

# Macro-hermeneutical Principles for Use in the Interpretation of Scripture

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“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, **rightly dividing the word of truth**” (2 Tim 2:15 NKJV).

Scripture *requires interpretation* because (1) finite human minds are unable to comprehend the infinity of the divine mind (Deut 29:29; Job 11:7–9; Isa 55:8, 9; Eccl 3:11; Rom 11:33, 34) and (2) sin has darkened and blinded the human mind so that, unaided, it cannot understand it correctly (Rom 1:21; Eph 4:18; John 9:39–41). Many of the patriarchs, prophets, and leaders of Israel in the Old Testament understood this need and “gave the sense” of the word of God “so that the people understood the reading” (Neh 8:8 ESV). In the New Testament, Jesus “interpreted [from διαρμηνεύω (*diermēneúō*)] to” his disciples “in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27 ESV). His scriptural interpretation was “handed down” to us by the apostles in their inspired canonical writings (1 Cor 11:2; Gal 1:11–12; 2 Thess 2:15; 2 Tim 1:13, 14; 3:14–17; 2 Pet 1:19–21; 3:1, 2, 15–16). Moreover, the differences between the present era and those of the past in language; social customs; geography; civil, military, and political institutions; economic and technological conditions; patterns of thought and writing; and philosophical worldview mandate the hermeneutical process. Yet, with the rise of modernism and postmodernism, a wide variety of hermeneutical approaches now exist. Nevertheless, these overarching interpretive principles and their corollaries, *derived from Scripture itself*, are needed for soundly interpreting Scripture *on its own terms (sensus literalis)*.

## 1. *Sola Scriptura* “only Scripture”

Scripture is the *norma normans non normata* (“the norm that norms and is not normed”), the uniquely *infallible* source of divine revelation and the *absolute* epistemological authority that is available to contemporary humans collectively for all areas of faith (i.e., theology) and practice. The biblical canon *qua* canon is the *regula credendi* (i.e., the “rule of faith”) for the Christian. As such, it stands above all other sources and authorities of knowledge as the *final arbiter* of truth (Isa 8:20; see EGW, *GC*, 595).

**Sufficiency of Scripture:** Scripture sufficiently provides the philosophical framework, the divine perspective, and the fundamental principles of reality for every branch of knowledge and experience (2 Tim 3:16, 17; Ps 119:105; Prov 30:5, 6; Isa 8:20; John 17:17; Acts 17:11; 2 Thess 3:14; Heb 4:12).

## 2. *Prima Scriptura* “Scripture first”

While the existence of other epistemological sources should be acknowledged (e.g., nature [Ps 19:1–6; Rom 1:19, 20]), Scripture is the *preeminent* source of truth (John 17:17) and stands above all others in *primacy*. The so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” of epistemological authorities identifies four sources of revelation, yet exalts Scripture as the *supreme* and *primary* source of them all. Since sin has corrupted all other sources of knowledge, these other sources must be arbitrated by the infallible rule of Scripture.

- (a) **Scripture** (2 Tim 3:16, 17; 2 Pet 1:19–21)
- (b) Tradition (Matt 15:3, 6)
- (c) Reason (Prov 28:26; Jer 17:9, 10; e.g., philosophy [Col 2:8], science [1 Tim 6:20], and nature [Gen 3:17, 18; Isa 24:4–6; Rom 8:20, 21])
- (d) Experience (Prov 14:12; Jer 17:9, 10; 2 Cor 4:18; 5:7)



## 3. *Tota Scriptura* “all of Scripture”

The *totality* of Scripture (i.e., the complete sixty-six-book Protestant canon) is *divinely revealed* and *inspired* by the Holy Spirit. As such, *all* of it serves as *the* sufficient basis of truth and should be *equally* utilized in its pursuit (2 Tim 3:16, 17), so there is no creation of a “canon within the canon.”

*All of Scripture equals*, not merely contains, the word of God (Matt 4:4; 1 Cor 2:13; 1 Thess 2:13). In the Old Testament alone there are about 1,600 occurrences of four Hebrew words (in four different phrases with slight variations) that explicitly state God has spoken in Scripture: (1) “the utterance [נְאֻם (*nə’um*)] of the LORD” (~360 times), (2) “thus says [אָמַר (*’āmar*)] the LORD” (~425 times), (3) “and God spoke [דָּבַר (*dābār*)]” (~420 times), and (4) the “word [דָּבָר (*dābār*)] of the LORD” (~395 times).

**Divine-Human Union:** Scripture is an indivisible, indistinguishable union of the divine and human in which God is the author and the human patriarchs, prophets, and apostles were the writers (2 Pet 1:19–21). The divine and human elements are inextricably linked together (Heb 4:12; Rev 19:13; John 1:1–3, 14; see EGW, *GC*, vi).

#### 4. *Analogia Scripturae* “the *analogia/harmony* of Scripture”

Because the one same divine author inspires all of Scripture, there is a fundamental *unity* and *harmony* among its various parts. Accordingly, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*—“Scripture is its own interpreter” (Luke 24:44, 45, 27; see EGW, *FE*, 187). Each text of Scripture must be understood within its own context *and* within the overarching context of the whole of Scripture, by comparing texts with one another (Isa 28:10; 1 Cor 2:13). The two Testaments have a *reciprocal* relationship in which they *mutually* illuminate each other.

**Consistency of Scripture:** Among the Bible’s various parts is an unbreakable *consistency* and *coherence* of truth wherein no real incongruity exists (John 10:35; see EGW, *EW*, 221). The revelation of Scripture is “progressive” in the sense that later revelation illuminates, clarifies, or amplifies—but *never contradicts*—previously given revelation.

**Clarity of Scripture:** Scripture is sufficiently clear for all readers to understand God’s message for themselves without the need of a creed, ecclesial magisterium, or other external arbiter (e.g., Deut 30:11–14; Luke 1:3, 4; John 20:30, 31; Acts 17:11; Rom 10:17; Rev 1:3). As such, the whole of Scripture should be taken in its *plain* and *literal* sense unless an obvious figure of speech or prophetic symbol is employed (e.g., John 16:25, 29).

#### 5. *Spiritalia spiritualiter examiner* “spiritual reception”

Since “spiritual things are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:11–14), the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination is vital for fully understanding, obediently receiving, and faithfully applying Scripture. The Holy Spirit will convict the heart (John 16:8; cf. Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12), prompting repentance and faith. His main goal is to enact sanctification (John 17:17, 19; 1 Pet 1:2) in the life of the interpreter (John 6:45; 7:17; 14:26; 16:13; see EGW, *5T*, 704), to produce/grow “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22, 23 ESV) and Christ’s character (2 Cor 3:17, 18). This makes prayer for the Holy Spirit’s presence and power during study a crucial preparatory practice (Luke 11:9–13).

#### 6. The Christological Principle “the *Christocentric* and *Christotelic* nature of Scripture”

Scripture’s *τέλος* (*télos*) or primary purpose is **to convey Christ**, who is the *center* of its content and the climactic *goal* of the covenant of redemption explicated within it, to effect repentance and faith in the life of the interpreter

by the Holy Spirit (*solus Spiritus sanctus*) unto salvation (*sola gratia* and *sola fide*) *in Christo solo* and *ad gloriam Dei*.

- “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39 ESV).
- “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me” (John 15:26 ESV).
- “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [i.e., Jesus] interpreted to them **in all the Scriptures** [תנך (*TaNaKh*)] the things concerning himself. ... Then he [i.e., Jesus] said to them [i.e., his disciples], ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses [תורה (*Tôrāh*)] and the Prophets [נביאים (*Nabî`im*)] and the Psalms [כתובים (*Katûbîm*)] must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations’” (Luke 24:27, 44–47 ESV).
- “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how ... you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you **wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus**” (2 Tim 3:14, 15 ESV).

#### 7. The Canonical-theological Principle

All of Scripture should be understood within the broader canonical-theological context of the biblical canon’s grand metanarrative of cosmic conflict (i.e., creation [Gen 1–2], fall [Gen 3–11], covenant/law [Exod 20:1–17; 24; Deut 5], redemption [Rom 3:22–26; 5:12–21], and consummation [Dan; Matt 24–25; Rev]), the sanctuary motif [Exod 25–31, 35–40; Lev; Heb], and eschatology and the three angels’ messages (Rev 11:19–14:20).

#### Resources

Davidson, Richard M. “Biblical Interpretation.” Pages 58–104 in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*. Commentary Reference Series 12. Ed. Raoul Dederen. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000.

Peckham, John C. *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. Esp. 140–165.