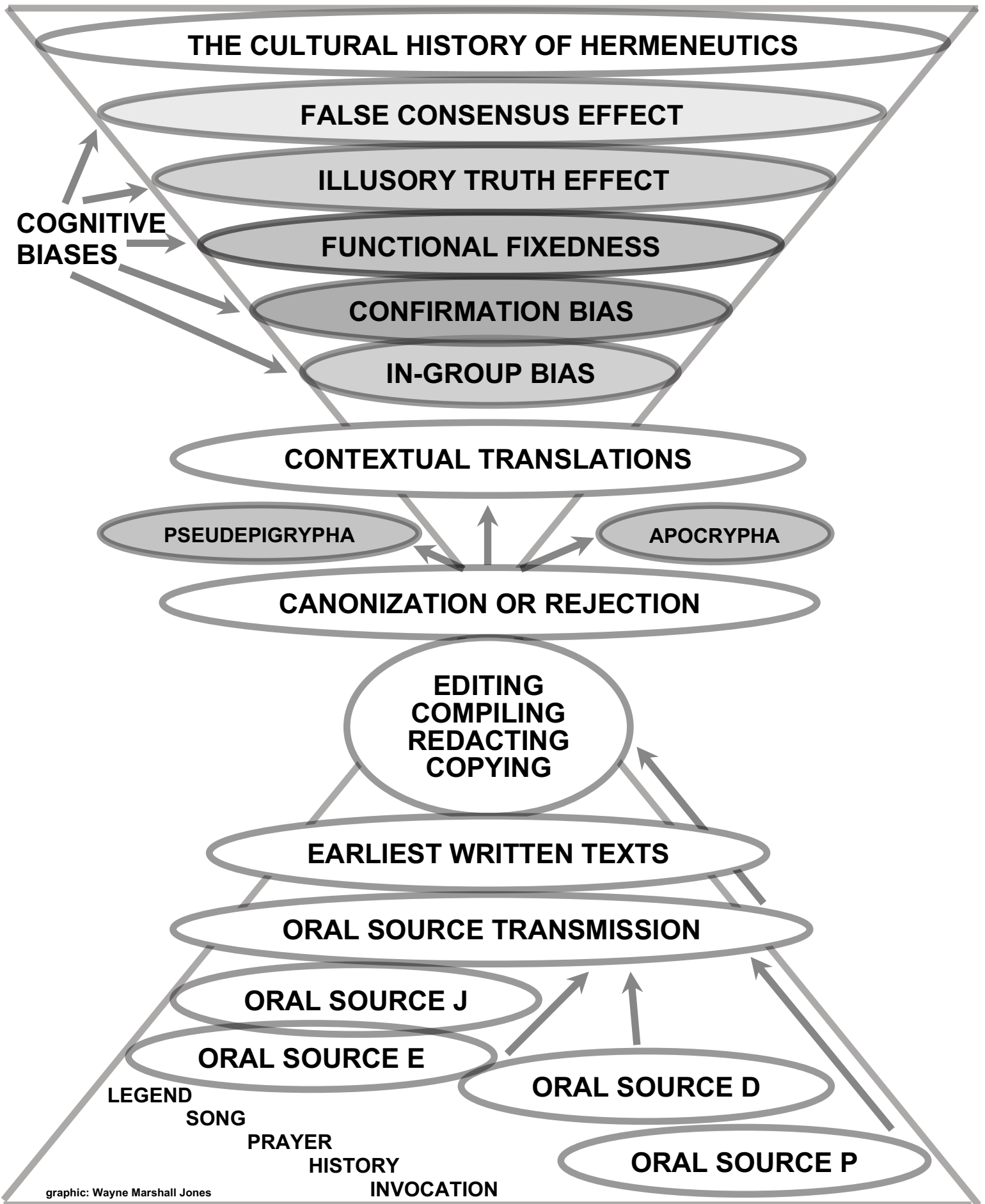


THE LAYERS AND LENSES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION



How Our Cognitive Biases Influence Our Biblical Interpretation

The following text comes from Jackson Wu's discussion of Aaron Chalmers' exceptional article "[The Influence of Cognitive Biases on Biblical Interpretation](#)" (BBR, 26.4).

A Few Cognitive Biases

Chalmers identifies five cognitive biases that influence interpretation (and therefore contextualization). They include:

1. Confirmation Bias

"the tendency to selectively search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions or hypotheses." (p. 470)

2. False Consensus Effect

individuals seeing "their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, or inappropriate." (p. 472)

3. In-Group Bias

"the tendency for people to give preferential treatment to others they perceive to be members of their own group." (p. 474)

4. Functional Fixedness

"the inability to realize that something known to have a particular use may also be used to perform other functions." (p. 475)

5. Illusory Truth Effect

"the tendency of people to identify a statement as true simply because they have heard it before, irrespective of its actual truthfulness." (p. 476)

How Cognitive Biases Affect Interpretation

How do these biases impact the way we read the Bible? According to Chalmers, ...

1. Confirmation Bias

"may also be displayed in people's tendency to interpret evidence in a way that supports their preexisting position. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to the handling of ambiguous information; psychological studies have shown that people are more likely to interpret ambiguous evidence as confirming their preexisting beliefs than disconfirming of them....

Researchers have shown that the effect of confirmation bias is stronger for emotionally charged issues and for deeply entrenched beliefs. In both instances, people are more likely to be resistant to change. Therefore, we would expect this bias to be a significant factor when it comes to biblical interpretation, which is often dealing with issues that are emotionally significant and—for those who come from a confessional background—frequently involves deeply-held beliefs." (p. 470–71)

2. The False Consensus Effect

“might result in interpreters naively assuming that the biblical authors held the same priorities, attitudes, or beliefs as themselves. While there may be some overlap, there are also likely to be significant differences.” (p. 473)

3. In-Group Bias

manifests in multiple ways. For example, we might only read commentaries and listen to speakers from within our tribe. Likewise, we must be suspect of anyone not from our tradition or school of thought. This bias constricts what questions we ask and the potential answers we’ll find.

4. Functional Fixedness

limits how we understand the “application or contemporary relevance of the text.” (p. 475)

5. The Illusory Truth Effect

causes people to think “that a certain interpretation of a passage is correct simply because they have encountered it before, especially if they have encountered it on numerous occasions.” (p. 477)

Countering Cognitive Biases

What can we do to mitigate the effects of cognitive bias on [contextualization](#)? Chalmers’ suggestions apply to everything from biblical interpretation to ministry strategy.

First, we need to **grasp how cognitive biases work and their influence**. This awareness helps us to identify when such biases rear their ugly head.

Second, genuinely **seek ways to refute your opinion**. What would your opponents say in disagreement? Beware not to caricature their position

Third, **don’t presume your abilities are sufficient** to immediately understand a text of situation. By slowing down, one can more easily notice details, emphases, and nuance.

Fourth, **seek the opinions of others**, especially those who are most likely to disagree with you. I often tell people, “Even heretics aren’t idiots. They likely have a good insight that they’ve taken in a wrong direction.” Don’t get defensive but rather try to assume their perspective in order to understand it and apply the legitimate insights they offer.

Finally, Chalmers adds, “**Ensure we have adequate time** to complete our exegetical work. Time pressures (and stress) tend to increase the effect of cognitive biases.” (p. 479)

source: Dr. Jackson Wu, **How Cognitive Biases Produce Theological Syncretism** 9/28/2018 at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2018/09/26/how-cognitive-biases-produce-theological-syncretism/>