A figure of speech where a part of something is used to indicate the whole. Example: He borrowed Joe's wheels to go to New York. ("Wheels" indicate car.)

Biblical example: In Genesis 12:5, "the souls they had acquired in Haran" ("souls" indicates people and is translated as people in some Bibles).

K. Other figures of speech: antithesis, euphemism, litotes, onomatopoeia, oxymoron

L. Literary Structures: Before making any interpretation and application, first determine the literary structure of the passage. The structural methods one uses in writing often impacts the intended intent. Hebrew poetry is different from English poetry and understanding its system of expanding and/or repeating an idea indicates the meaning. The division markers as in Genesis, "these are the generations," would be another guide. We tend to be linear when writing. However, the Hebrews used chiasmic structures extensively. Recognizing when chiasms are used can be crucial to a proper understanding of the passage.

Chiasm comes from the Greek: χιάζω (chiázō) having the shape of our letter "X." Chiasms are a method of communicating in which two clauses on either side of the center are related to each other through a literary structure that leads into a central, main point. An outline of the chiasm looks like a "V" on its side. Chiasms are an inverted parallelism where the first half progresses into the center and the following half progresses away from the center. Each repeated thought is identical or similar to its matching point. The chiasm is a literary structure designed to focus the reader's attention on the center of the message being transmitted. The surrounding points leading into and away from that main point support and amplify the main point.

Example:⁷ Romans 13:1-7 is a chiasmus, verses 3 and 4 being the center of the pattern. Recognition of this structure will impact one's doctrinal interpretation of verse 1. The book of Matthew is written in a chiasm with chapter 13 being in the center.⁸

Rule #10: All that is necessary for faith and practice has been clearly revealed:

- a) God created the universe and all life (Genesis 1-2).
- b) Man disobeyed the Creator and became a sinner (Psalm 14 and Romans 3:23).
- c) Man without Christ is condemned (John 3:17-18).
- b) Jesus Christ is God in the flesh (John 1:1-3, 14 & 18, and 2 Corinthians 5:19).

⁷ Two excellent books: *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, by David A. Dorsey, © 1999, Pub. Baker Academic; and *The Literary Development of John 13-17, A Chiasmic Reading*, by Wayne Brouwer, © 2000, Pub. Society of Biblical Literature

⁸ "Matthew's Chiasmic Structure and Its Dispensational Implications," by Gary W. Derickson in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Volume 163, October-December 2006

- e) Jesus as the promised seed of Abraham is the virgin-born Son of God (Genesis 12:1-3 and Luke 1:27).
- f) God chose to love man and sent His Son to redeem him (John 3:16 and 2 Peter 3:9).
- g) Man is a responsible agent and by faith must appropriate God's gift (John 3:16-18; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- h) Jesus rose from the dead bodily (1 Corinthians 15:1-8).
- i) Jesus is coming again (John 14:1-3: Though not an essential, I believe His pre-millennial return is clearly revealed).
- j) All persons will stand before the Creator to give an account of their lives. Some will enter eternal bliss and others will be condemned to eternal suffering (John 5:28-29; Revelation 20:11-15)

SPECIAL RULES

1. **Parables:** Never base a doctrine on a parable. Parables illustrate truth. Do not seek meaning in every detail of a parable. Parables usually emphasize one truth.
2. **Prophecy:** Revelations that foretell still future events can often have shadow or seemingly pre-fulfillments in history, but a careful study will reveal that the shadow does not complete all that was predicted to happen. Such predictions have only one true fulfillment.

A Word of Caution

Two hermeneutical errors and dangers are active today in the church of Jesus Christ. In reality these are related. Throughout this chapter I have shown that the error of interpreting the Scriptures in an allegorical or spiritualizing way is dangerous and has caused much confusion in theology throughout the history of the church. This approach to God's Word was around before the birth of our Savior and Lord and found its way into the church before the third century through the Alexandrian School and men like Origen, Jerome, and Augustine. God's Book of Words was written in the language of the common person, and it is my firm conviction that the Lord's intent was that all understand it. The Bible is not a book of magic that contains hidden meanings that must be discovered through trial and error by some spiritual guru. It is to be interpreted as one would any normal letter received from a friend.

The second error has been around a long time as well. Since its inception, the Catholic Church has allowed tradition to become elevated to the level of theology. Tradition is born out of the experiences and habits of men. With the start of the charismatic movement, the Protestant Church has elevated experience. These are carried to the Bible where a misinterpretation based on the spiritualizing method is applied, and these experiences are treated with theological authenticity. A good formula to remember is that Fact (the Bible) plus faith equals or produces experience. Never should the order be changed. Faith plus experience should *never* equal or produce Fact (making experiences equal to the Holy Scriptures).

Concluding Remarks

Bible study and interpretation is hard work. Obeying the rules is the only reliable way to proceed. Though this chapter outlines rules to guide us in properly interpreting the Scriptures, they can be applied to any literature. I wish they were the law for the interpretation of the Constitution of the United States.

In the early 1960s, when I attended Bible college, there were very few books on hermeneutics. Though some contained good teaching, those I knew about that claimed to treat the subject did not lay out hermeneutical principles but were the authors' interpretations of the Bible. One such book was *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics*, by J. Edwin Hartill. He lists dispensationalism, covenants, ethnic divisions, types, Bible numerics, election, etc., as *principles*.⁹ These are not hermeneutical principles but the *results* of the author's hermeneutics.

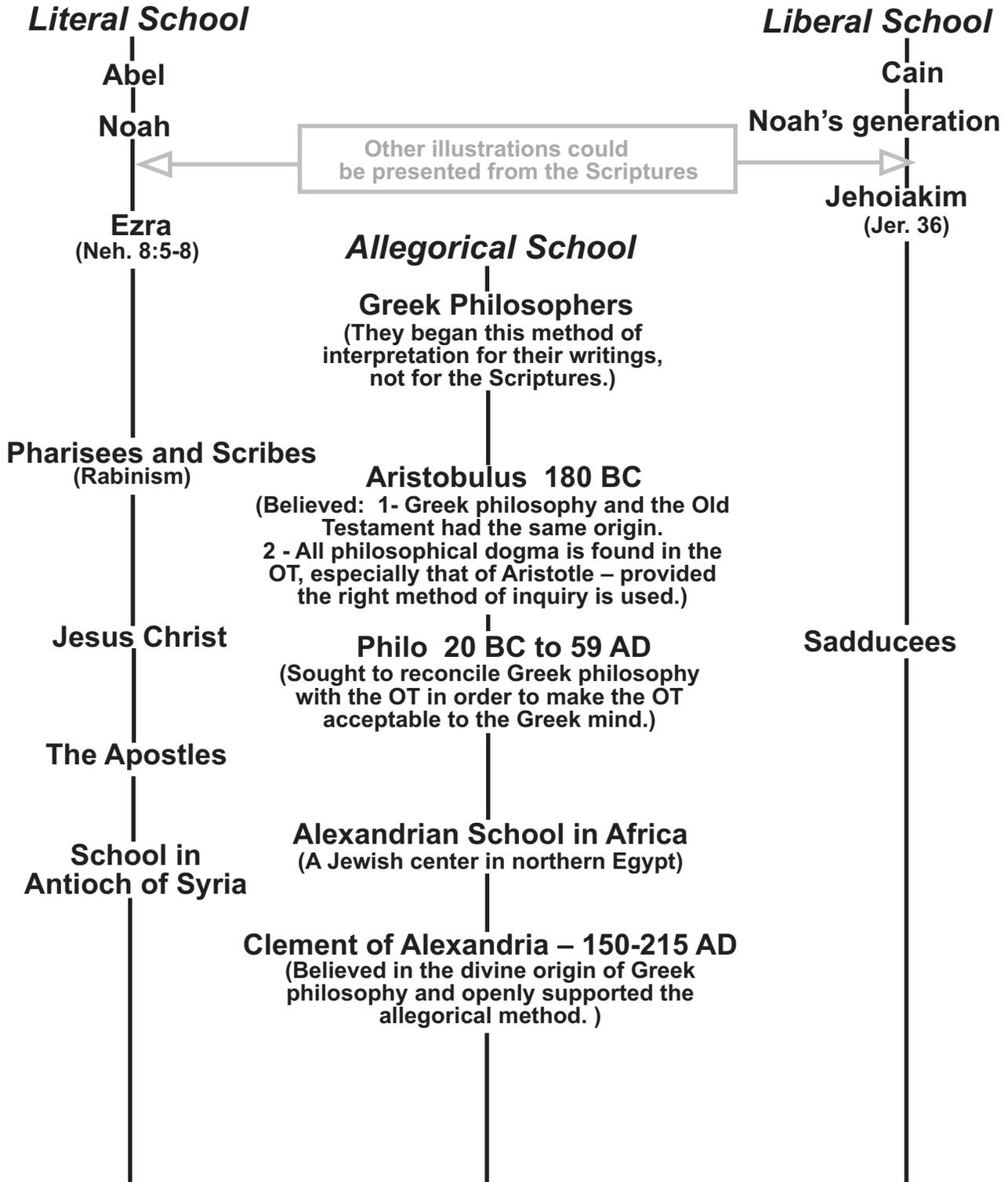
During those early years of searching, I discovered *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, by Bernard Ramm (1956 edition preferred). Also in the front of *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*,¹⁰ by Robert Young, I discovered a very good section titled "Hints and Helps to Bible Interpretation." These two works were foundational in my search for objective principles of hermeneutics. Over the past decades the importance of hermeneutics has been recognized and several fine books have been published. If I had to recommend one, I would choose *Basic Bible Interpretation*, by Roy B. Zuck.

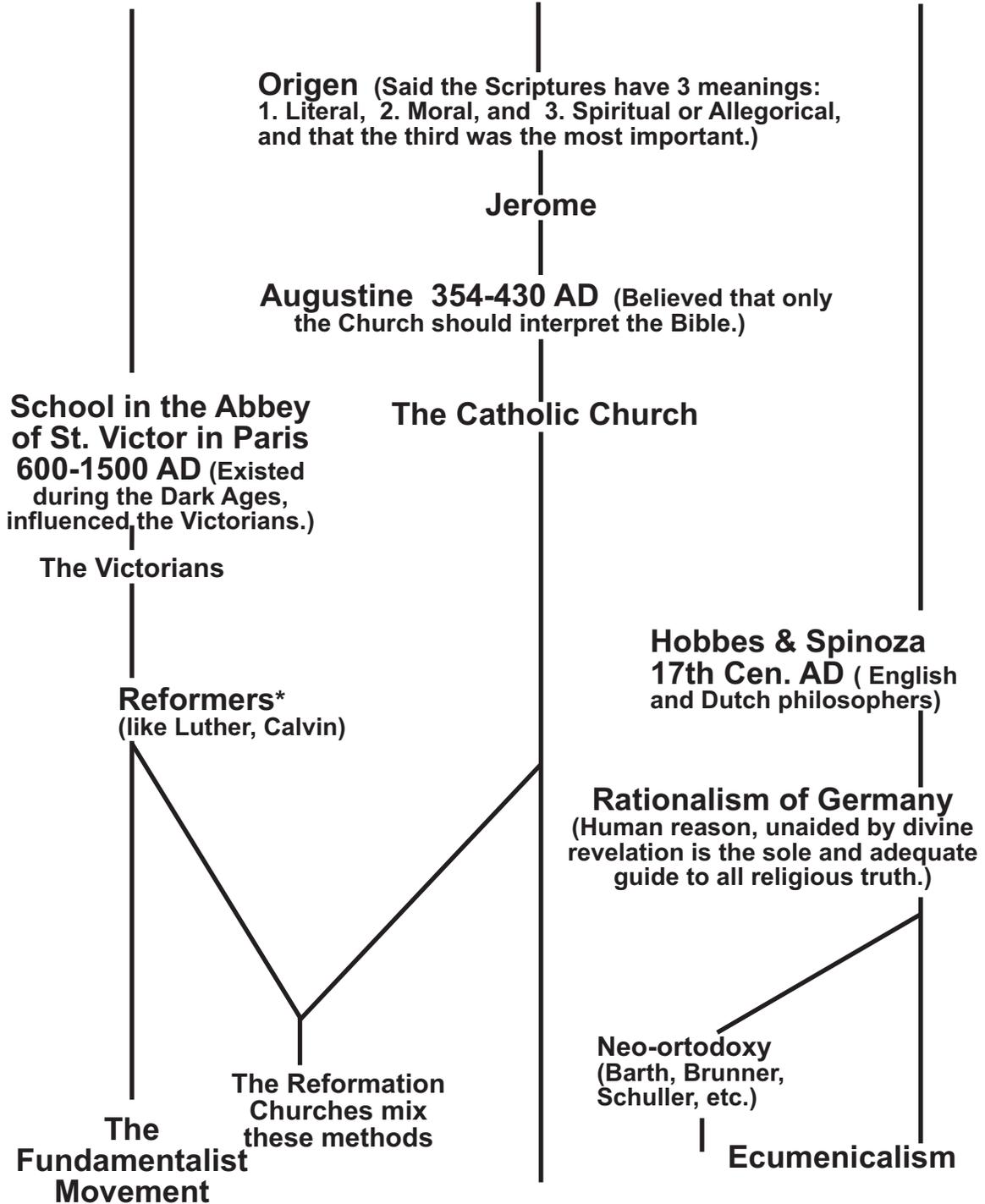
⁹ Though a fine work, *18 Principles of Divine Revelation*, by Clifton Fowler, follows in the same vein. *Biblical Hermeneutics*, by Milton Terry, is a good work but it is lengthy and heavy.

¹⁰ In grading concordances, it has been said, "*Cruden's* for the crude, *Young's* for the young, and *Strong's* for the strong." I disagree with that analogy. It requires skill to use *Young's*, and each has its proper place and usage.

A MAP OF THE HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS

By Rev. Phillip David Mosher © 1996-2004





* Some might prefer to place the Reformers in the Allegorical School. Because of their return to the Bible, in the area of soteriology, I have indicated their move to literalism but also point out that the Reformed Churches tend to mix these methods.

