

# Forms of Bible Interpretation Compared

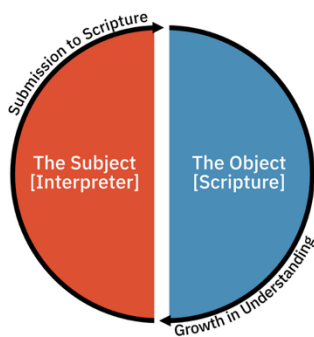
A quick primer compiled by [Eric Louw](#) - (Last updated: 5-4-26)

## Section 1: Two Foundational Approaches:

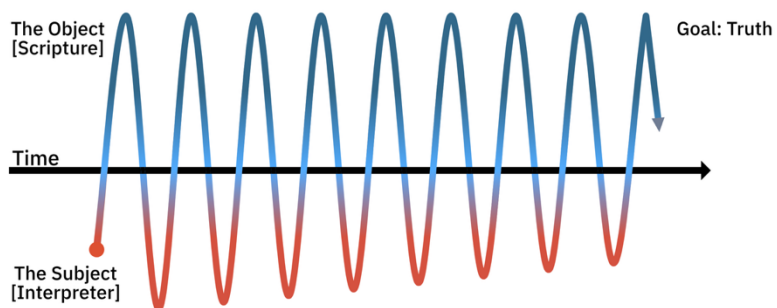
The approaches people take to interpret the Bible can generally be categorized into two main types, described as follows.

1. **SSO - Submission of the Subject [Interpreter] to the Object [Scripture]:** Study is grounded in submission to scripture as a respected source of divine revelation and truth.
  - Faith is placed in God's ability to preserve the meaning and intent of the text such that its principles are understandable to us today. Conflicting or distorting pre-conceptions are surrendered as they are discovered.
  - Low anthropological approach: low regard for and confidence in human reason and ability. Biases and presuppositions can skew outcomes, yet they are ideally submitted to the dictates of the text as they are discovered.
  - Compatible Methods (*an outline of each method follows in the next section*):
    - Grammatical-Historical
    - Narrative Analysis
    - Textual Analysis
    - Biblical Archaeology
  - This is where Seventh-day Adventism has historically operated.

### 1. The Hermeneutical Circle:



### 2. The Hermeneutical Spiral:



Figures 1–2: *The hermeneutical circle* illustrates the process of an interpreter (the subject) submitting themselves to scripture (the object) and growing in understanding through Holy Spirit guidance ([John 16:13](#), [1 Corinthians 2:10–14](#)). *The hermeneutical spiral* depicts what happens when the hermeneutical circle is applied consistently and repeatedly over time. Truth does not move, but we may come closer to it as we submit to the process.

A hermeneutical spiral approach is beneficial because, just as no scientist is entirely neutral and unbiased, they cannot be certain they have reached an objective truth about reality

that is impervious to change by future discoveries and perspectives. Similarly, no Bible interpreter is omniscient or free from potentially misleading presuppositions or methodological mistakes. Learning and understanding are lifelong journeys with no endpoint where one can confidently claim they have reached the limit of all knowledge. However, personal confidence in and assurance of truth can simultaneously coexist with a humble openness to further learning.

2. **SOSO - Submission of the Object [Scripture] to the Subject [Interpreter] and other Objects:** Study begins with a posture of methodological doubt and skepticism. Truth is established by human reason as one compares the text with other evidence, whether data from different fields of expertise or hypothetical sources and frameworks.
- Faith is placed in the legitimacy, accuracy, and relevance of these sources and one's thinking about them.
  - High anthropological approach - This refers to a high regard for and confidence in human reason and ability. Biases and presuppositions can skew outcomes, but can be discarded if reason and critical thinking dictate they should be.
  - Compatible Methods: Note that *all methods* can fall here depending on how they are used and applied, but the following have an intrinsic leaning:
    - Cartesian Skepticism,
    - Higher Criticism,
    - Mythological Criticism,
    - Source Criticism,
    - Form Criticism,
    - Tradition History,
    - Redaction Criticism,
    - Canonical Criticism,
    - Structuralism,
    - Narrative Criticism,
    - Reader-Response Theories,
    - Textual Criticism.
  - Much of popular Christian scholarship operates here.

## Section 2: Interpretive Methodologies

This section provides a brief overview of each methodology including a description of the big idea, some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with it, and a summary of how things can turn out when the method is employed.

### 1. Grammatical-Historical

**Origin:** Reformation Era, Martin Luther and John Calvin

**Exemplars:** Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–1564)

**Idea:** The grammatical-historical approach seeks to interpret the biblical text by understanding its original language, literary context, and using these to try to discern the intended meaning. It emphasizes the importance of grammar, syntax, and historical context in uncovering the author's original intent and meaning.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Provides a methodical approach to biblical interpretation.
- Emphasizes understanding the text within its original historical and cultural context to discover original meaning.
- Encourages a careful study of the original languages and grammar.
- Aims to uncover the author's original intent and meaning.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Can be perceived as overly rigid or mechanical.
- May overlook the text's theological and spiritual dimensions.
- Requires knowledge of the original languages and historical context.
- Discerning authorial intent is not always possible.

**Outcome:** Offers a disciplined approach to interpreting the biblical text, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the original language and historical context, and aligning with the author's intended meaning. Historical context can significantly increase the probability of an interpretation, but should not be overemphasized beyond what is known and knowable.

## 2. Cartesian Skepticism

**Origin:** 17th Century, René Descartes

**Exemplars:** René Descartes (1596–1650)

**Idea:** By doubting everything not absolutely certain, René Descartes discovered one foundational principle: "I think, therefore I am." This combination of methodological doubt and trust in his own thinking became the basis of his approach to knowledge and to understanding the world. Subsequently, *Cartesian Skepticism* involves beginning with a posture of doubt and questioning everything to establish certainty. It places authority within the human subject, making reason the arbiter of truth.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Encourages rigorous questioning and critical thinking.
- Seeks to establish a firm foundation for knowledge.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Can lead to excessive skepticism and doubt.
- May undermine traditional authorities and beliefs.

**Outcome:** Provides a critical approach that can help identify and eliminate unfounded assumptions and pre-commitments, yet fundamentally subordinates the object of evaluation to the reason of the subject. There is also no guarantee that biases and presuppositions will not color and radically alter the outcome. Confidence in conclusions may be overstated or require the same preconceptions. Cartesian skepticism formed the methodological basis for most other critical methods.

## 3. Higher Criticism

**Origin:** 17th Century, Benedict Spinoza

**Exemplars:** Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677)

**Idea:** Higher Criticism involves analyzing the Bible by placing human reason and historical context above its divine inspiration. It subjects Biblical claims to rational scrutiny, often subordinating revelation to human rationalization.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Promotes scholarly analysis and understanding of historical contexts.

- Encourages an examination of biblical texts with consideration for the context in which they were written.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- May undermine the authority of scripture by making it a human production, rather than the product of revelation and inspiration.
- Can lead to subjective interpretations.
- Presupposes that the Biblical records are unreliable as accurate historical records and that descriptions of supernatural events are the product of primitive experiences.

**Outcome:** Built on Cartesian Skepticism. Highlights the importance of understanding historical and cultural contexts in biblical interpretation, yet subordinates the Bible to current historical and cultural understandings that may differ from the historical and cultural realities of the time.

#### 4. Mythological Criticism

**Origin:** 18th Century, W. M. L. De Wette

**Exemplars:** W. M. L. De Wette (1780–1849)

**Idea:** This approach views the Bible as containing myths that need to be demythologized to understand the historical reality. It treats the Old Testament as frequently mythical and separates the study of Israel's actual history from its biblical portrayal.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Provides a framework for understanding the Bible in a historical context.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Approaches the Bible with the assumption that it is fundamentally grounded in myth.
- Encourages distinguishing between historical facts and mythological elements.
- May lead to viewing the Bible as merely a historical fiction/myth.
- Can diminish the Bible's spiritual and moral value.

**Outcome:** Built on Higher Criticism. Identifies and interprets elements within the biblical text that seem improbable or miraculous as mythological.

#### 5. Source Criticism

**Origin:** 19th Century, Julius Wellhausen

**Exemplars:** Jean Astruc (1684-1766), Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918)

**Idea:** Source Criticism seeks to identify and reconstruct hypothetical sources behind the biblical text. It involves analyzing the text to uncover various proposed sources, such as those suggested by the Documentary Hypothesis, which attempts to explain the composition and authorship of the first five books of the Bible by attributing them to four sources (J, E, D, P) based on the assumption that different theological perspectives, literary styles, and historical contexts are discernible in these books.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Aids in understanding the potential composition and development of biblical texts.
- Encourages detailed textual analysis.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Assumes the Biblical text is a human product.
- Relies heavily on speculative reconstructions.
- May lack concrete evidence for hypothetical sources.
- Tends to exclude revelation, inspiration, and God's guidance from consideration.

**Outcome:** Built on higher criticism. Provides speculative insights into the possible origins and development of biblical texts from other earlier sources, yet does so in a way that is highly speculative.

**Example:** The JEDP sources behind the Pentateuch are hypothetically built by focusing attention on perceived inconsistencies, linguistic variations, and anachronisms in the Biblical text. A redactor (editor) is then assumed as someone who helped shape these sources together into the books we have today.

- J (Jahwist) - 850 BC, Southern kingdom of Judah
- E (Elohist) - 750 BC, Northern kingdom of Israel
  - JE Redactor - 650 BC
- D (Deuteronomist)—621 BC (Josiah)
  - JED Redactor - 550 BC
- P (Priestly)—536 BC – 450 BC
  - Final redactor of JEDP - ca. 400 BC

Note: Dating is unsettled in contemporary source criticism. In New Testament studies, "Q" is a hypothetical sayings source proposed to explain the double tradition material in Matthew–Luke that is not found in Mark.

## 6. Form Criticism

**Origin:** Early 20th Century, Hermann Gunkel

**Exemplars:** Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932)

**Idea:** Form Criticism focuses on identifying the literary forms and genres within the Bible to understand its religious and historical context. It emphasizes the importance of oral traditions and the religious settings that are believed to have shaped the biblical material. The final form found in the Bible, with its various layers and stories, may or may not be what really happened, and is more about the traditions handed down. The stories and traditions had a function, even if they were not true, so this becomes the focus of investigation.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Enhances understanding of the literary and cultural context.
- Reveals the religious expression and feelings of the people.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- May overshadow the divine inspiration of the Bible.
- Can lead to subjective interpretations based on genre identification.
- Presupposes that ideas develop and morph over time, such that narratives may have changed.

**Outcome:** Built on higher criticism. Helps categorize and understand different literary forms within the biblical text.

## 7. Tradition History

**Origin:** Mid-20th Century, Gerhard Von Rad

**Exemplars:** Gerhard Von Rad (1901–1971)

**Idea:** Tradition History examines the development and transmission of biblical traditions over time. It focuses on how independent traditions were handed down and integrated into the final form of the biblical text.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Provides insights into the evolution of biblical traditions.
- Highlights the function and significance of traditions.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- May disconnect the biblical narrative from a cohesive salvation history.
- Can lead to viewing the Bible as a collection of isolated traditions.
- The traditions referred to may be speculative constructions, given that oral traditions are not available for analysis.

**Outcome:** Less focused on genres than form criticism. Offers a perspective on how biblical traditions may have been shaped and transmitted, but does so in a way that assumes the narratives and text of scripture morphed over time with the passing down of oral tradition. This critically accounts for supernatural elements.

**Example:** The giving of the Ten Commandments may have descended and morphed from oral tradition and stories that probably originated with a volcanic eruption on the mountain. Did giving the Ten Commandments really happen? No. Do you believe the story is true? Yes. Doublespeak results.

## 8. Biblical Archaeology

**Origin:** Early 20th Century, William Foxwell Albright

**Exemplars:** William Foxwell Albright (1891–1971)

**Idea:** Biblical Archaeology uses archaeological data to understand and validate the historical context of the Bible. It emphasizes the importance of tangible evidence in supporting biblical narratives and understanding the ancient Near Eastern context. This was, in part, a reaction to higher criticism, which was far too subjective because it ultimately relied on flimsy interpretations of biblical data without anything else.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Provides tangible evidence to support biblical narratives.
- Enhances understanding of the ancient Near Eastern context.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Can place too much emphasis on archaeological evidence over biblical text.
- May reduce the Bible's authority by viewing it as merely historical.

**Outcome:** Offers concrete data to support and contextualize biblical events. One can still consider archaeology so objective as to subject Biblical interpretation to the presuppositions of a data-driven perspective. Albright tended to make the events in the Bible the locus of revelation rather than the Bible itself. In other words, there is a risk of viewing the Bible as only talking *about* revelation rather than representing an inspired work that communicates revelation.

## 9. Redaction Criticism

**Origin:** Mid-20th Century, Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Conzelmann

**Exemplars:** Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), Hans Conzelmann (1915–1989)

**Idea:** Redaction Criticism focuses on how the biblical authors edited and compiled their sources to convey theological messages. It examines the editorial choices and modifications made to the text to understand the author's intentions and the context in which the text was written.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Attempts to highlight the theological and editorial intentions of the biblical authors.
- Provides insights into how different sources may have been integrated into a cohesive narrative.

- Helps in understanding the possible development and transmission of biblical texts.
- Emphasizes the role of the community in shaping the text's final form.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- We do not have access to any data, like private journals, concerning the editorial intentions and practices of Biblical authors.
- As such, it can be highly speculative, relying on assumptions about the editorial process based on how the text appears to the interpreter.
- May overlook the historical and cultural contexts in favor of editorial analysis.
- Can lead to subjective interpretations based on perceived editorial motives.
- May diminish the perceived divine inspiration of the text by focusing on human authorship.

**Outcome:** Offers a perspective on how the biblical texts were shaped and edited to convey specific theological messages, providing a deeper understanding of the authors' intentions and the community's role in the formation of the canon. Speculative, patchwork presuppositions about the editorial process can diminish and supplant God's authority and guidance over the text. There is no guarantee that conclusions are remotely accurate, though the possibility exists.

## 10. Canonical Criticism

**Origin:** Late 20th Century, Brevard S. Childs

**Exemplars:** Brevard S. Childs (1923–2007)

**Idea:** Canonical Criticism focuses on the final form of the biblical text and its role within the canon. It privileges the final form because of the maturity in thought and perspective it represents, while still operating within the parameters of source, form, tradition, and redaction criticism.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Emphasizes the maturity and coherence of the final text.
- Considers the role of the text within the faith community.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Can still be speculative due to reliance on higher critical methods.
- May not fully account for the divine inspiration of the text.
- Assumes the canon changed over time to an extent that disallows general divine preservation.

**Outcome:** Built upon other higher critical forms like tradition history and redaction criticism, highlights the importance of the “final form” and its role in the biblical canon.

## 11. Structuralism

**Origin:** Mid-20th Century, influenced by linguistics and anthropology

**Exemplars:** Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), Roland Barthes (1915–1980)

**Idea:** Structuralism seeks to uncover the underlying structures and patterns within the biblical text. It analyzes the text's language, symbols, and narrative structures to reveal the deep-seated frameworks that shape its meaning.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Highlights recurring patterns and structures within the text.
- Provides insights into the universal elements of human experience reflected in the text.
- Encourages a systematic and analytical approach to biblical interpretation.
- Reveals deeper connections and meanings within the text.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Can be overly abstract and detached from the historical context.
- May impose rigid frameworks that overlook the text's complexity and diversity.
- Risks reducing the text to a set of structural elements, neglecting its theological and spiritual dimensions.
- Can lead to interpretations that are more reflective of the analyst's framework than the text itself.
- “Deeper connections and meanings” may not be genuine.

**Outcome:** Offers a method for identifying and understanding the deep-seated structures and patterns within the biblical text, enriching the interpretative process. May import the presuppositional framework of higher criticism.

## 12. Narrative Criticism

**Origin:** Late 20th Century, influenced by literary theory

**Exemplars:** Robert Alter (b. 1935), Meir Sternberg (b. 1944)

**Idea:** Narrative Criticism focuses on the literary aspects of the biblical text, analyzing its narrative structure, plot, characters, and themes. It treats the Bible as a coherent literary work and examines how its stories function to convey meaning.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Emphasizes the literary artistry and coherence of the biblical text.
- Provides insights into the narrative techniques and strategies used by biblical authors.
- Enhances understanding of the text's thematic and theological messages.
- Encourages engaging with the text as a unified story.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- May overlook historical and cultural contexts in favor of literary analysis.
- Can lead to subjective interpretations based on analysis.
- Might downplay the historical reliability of the biblical narratives.
- Risks treating the Bible purely as literature, neglecting its theological significance.

**Outcome:** Offers a deeper appreciation of the literary qualities and narrative techniques of the biblical text, providing a richer understanding of its themes and messages. May import the presuppositional framework of higher criticism.

**Alternative: Narrative Analysis** - Maintains the same strengths, while seeking to avoid aspects of Cartesian Skepticism.

## 13. Reader-Response Theories

**Origin:** Late 20th Century, influenced by literary theory

**Exemplars:** Stanley Fish (b. 1938), Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007)

**Idea:** Reader-Response Theories emphasize the role of the reader in interpreting the biblical text. They focus on the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, recognizing that meaning is created through the reader's engagement with the text.

**Strengths/Benefits:**

- Highlights the reader's active role in the interpretative process.
- Acknowledges the diversity of interpretations based on different readers' perspectives.
- Encourages readers to engage personally and reflectively with the text.
- Recognizes the text's potential to evoke varied responses and meanings.

**Weaknesses/Problems:**

- Can lead to highly subjective interpretations that vary widely among readers.
- May overlook the text's original context and authorial intent.
- Risks relativizing the text's meaning, making it dependent on individual perspectives.
- Can diminish the authority of the text by prioritizing the reader's response.

**Outcome:** Emphasizes the importance of the reader's engagement with the text, fostering a personal and reflective approach to biblical interpretation. Interpretations may contradict authorial intent.

## 14. Textual Criticism

**Origin:** Early modern period, developed significantly in the 19th and 20th centuries

**Exemplars:** Johann Griesbach (1745–1812), Frederick Scrivener (1813–1891), Brooke Westcott (1825–1901), Fenton Hort (1828–1892), Eberhard Nestle (1851–1913), Bruce Metzger (1914–2007), Kurt Aland (1915–1994)

**Idea:** Textual Criticism aims to reconstruct the original text of the Bible by examining the various manuscripts and textual variants. It involves comparing different manuscripts to identify and correct errors introduced by copying and transmission over time.

### Strengths/Benefits:

- Provides a more accurate and reliable text of the Bible.
- Helps identify and correct scribal errors and later additions.
- Enhances understanding of the history and transmission of the biblical text.
- Supports the integrity and authenticity of the biblical text by addressing textual variants.

### Weaknesses/Problems:

- Can be highly technical and specialized, requiring expertise in ancient languages and manuscripts.
- May lead to debates and uncertainty over which textual variants are original.
- Can overshadow the theological and spiritual interpretation of the text.
- Risk of overemphasis on textual minutiae rather than the overall message.

**Outcome:** Offers a critical method for reconstructing the most accurate text of the Bible, ensuring that modern translations and interpretations are based on the best available manuscript evidence.

**Alternative: Textual Analysis** - Retains the legitimate strengths of manuscript comparison while avoiding methodological skepticism that subordinates Scripture to autonomous human judgment. Textual analysis compares manuscript witnesses and variant readings to discern, as far as possible, the most reliable form of the biblical text. It is compatible with SSO when practiced under Scripture's divine-human nature and authority. By contrast, **textual criticism**, as the term is used here, refers to approaches governed by naturalistic or skeptical assumptions.

## Section 3: Claims Relevant to Our Methodologies:

The Bible claims divine origin transcending human analytical categories, requiring spiritual discernment and not just an academic methodology. This does not mean there can't be valuable aspect(s) to a given methodology, but the approach one takes (SSO vs. SOSO) makes a crucial difference to which methodology one will adopt and how they will use it.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." - [Isaiah 55:8–9](#)

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." - [John 16:13](#)

"These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." - [1 Corinthians 2:10–14](#)

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." - [1 Corinthians 1:18–25](#)

"As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. . . . The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God's word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives." - *Acts of the Apostles* 474

"Man can be exalted only by laying hold of the merits of a crucified and risen Savior. The finest intellect, the most exalted position will not secure heaven. Satan had the highest education that could be obtained. This education he received under the greatest of all teachers. When men talk of higher criticism; when they pass their judgment upon the word of God, call their attention to the fact that they have forgotten who was the first and wisest critic. He has had thousands of years of practical experience. He it is who teaches the so-called higher critics of the world today. God will punish all those who, as higher critics, exalt themselves, and criticize God's Holy Word." - *The Bible Echo*, 1 February 1897, 34–35

"But just as soon as some enter college and get a little bit of knowledge they think they know more than God. And you hear of the higher critics. Who is the Higher Critic? It is the Lord God of the universe, who has spread the canopy of the heavens above us, and has made the stars and called them forth in their order; that has created the lesser light, the glory of the moon, to come in its order and to shine in our world. And the higher critics come in. Who are they? Poor, finite man on probation to see if he will be loyal and true to God that he can stand under the blood-stained banner of Prince Emmanuel, and that he can become a child of God and an heir of heaven. Talk of the critics, the higher critics. We have God; we have his Word in its simplicity." - *Sermons and Talks*, vol. 1, 255

## Sources

The following resources were used as part of an AI-assisted reference and summary process. This document is intended to be a teaching resource that should continue to receive updates. Suggestions and corrections are welcome.

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