

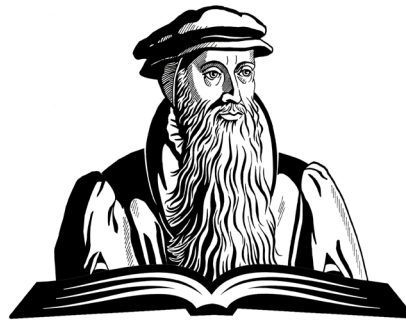
Video Lecture Series

# HERMENEUTICS

## *Principles of Scripture Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

### *Lecture 8* **GENRE**



**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# HERMENEUTICS

## *Principles of Scripture Interpretation*

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### *Lecture 8*

## Genre

Thus far in our studies, we have surveyed some of the basic overarching principles of interpretation that apply to understanding the whole Bible. But there are other important principles to learn that correspond to specific parts of the Bible. One of the unique qualities of the Holy Scriptures is that they contain many types of literature. We have history, laws, poetry, proverbs, epistles, parables, apocalyptic literature, and so on. We sometimes refer to these as various *Genre* within Scripture. “Genre” simply means various kinds of literature. Furthermore, the Bible includes different ways of using language, such as metaphors, typology, figurative language, and so forth. Well, it is incumbent upon us to acquaint ourselves with some of the peculiarities of these different parts of the Bible, and more specifically, with the principles of interpretation that assist us in better understanding the meaning of passages located in those parts of the Bible.

In a previous lecture, we considered the importance of words—words matter. We need to be careful, and to give careful attention to the words that God has given to us, since every word is inspired by God. When we focus on the literal meaning of those words, we must also recognize that words can be used in different ways. For example, when Jesus says that he is the door, he’s telling us an important Biblical truth. But we do not understand him to mean that he is a literal door made of wood that swings on hinges. We know that he is teaching us that he is the only way to God and eternal life, which we must spiritually enter by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this lesson, we will explore an introduction to the principles that help us interpret the different kinds of language and *Genre* that we find in our Bibles. And we will not consider all of the *Genre* here, or all of the uses of Biblical language. But what we do learn will provide us with a basic grasp of the kind of tools we need to learn to employ of our study of Scripture. So first of all, we will begin with *metaphors* and *symbolism*.

A “metaphor” is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of idea is used in the place of another to illustrate an analogy between the two things. So the example earlier of Jesus as the door is an example of a *metaphor*. Well, there are many other examples in both the Old and New Testament. Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life that is come down from heaven. He refers to himself as the light of the world, and many other things. And the same is true in the Old

Testament, where, for example, believers are described as mounting up with wings like an eagle, at the end of Isaiah 40. These are examples of *metaphors*. You'll find them in many, many, many places throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Similarly, the Bible also contains *symbols*. A "symbol" is an object that stands for something else. So the object does not need to be real, though sometimes it is real. In the book of Revelation, Christ is symbolized as a Lamb, in chapter 5. And Satan is symbolized as a dragon in chapter 12. And the church is symbolized as a woman in several places, but in Revelation 21, the church is described as a bride that is prepared for her husband. *Symbolism* most often occurs in prophetic and apocalyptic literature. But the varying contexts account for the differences between a *metaphor* and a *symbol*. So the main point is that we learn to recognize them when we see them, not mistaking them for something literal. So we begin with the *metaphor* or *symbol*, what is it, and understanding the picture itself, and then we interpret them in light of the divine truths that they convey and communicate. In other words, we derive the meaning that is to be found within them, the purpose for why they're being employed.

Secondly, we've spoken about *metaphors* and *symbols* briefly—"figurative language" is simply a broader category which includes *metaphors* and *symbols* and more. So we need to think a little bit more about figurative language. An example of figurative language is a phrase, "The moon is a silver fish swimming through a sea of clouds." Well, if you interpret this literally, you'll miss the meaning. So it's actually figurative language that's poetic and beautiful to describe something about the moon. So what are some of the principles that guide us in interpreting the figurative language of Scripture?

Well, first of all, when the natural reading of a passage contradicts what the Bible teaches elsewhere, that is a clue that in fact figurative language is being used, at times. We sing in Psalm 91 about God. It says, "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler." Well, it would be a grievous error to conclude that God is a literal bird. Indeed, that would be blasphemous. The meaning of the passage conveys the warmth, and care, and protection that Jehovah provides for his people—that's the point. Figurative language is loaded with valuable content and meaning.

Secondly, we can examine the internal indicators within the text itself. So, in what kind of literature is the text found? Is it in poetic literature? apocalyptic literature? or in narrative literature? or in prophetic literature? Well, that helps, because poetry and apocalyptic portions of Scripture contain greater amounts of figurative language. But you can go further. Are there indicators within the book itself that things should be taken figuratively? Now, for example, in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, Revelation 1 tells us explicitly that it contains symbolism that represent other things. And in fact, in chapter 1, it defines the meaning of some of those symbols. And it tells us, that Jesus is walking in the midst of the candlesticks, and that the candlesticks are the churches, and that he holds the stars in his right hand, that the stars are the angels of the churches, and so on. Well, this sets our expectation, doesn't it, that the rest of the book will contain, and be dominated by symbolism, where a symbol stands in the place of something else. And that's exactly what we find in the book of Revelation. In this case, most of that symbolism is drawn from Old Testament figures.

Thirdly, to be clear, figures and figurative language teach factual, literal, and historical truths. So the language itself is figurative, the truths are to be taken literally. So in Daniel, chapter 2, you have that long section in verses 31 to 45. And we are given a description of an image, and the image, we are told, was symbolic. Well, the image was symbolic of five literal kingdoms, from the

head of gold, to the iron and clay in the feet. They were symbolic of the kingdom of Babylon, the kingdom of the Medo-Persian empire, the kingdom of the Greeks, and the kingdom of the Roman empire, and lastly, out that emerges the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, the third category is typology. The word “type” originally meant a print, mark or impress made by a hard object on a soft surface. But when we use it today, a “type” means a representative character or object. So to understand the role of typology in the Bible, we need to remember the Doctrine of Progressive Revelation, that is, that God used different means to unfold his plan of redemption throughout Biblical revelation, from Genesis through the Old Testament, into the New Testament, culminating in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, in the opening of the book of Hebrews, we’re told that “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.” Well, this included a long period of time throughout the Old Testament given in successive epics. And as God continued to unfold his special revelation, which came into the pages of the Old Testament, redemption became clearer and clearer, until at last he gave us the fullest and final revelation in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we have to remember that. There’s much more that could be said, but that’s in the background of our understanding of typology.

Types are related to antitypes—types, and antitypes. So a type is an Old Testament picture that pointed forward to something fulfilled in the New Testament. And an antitype is the thing to which the type points, the reality being depicted, the thing that is ultimately fulfilled. And so a type is something real that is designed by God to represent and prefigure something else. In interpreting typology, we must first identify what is literally being done or said, and then what it is intended to typify. So distinguishing and connecting these two things enables us to see the one meaning that’s being communicated. Most often, types point forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. So for example, in the Old Testament, you have the paschal lamb at passover. That paschal lamb was a type that was pointing forward to what would be fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, and indeed we see that in John 1, and we see that in the book of Hebrews as well. He is our passover, he is our Paschal Lamb. He is the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. And then in the Old Testament we have the bronze serpent that was lifted up in the wilderness. Well, that was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, you turn to the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 14, and Jesus tells us that, that it was a picture that would be fulfilled in him, ultimately as he is lifted up, not only upon the cross, but in the preaching of the gospel, so that as men look unto him by faith, they’re healed from their sins. You have the example of the manna in the wilderness. The manna was a type as well. And we see that fulfilled in John, chapter 6, verses 32 and 35. Christ is that manna, that bread that is come down from heaven, which God’s people feed upon by faith, in order that they might have life that is eternal. Or you think of the pillar of fire in the Old Testament—that was a type. In John chapter 8, verse 12 tells us that that’s also fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. Or you think of the rock in the wilderness. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 4, refers to that rock in the wilderness, and he says, “That Rock was Christ.” Or you think of the temple. The Old Testament temple was a type that was pointing forward to the New Testament. First and foremost, it was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember Christ’s words, They will “destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.” He was referring to himself. But interestingly, the temple points forward to more than one thing. It points forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, in the first instance, in the preeminent instance, but it also points forward to the believer, because when Paul writes to the Corinthians, he says that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost—we’re indwelt by the Lord. And the church is referred to in the language of the temple, the house of God that God indwells, as you see at the end of Ephesians 2

and elsewhere. And the temple is also a picture and type of heaven. Indeed, the book of Hebrews says that it was designed after the heavenly model, and therefore ultimately, it culminates in the fulfillment of heaven itself, which is the dwelling place of God.

Well, typology is vast. It's an entire field of study on its own. But you can appreciate why it's important, and how it functions, and why it's essential that we interpret it accurately. But for starts, reading the Old Testament and New Testament together will enable you to accurately draw connections between types and their antitypes, as the New Testament often explains these Old Testament pictures for us. So for example, you should read the book of Leviticus and the book of Hebrews together, because they will cast light in understanding each other. You'll understand the book of Leviticus better, because you'll understand it in light of the fulfillment described in Hebrews. But also, when you're reading Hebrews, you're going to understand it a lot better if you're familiar with all the typology in the book of Leviticus itself. And so typology is another field, another *Genre*, that includes the use of language that we need to be careful about. We do not want to create of type of something in the Old Testament that's unwarranted, that's not actually a type. So you can see the care that has to be applied here.

Fourthly, another area or category would be parables. So we'll consider actually a couple of specific *Genre* within Scripture, first of all, parables in the New Testament, and then, secondly, poetry in the Old Testament. So these are two different *Genre* of different kinds of literature.

First of all, parables. We learned earlier about *metaphors*, which is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of idea is used in the place of another to illustrate an analogy between them. Well, this is distinguished from a "simile", which is another figure of speech, in which one thing is likened to another. And we'll say, "This is like that," or, "This is as we see in something else." A parable is an extended simile. And so, for example, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." and then he gives us a parable. If you turn to Matthew 13, and you'll see several of these one after another. The word "parable" literally means, "a throwing along side of." In a parable, a truth is presented in terms of a story that illustrates that truth. Christ uses parables throughout the Gospels, as you know. He tells us that the purpose of parables is both to reveal and to conceal simultaneously. It would reveal truth to his people, his disciples, and it would conceal truth from his enemies. And so Jesus gives a parable about a king who takes his workers and sets them about caring for the vineyard, and he goes off into a far country. And he sends his servants in order to collect the produce, and they abuse them and kill them. Ultimately, he sends his son, and they say, "Hey, here is the heir. We can kill him and have the things for ourselves." And the king comes back, and he destroys these wicked servants and gives it to another. That parable is speaking about how the Lord has sent his prophets, and the Jews didn't receive them, and ultimately God sent his only begotten Son, and they killed him. And the Lord would take away the kingdom from the Jews and give it to another. The gospel was going to go to the Gentiles. And so his disciples and those who know the Lord would understand the truth. They could see how this explains and illustrates for us this important Biblical truth. Whereas, the Jews would be ignorant of the significance or meaning of what was being said often.

The important principle for interpreting parables is to recognize that most of the time there is one central point, one central truth to each parable. We're to look for one primary truth being communicated. We're not to draw diverse meanings and significance from every part of the parable. People begin to put meaning into this thing, and that detail and another detail. No, it's given as a whole to illustrate one primary truth. So in Matthew 13, verses 31 and 33, we read, "Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed,

which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.” And then he gives them another parable, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.” In both of these parables, the kingdom of heaven is being likened unto something. It’s being likened unto something that begins small, looks small, but like the mustard seed, it’s going to grow and fill the earth. Or like the leaven, which is small, sown into the meal, and it leavens the whole lump. You can see how the point is singular and it’s simple. In Matthew 7, verses 24 to 27, Jesus says, “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him”—so, clearly, we have a parable—“I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.” Then it speaks about the rain coming, and the storms, and the wind, and so on, and it doesn’t fall, because it’s founded upon that rock. And Jesus draws the conclusion, “Every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand.” And so here’s the contrast, and the rain and the floods come, and the entire house falls, or collapses—“great is the fall.” So the Lord is saying, those who hear his Word and do his Word are like those built upon the rock, and withstand the storms of life. And so we have a basic introduction, just a few examples to give us an idea of what parables entail.

But then fourthly, Old Testament poetry. Hebrew poetry is different from poetry in many other languages. In some languages, poetry is characterized by rhyme and meter, and so on. But Hebrew poetry is characterized by exaggeration, and personification, and vividness, and parallelism. The poetic books of the Old Testament would include Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations. Well, for the sake of brevity and simplicity in this lecture, we will limit ourselves to the most prominent feature within Biblical poetic literature. Hebrew poetry makes extensive use of what we call “repetitive parallelism,” which is used to express vivid emphasis in the Old Testament. And we’ll consider just a few of the types of parallelism. Remember, we’re seeking to learn how to interpret Scripture. And so, understanding the nature of Hebrew poetry and its parallelism keeps us from misinterpreting Scripture. So three types of parallelism.

First of all, there is “synonymous parallelism.” Here you will often find two phrases with the second phrase saying the same thing, only in different words. In Proverbs 19, verse 5, we read, “A false witness shall not be unpunished”—second phrase, “and he that speaketh lies shall not escape.” Well, “a false witness”—“speaking lies,” there’s a parallel; “shall not be unpunished”—“shall not escape.” There’s a parallelism there. Or in Psalm 95, verse 6, we sing, “O come, let us worship and bow down”—“let us kneel before the LORD our maker.” And so when we come to these texts, we think, Ah, here is synonymous parallelism. We wouldn’t make the mistake of thinking that the second phrase means something totally different than the first phrase, that they’re actually saying the same thing in different but similar words.

Secondly, there is “antithetical parallelism.” Antithesis is opposites. And so this emphasizes a truth by stating the opposite—the second phrase saying the opposite of the first phrase. In Proverbs 10, verse 4, “He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand”—second phrase, “but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.” So these two things are set in contrast. They’re still communicating the same truth, but by stating it in opposite ways. Or Proverbs 13, verse 1: “A wise son heareth his father’s instruction: but a scorner heareth not rebuke.” You can see how the point is being made by way of poetic contrast.

Thirdly, there is what we call “chiastic parallelism.” So that word “chiastic” comes from the Greek letter, *CHI* or *KAI*, which forms two crossing lines: X. Here, the words of a second half-



line reverse the order of the parallel words in the first half-line. You can think of it in terms of two phrases, and the order is, the first part is (A), the second part is (B). And then in the second phrase, you have (B) first, and then (A). AB—BA, in the two phrases. So the Old Testament uses this very frequently. I'll give you one example, in Psalm 51, verse 1: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness," and then it flips the order: "according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." That's a chiasmic parallelism. It enables you to appreciate the beauty of what God gives us in his inspired Word. But it also enables you to interpret it properly. The Lord is giving us one truth, and he's stating it in two different ways. So we don't want to misinterpret the Scripture by making these two parts different things when they're saying the same thing.

So again, why is this helpful to know and recognize? First of all, it prevents you from making unwarranted distinctions between related phrases—there's one meaning, not two. And then secondly, it can clarify your understanding of a difficult phrase by noting the synonymous parallel. So in the first phrase, you may find you're having difficulty understanding what it means, but then it's clarified when you recognize that it's stated again, in the case of synonymous parallelism, in the next phrase. So if one phrase is difficult to understand, the second may often explain it.

Well, this gives you, again, a little taste, a little example of how there are different *Genre*, and how poetry, Old Testament poetry in particular, has its own distinctive features. And therefore, we have to employ a set of Biblical principles for interpreting those particular passages. What I've illustrated here applies far more broadly, and in more advanced courses, you could have many more details.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the different uses of *words*, and a couple of the *Genres* found in the Bible, along with the principles that help us to interpret them accurately. In the next lecture, we will consider the principles related to a *Christ-centered* reading and interpretation of the Scriptures.