

Five Key Terms

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In your studies at Siena Heights, there are five terms you will need to understand:¹

Understanding, Horizons, Hermeneutics, Authors, and History

1. To *understand* means to "make sense" of what we notice, read, or are told. Another term for the experience of understanding is *insight*.

Jack was concerned about how different their third son, Joey, looked compared to their other four boys. So he asked his wife Mary if she ever cheated on him.

Mary said Yes.

Bill asked her who Joey's father is.

Mary said You.

When we don't understand a joke, we did not experience an insight. When we understand *why* cars have radiators, we experience an insight into *why* it's important to keep water in them. When we understand *how* mortgages are calculated, we have an insight into *how* to calculate when we should pay them off. When nurses understand the purpose of a chief medical officer's policies, they have insight into *how* to adapt them to individual patients.

2. A *horizon* is the totality of everything a person cares about. It includes both everything we know and everything we have questions about. A horizon is often called a "mindset," meaning the totality of what a person believes is true or possible. The category is important because "whatever is received is received according to the mindset of the receiver."²

Janet, a medical technician, is still learning about medical technology; it's in her horizon. But she has no interest in the history of Germany, it's beyond her horizon.

3. *Hermeneutics* is about the methods we use to understand texts. (*hermeneutics* comes from the Greek *heurisko*, to discover.)

Words connected to *hermeneutics* are *exegesis* and *exegete*:

Exegesis refers to the process of understanding a text. An *exegete* is a person who interprets a text, optimally by understanding the criteria furnished by a reliable *hermeneutics*.

¹ My sources include Bernard Lonergan's *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957) and) *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), Chap. 7 ("Interpretation") and Chap. 8, sec. 1 ("Critical History").

² Aquinas often cites this principle to explain why what a speaker says is misunderstood by the hearers. Latin: "Quid quid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur."

Bill, a minister at a Presbyterian church, knows a lot about the Bible, but there are passages he does not understand. He tries to understand puzzling texts by looking harder at the words. But looking is not understanding. Nor is memorizing definitions. Nor looking up commentaries. What Bill first needs to understand is the difference in himself between the experience of understanding and the experience of not understanding. Once he attains the habit of noticing this difference, in all areas of his life he will grasp exactly what he understands and what he doesn't. If he fails to notice this difference, he may believe he fully understands biblical texts and their commentaries, but it often happens that he does not and so is prone to fall into that unhappy state of preaching with heartfelt enthusiasm about matters he does not understand.

Typically, people who fail to notice this difference in themselves regard knowledge as attained mainly by memorizing. Teachers who fail to notice this difference in themselves will often present material for their students to memorize, but not necessarily understand.

Prior to the mid-1960s, hermeneutical rules identified what to notice about a text. Is this translation reliable? What literary forms does the author use?³ What is distinctive about literary style of the author? What are the social and cultural assumptions that define the community the author is writing for?

In the early 1960s, Bernard Lonergan proposed a hermeneutics based on the event of *understanding*.⁴ An understanding-based hermeneutics will guide Bill toward understanding not only biblical passages and commentaries but any written texts whatsoever. He will aim at understanding

- (a) the things the writer writes about,
- (b) the words the writer uses,
- (c) the horizon of the writer, and
- (d) what the words evokes in himself, the reader.

If a reader lacks a clear *understanding of understanding*, these guidelines will be fruitless.

4. *Authors.*

In the Bible and other classical works, a single "author" is sometimes named, but not necessarily to designate an individual who created the entire work.

In some cases, the named author is actually a *redactor* who edited an original work. *Redactors* are "final editors." They gather oral and written

³ Common literary forms in the Bible are: allegory, metaphor, psalm/hymn, legend, historical narrative, proverb, cosmic-destiny myth, divine revelation.

⁴ Lonergan's hermeneutics follows directly from his 1957 work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*; *op. cit.*

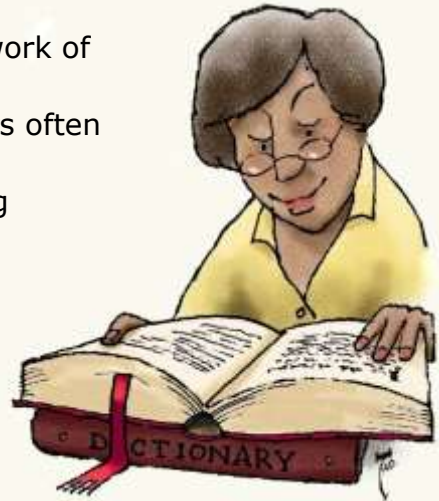
accounts and compile a organized account of events, sometimes adding their own passages in their attempts to clarify what they believe the authors meant. Today, scholars who specialize in "redaction criticism" seek to clarify what parts of a written work were created by original authors and what parts were alterations made by redactors.

In many texts, later generations depend on the work of *translators*, and the "original" texts with which translators began have been lost. Also, translators often replace original, vividly descriptive words with abstract explanatory words,⁵ (for example, saying "offspring" instead of "seed").

We are familiar with the phrase, "Lost in translation." What original authors meant may also have been "lost in redaction."⁶

Almost every "Bible" we have today was written by *translators*. The original Gospel of "Matthew" is a redaction/translation of a lost version written (probably) in Aramaic, and is hugely dependent on the Gospel of Mark. Most of the works in the Bible were compiled by redactors.⁷ The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—which Hebrews refer to as the *Torah* or "the teachings" or "the law") are redactions from several different sources. Scholars name sources as J, E, P, and D.)⁸

The writings attributed to Isaiah are now classified as First Isaiah (chapters 1-39), Second Isaiah (chapter 40-55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). The commonly-named "The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians" was originally several different letters written by Paul—at least two, perhaps even



⁵ See Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), xix: "The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of a translation as a vehicle for *explaining* the Bible" [which] "amounts to explaining away the Bible."

⁶ Even today, the works of Shakespeare are the subject of an ongoing dispute among scholars, some of whom propose that Christopher Marlow or Francis Bacon were the original authors of certain works attributed to Shakespeare.

⁷ The original draft of the U.S. Constitution was written by James Madison. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson are named as the authors of the final version. The Constitution itself allows for later amendments.

⁸ J stands for *Yahwey* (or *Jehovah*), the preferred Hebrew name of God. E stands for *Elohim*, the name for God that Hebrews borrowed from Canaanite writings. P stands for "priestly," a group of Hebrew priests who redacted the works of J and E. The letter D stands for Deuteronomy, which means a "second law." (Psalm 91 uses all four different words for God: "If you live in the shelter of Elyon; if you dwell in the shadow of Shaddai, say to Yahweh, 'my refuge,' my Elohim on whom I rely.")

five. The US Constitution was originally drafted by James Madison; the agreed-upon version what written by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Later changes were allowed as amendments.

Today, teachers may suspect that a paper submitted by a student was written by someone else. This practice is name "plagiarism," a word whose root means to "kidnap." Teachers of online courses usually include a warning about plagiarism in their syllabi; most have access to a plagiarism-detection program and will downgrade or give a zero grade to the student.

4. *History* may refer simply to events in a community's past. It may also refer to *historical accounts* of a community's past. Historical accounts, in turn, may be "critical" or "precritical."

Authors of *precritical* historical accounts only partially suspect their sources and themselves. Their main purpose in writing is to strengthen the commitment of their community's members to preserve, develop, and disseminate its heritage. They seldom present evidence or theories that justify their explanations. They favor stories that foster community pride.

A *critical* historical account is reached by historians who scrutinize their sources, the currently available historical accounts, and their personal realization that their understanding may be overly narrow. Behind overly narrow accounts, there are several possible suspects:⁹

Historians may be biased against the hard study required to gain insight into history.

They may be biased against understanding the past of certain groups.

Some of their sources may be infected by misleading revisions or translations or redactions of lost originals.

Writers of available historical accounts may have overlooked relevant data. New theories may appear in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and economics that raise new questions regarding a community's past.

Historians themselves may be unaware that understanding, by itself, is not knowledge. Even the most brilliant insights need to be verified by judgments based on evidence.

In this light, all critical historical accounts are provisional. They are best regarded not as "true" but as "best available accounts based on the available data."

⁹ "Precritical" historical accounts are not entirely "uncritical." Their authors may scrutinize their sources. But if they fail to notice that their ideas about the past need verification by evidence, their accounts lack an essential self-critical basis for the assertions they present. They have not reached the level of a fully "critical" historical account.

Also, the goal of historians can undergo development. A major change came in 1824, when the historian Leopold Von Ranke established a new standard. Previous historians typically included value judgments about the past and advice to the contemporary world about about the future. In his *History of Latin and Teutonic Nations*, Von Ranke prefaced his account by stating that any written account of the past should state "what actually happened." He effectively split the work of historians into two disciplines: A factual account of what actually happened, and a wider account that adds value judgments on whether or not certain happenings were for the better.¹⁰ Ever since, historians have had to reconsider the worth of previously trusted earlier historians. Some restricted their own accounts to what actually happened, and others widened their account to include assessments about the value of certain historical movements.

An issue that still disturbs many people who prize the Bible, is that scripture scholars realized that none of the authors of historical books was guided strictly by the standard of "what actually happened."

I have highlighted the terms *understanding*, *horizons*, *hermeneutics*, *authors*, and *history*. But again, it will not be sufficient if you just memorize these terms. A more effective approach toward understanding is to keep these four questions in mind regarding any textbook, lecture, or discussion:¹¹

1. *The Objects*. Do I understand the *objects* spoken about? Does the content take historical factors into account and, if so, am I confident that I know whether the historical accounts are pre-critical or critical?
2. *The Author(s)*. Do I understand the *author/speaker*? (What the author's horizon is, including the horizons of prospective readers or hearers.) Is this the original author I am understanding or might it be an amalgam of the insights of original author(s) redactors, and/or translators?
3. *The Words*. Do I understand the *words* being used?
4. *Myself*. Do I understand *what happened to me* as I read or heard these words? To fully understand the writing process, it is essential to understand its effect. All writers aim to change the midsets of readers. Readers, in turn, need to consider what occurred to them because of what they read if they intend to share what they learned about reality from reading this author.

¹⁰ See http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/historian/Leopold_von_Ranke.html.

¹¹ See number 3, above, which is based on Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, *op. cit.*, chap. 7, sec. 1, especially pp. 155-161.