

Hermeneutic Applications from the Patristic Exegetes

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Abstract: *This paper examines modern hermeneutic approaches and how patristic exegetes can complement interpretative methods. Modern hermeneutics apply different procedures depending on the genre. Kannengiesser's Handbook of Patristic Exegesis is used to summarize patristic views by specific book and genre, while Russell's Playing with Fire, Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard's Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, and Kaiser and Silva's, Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics frame the range of modern hermeneutic approaches. Perspectives on spiritual formation are addressed per genre since it is important for biblical interrelation and application and was valued by patristic exegetes like Augustine. The paper shows how patristic exegetes focused on the spiritual and seeking the Bible's deeper meaning. It demonstrates how Russell's spiritual formation emphasis aligns with Augustine's spiritual burning that transformed his life and how this emphasis aligns with the patristic exegetes' desire to seek deeper spiritual meaning in scripture.*

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Patristics, Historiography, Spiritual Formation, Genre

Introduction

Hermeneutics is the practice or discipline of interpretation. Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which means to explain or interpret. From Greek mythology, Hermes was the Greek god who was the spokesman or interpreter for the other gods. In Acts 14:12 Paul was call Hermes. The traditional meaning for hermeneutics is the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation. It is the science of interpretation.¹ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard point out that interpretation is necessary in art and science and that several factors have to be addressed, (1) meaning of the message, (2) the text itself, (3) the author and audience, and

¹ Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), xix–xx.

(4) impact of distance, via the time from event, geographical distance, cultural distance, language difference, and divine factors.²

A systematic process for biblical modern interpretation is to, (1) identify the biblical passage genre, (2) determine the passage main idea or theme, (3) make observations about the structure along with the literary, grammatical, historical, and cultural insights of the passage. (4) interpret the passage meaning with meditation and observations, and (5) apply the passage to the life of the reader and those around them.³ There is spiritual formation in the biblical interpretation process. Determining the core of the material, accurately understanding the genre, author's intent, and context are all very important. The patristic spiritual focus would endorse this approach. Their tools were not as advanced, but they reached spiritual depth in interpretation of the timeless biblical text.

Coming to God's word for transformation involves spiritual formation. Russell used the analogy of fire, encouraging readers to be close to the flame so they burn inside with God's zeal. Studying God's word brings a burning heart. God's word touches the human-centric world. As people transform and burn for Christ, they align with God's vision rather than their own. By recognizing and confronting one's biases, one sees the true meaning of God's word. Spiritual formation is a key element. The patristic exegetes focused on knowing the deeper elements of God's Word, and applying it in their lives, as well as a spiritual focus looking upward, was prominent.⁴

Effective modern Bible interpretation considers the genre of the passage. Figure 1 shows the amount of historical context per genre to consider and Table 1 summarizes biblical genres.

² William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 8–19.

³ Walt Russell, *Playing with Fire* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000), 278–80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–10.

Revelation and Spiritual Formation

In terms of spiritual formation there are five considerations when looking at Revelation, plus Table 18 shows guidelines for spiritual formation.

- Do not shy away from Revelation because of its distinctive genre
- Revelation is about Jesus Christ, not Satan or the Antichrist
- Revelation is mostly prophetic words to the church, and exhortations for holy living via vivid picture of God’s future triumph through Christ
- Revelation is about the end of history. It is not meant as a realistic glimpse of the future to inform godly choices today
- Revelation is filled with Old Testament allusions, and it functions as a Scriptural capstone for what God did in history

Table 18: Revelation and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of the Book of Revelation to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John
Primary Contribution	To encourage and exhort people to overcome through continued faith and faithfulness in the difficult times by revealing God’s ultimate triumph over Satan in establishing Christ’s kingdom and the new heavens and new earth
Therefore ask	What insights into God’s ultimate triumph does this passage give and how does it encourage one to live faithfully and courageously today in the face of opposition to and persecution of the church?
Secondary Contribution	To inform people of some of the specific events signaling the end of the age
Therefore ask	What can one learn about where God is going to take history and glorify themselves as one sees what events God will sovereignly allow at the end of the age?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 216.

Conclusions

The patristic exegetes focused on the spiritual and seeking the Bible’s deeper meaning. Spiritual insight of the Logos throughout scripture was an overarching goal, primarily among allegorical proponents. Practical application is one source of this deeper focus, and reading scripture for spiritual formation can be a key way of understanding the message well and

seeking to apply it in one's life. Modern hermeneutical approaches can benefit from patristic exegetes in this front. The patristics sought deeper spiritual insight in scripture but had varying effectiveness when considered by genre. Modern methods examine the genre first and then seek deeper meaning and spiritual formation. The patristics did not categorically make this distinction. Based on Kannengiesser and the modern hermeneutical scholars' assessments in this paper, Table 19 shows a relative ranking of the genre value between the patristic and modern approaches.

Table 19. Genre Ranking Comparison: Patristic vs. Modern

Genre	Patristic	Modern
OT Narratives	6.High	4.High
Law	8.Low	9.Medium
Psalms-Poetry	4.High	6.Medium
Wisdom	7.Medium	8.Medium
Prophets	5.High	5.High
Gospels	1.Highest-value	1.Highest-value
Acts	3.High	3.High
Epistles	2.High	2.High
Revelation	9.Low	7.Medium

Reading the Bible for information is transformational, but spiritual formation opposes simple information awareness and presses to deeper spiritual levels. Since the Bible contains God's words, its power extends beyond comprehension, but one can know in part what God reveals. Modern exegetes would benefit from embracing the deeper spiritual insights that Origen and Augustine sought. Russell's spiritual formation emphasis aligns with Augustine's spiritual burning that transformed his life and the patristic exegetes seeking deeper spiritual meaning in scripture. For modern hermeneutics, the spiritual focus of the patristics can complement a modern scientific centric knowledge base, and together they can form a better interpretive method.

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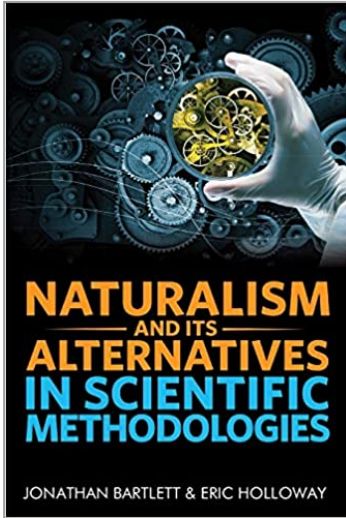
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[James D. Johansen](#), MSEE, MASR, MACA, PhD: The author has a strong commitment to equipping individuals with Biblical truth and the methods to apply it effectively in their lives. He has background in theology, apologetics, science and religion, and engineering, with a PhD in theology and apologetics from Liberty University, two master's degrees in science and religion, and Christian apologetics from Biola University, and a master's and bachelor's degrees in electrical engineering from the University of Southern California. He serves as an adjunct professor at several Christian universities and has ample experience in church equipping and pastoral care ministries serving as a seminary level instructor at two churches and two science and faith nonprofits. Besides the patristics and church history, his research interests include science and faith, looking at how theological truth is remarkably seen in the design and harmony of nature, which is Divinely architected to be uncoverable by man with the intent of drawing us towards a deeper appreciation for who God is.

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