EXEGETICAL FALLACIES: OVERVIEW

Jeremiah J. E. Wierwille

Last Updated: 12/04/2014
Copyright © 2014

Abstract —**Biblical interpretation is susceptible to false premises in the process of exegesis by violating laws of language and logic, and maintaining faulty presuppositions. Wrong understanding of the principles of language, errors in understanding word definitions and usage, the proper governance of context, or grammar lead to incorrect conclusions about meaning. Concerning the laws of logic, principles of argumentation, premises, and reasoning are sometimes neglected or distorted resulting in false conclusions. Regarding presuppositions, one's preunderstanding or prior biases can skew the way that a person approaches the text and the specific preconceived notions they bring with them when seek to determine meaning.**

General Research Topic(s) — **Principles of Biblical Interpretation, Exegesis/Hermeneutics, Exegetical Fallacies, How to Study and Interpret the Bible.**

**The following outline is largely adapted from D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996).[1]

I. WORD–STUDY FALLACIES

The reason why word studies are riddled with fallacies is because it is simple to obtain fragments of information from various references sources about words (e.g., concordances, lexicons, Bible dictionaries, etc.) and then present the information and use it to draw conclusions that may or may not proceed along reliable and sound methods of biblical interpretation. The solution is to learn and become more competent, or defer to scholars and other authorities who specialize in the field (but there's no guarantee they will avoid the fallacies either…it's just more likely).

The basic premise in word studies is that words are fluid entities that are affected by their surroundings. Words are not merely an isolated collection of symbols that represent a static idea. They require a series of associated words to define their meaning. Such a series of words is referred to as a context. As Carson argues,

> *"[T]he heart of the issue [in word studies] is that semantics, meaning, is more than the meaning of words. It involves phrases, sentences, discourse, genre, style; it demands a feel for not only syntagmatic word studies (those that relate words to other words) but also paradigmatic word studies (those that ponder why this word is used instead of that word)."[2]*

Below are listed several exegetical fallacies that deal with mishandling the meaning of words. In one form or another, each fallacy points to an erroneous assumption that ignores an established law of language. And, more

---

[1] Titles and descriptions of listed exegetical fallacies are based predominantly on D. A. Carson's work. Some minor alterations have been made for improvement of clarity or intelligibility. A few additional fallacies have been included as well. Section introductions have been added by the author and are not part of Carson's work.

[2] D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 64.

often than not, the error is in ignoring the context and investing undue authority in the words themselves.

1. **Root Fallacy** Determining the meaning of a word based solely or primarily on its etymology.
2. **Semantic Anachronism** Reading a more recent meaning of a word back into earlier literature.
3. **Semantic Obsolescence** Assigning meaning to a word that it used to have in earlier times but is no longer found within the semantic range at the time of composition.
4. **Appeal to Unknown or Unlikely Meanings** Appealing to a word meaning in order to suit a theological perspective for which there is little or no lexical/semantic substance to support the meaning.
5. **Careless Appeal to Background Material** Using background information to formulate a meaning for which there is little or no substantial connection or grounds for its validity.
6. **Verbal Parallelomania** Claiming verbal or conceptual links and even dependency of meaning based on parallels alone, being selective in using certain parallels to establish meaning, or seeing parallels in every occurrence of a word.[3]
7. **Linkage of Language and Mentality** Assuming that language constrains the thinking process to the point that language and mentality are confused and collapse into each other. In other words, no distinction is made between language and the way people think.
8. **False Assumptions About Technical Meaning** Assuming that a word always or almost always carries a technical meaning wherever used, disregarding the possibility that words can have more than one meaning (including a technical one) and can be used in more than one way.

9. **Problems Surrounding Synonyms/Componential Analysis** Misunderstanding the concepts of *synonymity* and *equivalence*, and thus claiming artificial distinctions between words/phrases that share a high degree of semantic overlap and which can be used interchangeably with the same referential meaning, or claiming a high degree of synonymity between words/phrases when they don't share the same referential meaning.
10. **Selective and Prejudicial Use of Evidence** Appealing to certain evidence in a selective way that justifies a particular view while ignoring or dismissing all other evidence.
11. **Unwarranted Semantic Disjunctions/Restrictions** Forcing an artificial disjunction or restriction on a word's sematic range and meaning that is not warranted, causing an "either/or" view toward the meaning of a word where it might contain the possibility of both.
12. **Unwarranted Restriction of the Semantic Field** Limiting the semantic range of a word that ignores the full range of possible meanings it can have.
13. **Unwarranted Adoption of an Expanded Semantic Field (Illegitimate Totality Transfer)** Incorporating a broader scope of meaning for a word in a particular context that is greater than the context allows.
14. **Problems Relating to the Semitic Background of the Greek New Testament** Imposing an overly close correlation between a Semitic word and Greek equivalent without consulting the Hellenistic context of its usage.
15. **Unwarranted Neglect of Distinguishing Peculiarities of a Corpus** Assuming that one writer's predominant usage of any word must then be the usage of all other writers as well.
16. **Unwarranted Linking of Sense and Reference** Confusing the "sense" (meaning) of a word from its actual "referent" (object) because all words have a "sense" but not all words have a "referent," and the "sense" is not always equal to the "referent."

---

[3] "Any individual occurrence is no more than a possible parallel until it has been shown to have a higher degree of semantic overlap (that is, it corresponds to the biblical term at several levels) than the other possibilities, even if the parallel is found elsewhere in the same book or section." Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 92.

II. Grammatical Fallacies (Greek New Testament)

Grammatical fallacies are less frequent than word-study fallacies mainly because less people are involved in grammatical analysis of the Greek New Testament than in other forms of investigation that do require the intense study of linguistics. But those who do grammatical analyses and other forms of critical investigation are usually more aware of how to handle the text and are less likely to make presumptive statements that fall into the category of fallacies.[4] Nevertheless, even experts make mistakes and don't always abide by proper rules of grammar and syntax.

Tense and Mood Fallacies

1. **The Aorist Tense** Presuming the aorist tense always refers to a "one-time" past event.[5]
2. **The First Person Aorist Subjunctive** Viewing the 1st person aorist subjunctive as always indicating a true, deliberative force.
3. **The Middle Voice** Assuming that the middle voice always connotes a reflexive action or suggests that the subject acts of itself.

Syntax Fallacies

1. **Conditionals** Taking the protasis ("if" clause) in 1st-class[6] conditional statements as always indicating something true in the ultimate sense. Or seeing 3rd-class[7] conditional statements as indicating a degree of possibility for its fulfillment or unfulfillment. Or perceiving the time reference of the conditional statement to be in relation to the speaker rather than in reference to the protasis.
2. **The Article** Interpreting the meaning and use of the Greek article in terms of the English article. Also, asserting the function of the Granville Sharp Rule and/or Colwell Rule beyond the range of significance in which it was meant to operate.
3. **Relationship of Tenses** Inadequately distinguishing the relationship of verb tenses between clauses and what each tense denotes in the structure and syntax of the passage.

III. Logical Fallacies

"Logic" is a very diverse word and holds meaning on several different levels. But on its broadest and most universal level, logic can be defined as "an analysis and evaluation of the ways of using evidence to derive correct conclusions."[8] There are three basic universal laws of logic: the Law of Identity, the Law of Non-Contradiction, and the Law of Excluded Middle. In general, logic deals with propositions, deductions, and inferences, and how evidence and reasoning are used to formulate meaning from suggested relationships between two or more objects or ideas. As Carson asserts,

> *It [logic] is the set of relationships that must apply if any knowledge is possible and if any communication of propositional knowledge is possible."[9]*

---

[4] The following list of grammatical fallacies are difficult to briefly summarize. See Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 65-86.

[5] Greek tenses are not strictly time-related as is often presumed. As Carson describes, "The time of action is not conveyed by the Greek tense…nor the kind of action that took place, but by the author's conception of that action." Ibid., 67.

[6] 1st-class conditional statements are considered the "simple condition and assumes that the protasis is true only for the sake of the argument but does not carry any bearing on the author's true conception of reality.

[7] 3rd-class conditional statements are conditional statements that point toward a possible future condition but indicate no such degree of possibility of its actuality. They are general statements of futurity usually based on hypothetical circumstances.

[8] William J. Kilgore, *An Introductory to Logic* (2nd ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), 7.

[9] Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 89.

Thus, biblical interpretation requires the use of logic to assemble ideas and statements together into meaningful relationships to each other by which then a conclusion can be drawn. Below are listed several exegetical fallacies that deal with the improper use of logic. Each fallacy points to a specific violation of a law of logic that ignores the logical constraints that must be applied to knowledge in order for it to be properly correlated. In most of the cases mentioned below, the error in logic is committed by trying to force meaning upon a text by incorrect associations, deductions, or conclusions that neglect logical consistency in the available information (data).

1. **False Disjunctions** Permitting the acceptance of only an either/or position on an idea so as to make the various sides of an argument mutually exclusive when such a logical constraint need not be imposed on them.

2. **Failure to Recognize Distinctions** Linking two ideas together in all aspects simply because they share similarities in certain aspects.

3. **Over-simplified Logic Ruling** Assuming the validity of a proposition simply on account of an explanation that is merely deemed to be "logical." What is claimed to be "logical" may or may not be actually logically true.

4. **Selective (Partial) Evidence** Choosing to rely on a subset of evidence thinking it will represent the whole (see Word-Study Fallacy #10 above).

5. **Improperly Handled Syllogisms** Pairing multiple statements of logic (syllogisms) together in such a way as to infer connections between the pairings that do not exist.

6. **Negative Inferences** Assuming that if a proposition is true, then the negative inference of that proposition must also be true.

7. **Worldview Confusion** Assuming one's personal experiences and interpretation of reality are a proper framework for interpreting the biblical text, in part

or in whole. This fallacy is the first to arrive when one fails to properly achieve distanciation.[10]

8. **Question Framing** Imposing a prior understanding of a text in the way questions are framed about the text that leads the answers toward the prior understanding.

9. **Confusion of Truth and Accuracy** Assuming the question of truth is a matter of precision *and* accuracy so that if a statement is not precise, it is not accurate, and therefore not true. Rather, truth has degrees of precision to it that do not invalidate it as being inaccurate simply because it could be stated with greater clarity.

10. **Purely Emotive Appeals** Assuming that emotional appeals based on sincerity and conviction can supplant the role of reason and logic.

11. **Unwarranted Generalizations and Overspecifications** Simply using one particular example to extrapolate a generalization that then is applied universally.

12. **Unwarranted Associative Jumps** Allowing a word or phrase to trigger an associated idea, concept, or experience that bears no explicit relation to the text but is then used to interpret the text.

13. **False Statements** Accepting/making statements that are self-contraventions, factually wrong, or that violate a law of logic (e.g., identity, non-contradiction, excluded middle, etc.)

14. **The *Non Sequitur*** Assuming that a statement or conclusion logically flows from a previous statement without proper cause or connection.

15. **Cavalier Dismissal** Assuming that an argument has been sufficiently answered when, in fact, it has just been written off and the interpretation redirected.

---

[10] Distanciation refers to the act of removing one's personal biases and preunderstanding from their view of the text. As Carson puts it, "We must first of all grasp the nature and degree of the differences that separate our understanding from the understanding of the text. Only then can we profitably fuse our horizon of understanding with the horizon of understanding of the text—that is, only then can we begin to shape our thoughts by the thoughts of the text so that we truly understand them." Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 24.

16. **Equivocal Argumentation** Overreaching the implications of an argument beyond what it proves so as to make the argument seem conclusive or decisive on some level.
17. **Inadequate Analogy** Supposing that a particular analogy is relevant to a text or theme when that analogy is actually inadequate or inappropriate.
18. **Emphatic Appeals** Assuming that statements like "obviously," "clearly," and other emphatic assertions actually adds any real validation to the argument.
19. **Simplistic Appeals to Authority** Assuming that appeals to authorities (scholars, pastors, authors, speakers, etc.) constitutes in itself a justifiable reason or sufficient validation for a particular interpretation of the text.
20. **Irrelevant Argumentation** Posing an argument not relevant to the subject under discussion in order to discredit or bolster a particular position or to promote personal credibility or engender distrust in the opponent. Potential arguments include attacks on one's character, reputation, education, etc. (*argumentum ad hominem*), as well as inconsequential factoids, aphorisms, and pithy sayings.

IV. PRESUPPOSITIONAL AND HISTORICAL FALLACIES

Some aspects of biblical interpretation rely heavily on presuppositional claims and historical reconstructions. Presuppositional claims deal with the field of epistemology (the study of knowledge, its source, nature, and scope) and are highly nuanced and complex. Needless to say, the arguments can be endless. Historical reconstructions are an effort of specialists to recover information about culture, events, people, and places in an attempt to fill in gaps in understanding of the ancient world.

Every person who interacts with the biblical text brings along a certain amount of preunderstanding. But the hermeneutical process that the interpreter of the

Bible engages in is highly influenced by their presuppositional and historical biases.

> *"The interpreter who approaches a text, it is argued, already brings along a certain amount of cultural, linguistic, and ethical baggage. Even the questions the interpreter tries to ask (or fails to ask) of the text reflect the limitation imposed by that baggage; they will in some measure shape the kind of 'responses' that can come back from the text and the interpreter's understanding of them….When the differences [between your horizon and the horizon of the text] are more clearly perceived, then it becomes possible to approach the text with greater sensitivity than would otherwise be the case."[11]*

We all have presuppositions that we bring to the interpretation of the Bible, and we all are attempting to hear what the text is saying but we sometimes have to infer information that is not explicitly stated. Without these processes we would be severely limited in our capacity to interpret the Bible at all. However, the key is being aware of such presuppositions and preunderstanding and how they affect one's conclusions about the text. Are they interfering with what the text is really saying? We must ask ourselves, "Have we taken a slanted approach to interpretation that excludes certain possibilities?" Furthermore, how do we handle the various historical settings and the missing pieces of the background puzzle?

Below is a list of exegetical fallacies that deal with presuppositions and historical reconstructions. Each fallacy points to an error in the way the interpreter lets their preunderstanding taint their view of the text or the way the interpreter shapes historical renderings to suit their perspective or support and agree with prior conclusions.

PRESUPPOSITIONAL / HERMENEUTICAL FALLACIES

---

[11] Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 126-27.

1. **<u>Omission of Distanciation</u>** Reading one's theology, ideology, or philosophy into the text.
2. **<u>Neglecting Bible Story-Line</u>** Discarding the premise that all Scripture leads toward the same ultimate conclusion of the Bible's story. In other words, adopting interpretations that disrupt the Bible's overall story stand in antithesis or opposition to the unity of the whole redemptive-historical purposes of God throughout history.
3. **<u>Working Outside the Bible's "Givens"</u>** Imposing (directly or indirectly) a social or cultural agenda on the interpretation of the text so as to fit a particular party's view or position personally, politically, or otherwise.

HISTORICAL FALLACIES

1. **<u>Uncontrolled Historical Reconstruction</u>** Putting speculative reconstructions of history above the text. Speculative reconstructions cannot overturn substantive evidence of history and cannot be used as an authoritative means for interpretation.
2. **<u>Fallacies of Causation</u>** Accepting causative explanations for events to which they are not causes, either because they are inferred causes, oversimplified causes, re-ordered causes, uncorrelated causes, or imaginary causes.
3. **<u>Motivational Fallacy</u>** Assuming to know more about the motives or reason for the way a biblical writer explained a particular account, used certain words or phrases, or added/omitted content than what can naturally be drawn from the text itself.
4. **<u>Conceptual Parallelomania</u>** Claiming conceptual links and even dependency of meaning based on conceptual parallels alone and/or seeing parallels in everything (see Word-Study Fallacy #6 above).

V. REFERENCES

Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996.

Kilgore, William J. *An Introductory to Logic.* 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006.

CORRESPONDENCE

Author: Jeremiah Wierwille
Affiliation: N/A
Street: 06573 Southland Rd
City/State: New Knoxville, OH 45871
Country: U.S.A.
Email: contact@jerrywierwille.com