

CHAPTER ONE

The Need for Hermeneutics

Correctly understanding Scripture is an arduous and often puzzling task. Consider some of the difficult tensions we face in this task:

The Bible is divine, yet it has come to us in human form. The commands of God are absolute, yet the historical context of the writings appears to relativize certain elements.

The divine message must be clear, yet many passages seem ambiguous.

We are dependent only on the Spirit for instruction, yet scholarship is surely necessary.

The Scriptures seem to presuppose a literal and historical reading, yet we are also confronted by the figurative and nonhistorical (e.g., parables).

Proper interpretation requires the interpreter's personal freedom, yet some degree of external, corporate authority appears imperative.

The objectivity of the biblical message is essential, yet our presuppositions seem to inject a degree of subjectivity into the interpretive process¹

No doubt every student of the Bible could add his or her own list of troublesome and perplexing issues. How can we be successful in our attempts to understand the Scriptures correctly? We need a well-thought-out approach to interpreting the Bible. And that is where hermeneutics comes in.

Hermeneutics is a big word—what you might call a fifty-dollar word. It is a technical term Bible scholars use to refer to the task of explaining the meaning of

¹M. Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 37–38.

the Scriptures. But what is the meaning of this bit of scholarly jargon? A Greek lexicon reveals that the verb *hermeneuein* means “to explain, interpret or to translate,” while the noun *hermencia* means “interpretation” or “translation.” Using the verb, Luke informs us that Jesus *explained* to the two disciples on the Emmaus road what the Scriptures said about him (Lk 24:27). Paul uses the noun in 1 Cor 12:10 to refer to the gift of *interpretation* of tongues. In essence, then, hermeneutics involves interpreting or explaining. In fields like biblical studies or literature, it refers to the task of explaining the meaning of a piece of writing. Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a message—written, oral, or visual—is endeavoring to communicate.

Why Hermeneutics?

But what does hermeneutics have to do with reading and understanding the Bible? Haven't God's people through the millennia read and understood the Scriptures without recourse to hermeneutics? Actually, the answer to this second question is technically, no. For though we might not always be conscious of it, without an organized approach or means to understanding, we would not be able to comprehend anything.

Think of normal everyday life. We engage in conversations or read a newspaper, and we unconsciously interpret and understand the meanings we hear or read. When we watch a television program, listen to a lecture, or read an article about a familiar subject in our own culture and language, we interpret intuitively and without consciously thinking of using methods. Though we are not aware of it, we are employing methods of interpretation that enable us to understand accurately. This explains why normal communication “works.” If there were no system, understanding would occur only randomly or occasionally, if at all.

But is reading the Bible like this? Can we understand the Bible correctly merely by reading it? Some Christians are convinced that we can. One seminary professor tells how a crying student once interrupted a seminar on principles for understanding the Bible. Fearful that he might have offended the student, the teacher asked if anything was wrong.

Sobbing, the student responded, “I am crying because I feel so sorry for you.” “Why do you feel sorry for me?” The professor was perplexed. “Because,” said the student, “it is so hard for you to understand the Bible. I just read it and God shows me the meaning.”

While this approach to biblical interpretation may reflect a commendable confidence in God, it reveals a simplistic (and potentially dangerous) understanding of the illumination of the Holy Spirit and the clarity of Scripture. As we will see, the role of the Spirit in understanding God's Word is indispensable. The Spirit convicts God's people of the truth of the biblical message and convicts and enables them to live consistently with that truth. But the Spirit's help does not replace the need to interpret biblical passages according to the principles of language communication.

Through the centuries, if people have correctly understood God's Word it is because they have employed proper principles and methods of interpretation.

The need for such principles becomes more obvious in an unfamiliar domain—a lecture on astro-physics or a highly technical legal document. Terms, expressions, and concepts are strange and perhaps incomprehensible. We immediately perceive a need for help in deciphering the message. How are we to make sense of antiquarks, the weak anthropic principle, or neutrinos? Who can tell us how to distinguish a *habeas corpus* from a *corpus delicti*? It will not do simply to make up our own meanings, nor merely to ask anyone who might be readily at hand. We need the help of a specialized dictionary. Or taking a physics class might help in the first situation, while consulting a lawyer would be helpful in the second.

At times even the most straightforward communication is not so straightforward. For example, to understand a father's statement to his daughter, “You will be home by midnight, won't you?” will probably require decoding various cues beyond the simple meanings of individual words. To determine whether this is an inquiry, an assumption, or a command will require a careful analysis of the entire situation. How much more complicated this task is when one seeks to decode an ancient text written by people in centuries past. Just think of the great distances of time and culture between us and them.

If the goal is correct understanding of communication, we need precepts and methods that are appropriate to the task. Hermeneutics provides the precepts and methods for acquiring an understanding of the Scriptures. To avoid interpretation that is arbitrary, erroneous, or that simply suits personal whim, the reader needs rules or principles for guidance. A deliberate attempt to interpret on the basis of sensible and agreed-upon principles becomes the best guarantee that an interpretation will be accurate. When we consciously set out to discover and employ such principles, we investigate hermeneutics. Thus, the basic goal of this book will be to establish, explain, and demonstrate precepts and methods to guide those who want to understand Scripture correctly.

Hermeneutics Defined

The Art and Science of Interpretation

Interpretation is neither an art nor a science; it is both a science and an art. We use rules, principles, methods, and tactics; we enter the worlds of the historian, sociologist, psychologist, and linguist—to name a few. Yet, human communication cannot be reduced solely to quantifiable and precise rules. No mechanical system of rules will ever help one understand correctly all the implications or nuances in the three words “I love you” as spoken by a teenage girl to her boyfriend, a husband to his wife of twenty-five years, a mother to her child, or a teenage boy to his mint-condition '54 Chevy. This is where the “art” of interpretation enters in. Adults may think they understand the words “cool” or “radical” (or any popular teen-age word), but without knowing the codes of youth culture, they may be wide of the mark.

In light of this, how much more must modern biblical interpreters seek to bridge the vast linguistic, historical, social, and cultural gaps that exist between the ancient and modern worlds so that they may understand what texts mean. We assume that people communicate in order to be understood, and this includes the authors of the Scriptures. Hermeneutics provides a strategy that will enable us to understand what an author or speaker intended to communicate.

Of course, this presumes that there is only one possible meaning of a text or utterance, and that our goal is to understand the author's intention in writing that text. But it is not that simple. Perhaps, given a specific text, we must ask whether it has only one correct meaning or whether it may accommodate several or even an infinite number of possible meanings (perhaps at different levels). On one side of the spectrum, some say that the only correct meaning of a text is that single meaning the original author intended it to have.² On the other side stand those who argue that meaning is a function of readers, not authors, and that any text's meaning depends upon the readers' perception of it.³ Between the two stand other options. Perhaps meaning resides independently in the texts themselves, regardless of what the author meant or of what later readers understand from them. These issues are crucial because our definition of the task of hermeneutics will depend on our answer to where meaning resides—in a text, in the mind of the reader, or in some combination of the two?⁴

²The name often associated with the stress on meaning as a function of authorial intention is E. D. Hirsch. He articulates and defends this view in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) and *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976). An early proponent in the field of biblical studies was K. Stendahl, "Implications of Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism for Biblical Interpretation," *JBL* 77 (1958): 33–38.

³A key figure among the several we could mention is S. E. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁴Two points require clarification here. First, in this volume we are using the term hermeneutics in what might be called its traditional sense: a systematic study of principles and methods of interpretation. Seminal thinkers like Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Fuchs, Ebeling, Gadamer, and Ricoeur use hermeneutics in a more philosophical sense to identify how something in the past can "mean" today or become existentially significant in the modern world. The term "new hermeneutic" describes this program to move hermeneutics from mere rules for understanding texts to more far-reaching understanding of understanding. Its practitioners would say they have shifted hermeneutics out of the realm of merely explaining, to providing an in-depth understanding of human existence. To fathom the intricacies of the "new hermeneutics" requires a separate discussion that lies beyond our scope here. Some further perspectives will be presented in the chapters that follow. We refer readers to A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). Another helpful guide is E.V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Second, readers will sometimes encounter the singular term "hermeneutic." Typically, this refers to a specific and self-acknowledged standpoint or frame of reference that an interpreter adopts to interpret a text or utterance. Usually this approach implies an established ideology, specific attitudes, and a definite approach. Thus, a "feminist hermeneutic" will adopt a way of reading a text that conforms to the premeditated confines of a feminist ideology. Substitute "black," "Marxist," "liberation," or "Freudian" for the word "feminist" and you can see how adopting a frame of reference will predetermine a reading or hermeneutic of the text.

The Role of the Interpreter

What role does the interpreter play in the hermeneutical process? We must realize that just as the biblical text arose within historical personal processes and circumstances, so interpreters are people in the midst of their personal circumstances and situations. For example, the phrase "white as snow" may strike a resident of Colorado as comprehensible but rather inconsequential; more important are details about packed snow on wintry ski slopes. In contrast, the phrase will be totally incomprehensible to a tribesman from Kalimantan who has no idea what snow is, much less what color it is. Then the resident of Chicago will have another perspective, wistfully recalling what used to be white while grumbling about the dirty, rutted, frozen snow that impedes the commute to work. In other words, people understand their world on the basis of what they already know or have experienced. Does this mean that because we live in an age and location far removed from people of the Bible we are doomed to misunderstand its message? No, we simply need study tools that will guide us to interpret it as accurately as possible, and we need to take into account the presuppositions and preunderstandings we bring to the task of interpretation. To fail to do so leaves us open to distortion and misunderstanding.

Thus, while hermeneutics must give attention to the ancient text and the conditions that produced it, responsible interpretation cannot ignore the modern context and the circumstances of those who attempt to explain the Scriptures today. No one interprets in a vacuum: everyone has presuppositions and preunderstandings. Dr. Basil Jackson, a leading Christian psychiatrist, learned this hermeneutical lesson during his youth when a Plymouth Brethren elder in Ireland told him, "Wonderful things in the Bible I see, most of them put there by you and me."⁵

On the other hand, no one can interpret without some preunderstanding of the subject.⁶ Yet no one should approach biblical interpretation with only preunderstanding. Those who read the Bible only from the perspective of their immediate personal circumstances, who forget that the passage was originally written to somebody else, cut short the interpretive process. They understand the message strictly in terms of the events going on in their own lives and ignore the perspective of the text and its original recipients. This results in serious misunderstanding like that reported by a Christian counselor. A woman explained to her therapist that God had told her to divorce her husband and marry another man (with whom she was romantically involved). She cited Paul's command in Eph 4:24 (KJV), "Put on the new man," as the key to her "divine" guidance. As humorous as this sounds she was absolutely serious.⁷ Although modern translations clarify that Paul was instructing believers to replace their sinful lifestyle with a Christian one, this woman preoccupied with her marital problems, read her own meaning into the passage.

⁵B. Jackson, quotation from a lecture at Denver Seminary, March 1991.

⁶On these points see R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, ed. S. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 289–96.

⁷H. L. Bussell, *Unholy Devotions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 119.

Is an accurate analysis of the Bible, then, simply a matter of applying with absolute honesty and accuracy certain precise techniques? Things are not so simple. When we try to understand each other's communication, scientific precision seems to elude our grasp. In fact, even the so-called objective or hard-science researchers recognize the influence of values. D. Tracy observes,

Former claims for a value-free technology and a history-free science have collapsed. The hermeneutical character of science has now been strongly affirmed. Even in science, we must interpret in order to understand.⁸

No one comes to the task of understanding as an objective observer. All interpreters bring their own presuppositions and agendas, and these affect the ways they understand as well as the conclusions they draw.⁹ In addition, the writer or speaker whom the interpreter wishes to understand also operates with a set of presuppositions. We humans mediate all our understanding through a grid of personal history and bias. Our prior experiences and knowledge—our total background—shape what we perceive and how we understand. So how can we study Scripture texts objectively and accurately? The answer is: by using an established hermeneutical approach that will provide standards to guide us in navigating through the variable and subjective human factors.

The Meaning of the Message

Any type of oral or written communication involves three expressions of meaning: (1) what the speaker or writer meant by what he or she said; (2) what the recipient actually understood by the statement; and in some abstract sense, (3) what meaning is actually encoded in the text or utterance itself.¹⁰ Of course when we seek to understand the meaning of a biblical text, all we have is the text itself. The author's intended meaning cannot be fully uncovered since he or she is no longer available to explain what was "meant." The original recipients remain equally inaccessible, so we cannot ask them to tell us how they understood the message. Only by means of the written

⁸D. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 33.

⁹Those who believe that women can be ordained ministers have no difficulty detecting those biblical passages that emphasize the crucial role women played in biblical history. Yet those who argue for the traditional understanding of the role of women in the church that precludes ordination point to those passages they believe teach the subordination of women. Presuppositions and agendas clearly influence what evidence interpreters value more highly. A classic documentation of this phenomenon occurs in W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983).

¹⁰Following a more semantically based model, G. B. Caird investigates the phenomenon of meaning in some detail in *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), especially pp. 32–61. Under "meaning" he assesses referential meaning, sense, value, entailment, and intention. The overlap with our three categories is clear. The meaning encoded in the text itself probably relates most closely with referential meaning, though that in no way exhausts what a text "means." For valuable discussions of these semantic relations see J. Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) or S. Ullmann, *Principles of Semantics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957).

text itself can we reconstruct the meaning the author most likely intended and the meaning the recipients most likely understood. Any appraisal of "meaning," then, must take into consideration this complex coalition of text, author, and audience.

The Text

How can the utterance or text itself help in discovering the message the author intended to convey or the message the hearers understood? Clearly, one basic factor is to determine the meanings of the terms that are used. We must adopt an approach to understanding the meaning of words that considers precisely their referential, denotative, connotative, and contextual meanings. Briefly, *referential* meaning specifies what some words or terms "refer to." In other words, part of the meaning of the word "tree" is a large leafy plant growing outside that bears apples in the fall. Denotative and connotative meanings speak of complementary aspects of a word's meaning. Words may denote a specific meaning. A biologist could provide a specific, scientific definition of tree that would represent its *denotative* meaning. But in a specific instance the word "tree" might take on special definitive meanings or *connotations*, as when Peter observes that Jesus died on a tree (1 Pet 2:24). In that instance the term comes to have a unique significance for Christians. Connotations, then, are a word's emotional overtones—the positive or negative associations it conjures up beyond what the word strictly denotes. The "hanging tree" used for executing criminals also conveys connotative meaning. In these uses, tree means more than the biologist's explanation, just as that scientific explanation goes beyond the picture or view of a tree in the yard. Peter's use also illustrates *contextual* meaning, for when we read his words we quickly conclude that he does not refer to a literal tree at all. In the context, tree means "cross."

Of course words do not occur in isolation in a text. All languages present their words in a system of grammatical and literary structures—sentences, paragraphs, poems, discourses, and even larger units. We must understand how the biblical languages function if we are to understand what the writers meant to say. A larger dimension involved in understanding an utterance is the specific literary genre or writing style the author employed to convey his or her message. We interpret the words in a poem differently from those in a letter when we know we are looking at a poem rather than a letter, or vice versa. We expect ambiguity or figures of speech to convey a meaning in poetry that is different from the more concrete sense of words in a historical narrative.

In fact, much recent study has focused upon the literary dimensions of the Bible, both of individual passages and of whole books, and any responsible procedure to interpret Scripture must address this dimension. When we receive a letter in the mail, we expect it to follow a fairly standard format. For the most part, the biblical writers also used and adapted literary forms and conventions that were standard at the time they wrote. Thus, in order to understand the books of the Bible as literary documents and to appreciate the various dimensions—both cognitive and aesthetic—of what God has given us in the Scriptures, we need to employ the insights and methods of literary criticism. The use of literary critical (or historical) methods

to understand the biblical writings need not diminish our conviction that they are the divine Word of God. Their uniqueness as Scripture pertains to their content as God's revelation and to the process God employed to convey his truth. Part of that process included the specific and varying literary features.

What does it mean to study the Bible from a literary standpoint? L. Ryken provides some help. Speaking of the literary dimensions of the NT, he argues that we must be "alive to the images and experiential concreteness of the New Testament" (and the OT, we would hasten to add) while resisting "the impulse to reduce literary texts to abstract propositions or to move beyond the text to the history behind it." Further, "this means a willingness to accept the text on its own terms and to concentrate on reliving the experiences that are presented."¹¹ To take a literary approach to the Bible means entering, living, and understanding its world before we move beyond it to abstract meaning. It also means that we study the texts in terms of their genre, that is, in keeping with their own conventions and intentions. It requires that we appreciate the artistry and beauty of texts, that we savor the nuances of language, and that we apply appropriate techniques for untangling the meaning in the extensive poetic sections. Ryken summarizes his principle in the formula "meaning through form." This simply asserts that "we cannot derive the meaning of the New Testament (or the OT) without first examining its form."¹² Part of the meaning recorded in the Bible derives from the forms the authors employed in their writing. We risk missing much of significance if we attempt merely to formulate abstract propositions from the texts we analyze. How much of the artistic elegance of passages such as Psa 23 or 1 Cor 13 we will miss if we extract only theological statements.

The Author and the Audience

Although we cannot ask the authors directly for a clue to the meaning they intended to convey, an examination of their respective contexts (general living conditions and specific life circumstances), when known, can provide helpful information in the interpretive process. Knowing all the conditions that surround the recipients of the original message provides further insight into how they most likely understood the message, as does the relationship between the author and recipients at the time of writing.¹³

Of course, if we are seeking the meaning intended by the author to the original recipients, that meaning must be the meaning they could understand at that

¹¹L. Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 22–23.

¹²Ryken, *Words of Life*, 24.

¹³For example, the situation of some NT epistles is simpler than, say, that of OT prophetic oracles. In the former we may be able to isolate such information to aid our understanding of the written text. In the latter we may have little or nothing to help us understand the relationship between a prophet and the original audience who heard his message. Likewise, we may be able to discover little if anything about the relationship between the author or editor of the final form of a book of the Bible and the readers—whether an OT prophecy or one of the Gospels. These points illustrate the larger problem with which we must deal as interpreters.

time, not the meaning we would determine based on our position of advanced historical developments. Obviously, we have access to the full canon of Scripture. We know how the whole story turned out, so to speak. However, in seeking to understand the meaning of a given text, we cannot impose insight that is based on later revelation. At least we must admit that the human author could not have intended in his or her message what we know only from subsequent revelation. Further, almost two millennia of history have passed since the last NT book was written. Again, we cannot impose on a biblical author information that we possess because of our accumulated current knowledge. If we read into the biblical texts information the authors could not possess, we distort their meaning. For example, when a biblical writer speaks of the "circle of the earth" (Isa 40:22), he may well employ a flat earth model (that is, as seen from God's heavenly throne, the earth looks like a flat, round disk). To hear him on his terms requires that we resist the temptation to impose our scientific, global worldview upon the text. That is, we must not assume that the word circle implies that the author believed the earth was completely round. Because we know "the rest of the story," we have to make a special effort to understand the impact the writers' words had on their original recipients who lacked that knowledge.

This works on several levels because the Bible contains not only the words of the final authors or editors of each book but also the words of historical people whose stories they report. We may be intensely interested in what the historical Jesus said on specific occasions, but we don't have transcripts of the actual words he spoke (probably in Aramaic).¹⁴ We have only the Evangelists' Gospels originally written in Greek and now translated into modern languages. To achieve their purposes for writing, they selected and recast Jesus' words and actions in their unique ways. We do not mean that the Evangelists distorted or misconstrued what Jesus said, nor as some Bible scholars aver, that the Evangelists actually attributed words to Jesus that he never said. Our point is simply that we must take the Bible as it is. We must resist reading "in" our privileged information.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates our tendency to read a later understanding into our interpretation of biblical texts. When we call the Samaritan "good," we betray how far removed we are from sensing the impact the parable had on the Jewish legal expert who first heard this memorable story (Lk 10:25). We must remember that the Jews despised the Samaritans as half-breeds. How shocked the lawyer would be when Jesus made a hated Samaritan the hero of his story—as shocked as Jews of today would be if one of their story-tellers portrayed an Arab terrorist as more heroic than leading Jewish figures! Accurately understanding the Bible requires that we take into account any preconceptions we carry that could distort the text's meaning. Our goal remains to hear the message of the Bible as the original audiences would have heard it or as the first readers would have understood it.

We must avoid the tendency to regard our own experience as the standard for interpreting what we see and read. All of us seem to suffer from the same malady: to view our own experiences of the world as normative, valid, and true. Naturally, we

¹⁴Unfortunately, "red letter" editions of the Gospels may give the (mistaken) impression that we have direct quotes.

are inclined to read the Bible through the lens of this tendency. For example, though today we readily see slavery as an abhorrent evil, it is amazing how many leading Christians defended this inhuman institution prior to the U.S. Civil War. Using the book of Philemon, Hopkins defended slavery in the nineteenth century saying:

He [Paul] finds a fugitive slave, and converts him to the Gospel, and then sends him back again to his old home with a letter of kind recommendation. Why does St. Paul act thus? Why does he not counsel the fugitive to claim his right to freedom, and defend that right . . . ?

The answer is very plain. St. Paul was inspired, and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was only intent on obeying it. And who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God . . . ?¹⁵

Based on his own worldview and experiences, Hopkins believed slavery was a commendable and biblically sanctioned institution.

Like Hopkins, we may unconsciously assume that our own experiences parallel those of the ancients—that life and landscape are the same now as then. In one sense no one can avoid this outlook. But when we simply allow our unchallenged feelings and observations to distort or determine what the Bible means, our experiences have become the test of truth (or at least the measure for what a text can mean).¹⁶ We must adopt an approach to interpretation that confronts this danger, for Scripture alone constitutes the standard of truth, and we must judge our values and experiences on the basis of its precepts, not vice-versa. It follows, then, that any valid approach to interpretation must concern itself with two crucial dimensions: (1) an analytical methodology for deciphering what the text is about, and (2) a means of assessing and accounting for our present situation as we engage in the interpretive process. We must account for both the ancient and modern dimensions. We require historical and grammatical methods to give us an understanding of the contours of the ancient world of the text. At the same time, we must somehow delineate the impact that interpreters themselves produce in the process of interpretation.

Some Challenges of Bible Interpretation

Distance of Time

We could use one word to summarize some of the greatest challenges (and frustrations) the Bible interpreter will face—*distance*. Consider first of all the distance

¹⁵J. H. Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. I. Pooley & Co., 1864), 16, as quoted in Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women*, 37.

¹⁶We in the West face the danger of reading the Bible through our experience of prosperity and technology. Is not the “health and wealth gospel”—that Jesus wants all his children to be healthy and wealthy—a prime example of this bias? How many so-called Third World Christians would assume the Bible taught this? Are there no godly and faithful believers in the poverty-stricken areas of the world?

of time that exists between the ancient texts and our modern world. The writings and events recorded in the Bible span many centuries, but about 1900 years have passed since its last words were written. Simply put, the world has changed in substantial ways over the course of the Bible’s composition and since its completion. Further, most of us lack essential information about the world as it was when the Bible was written. We may be at a loss to understand what a text means because it involves subjects beyond our time span. Even a cursory glance at Hosea 10 points to many references that remain incomprehensible to most modern readers: calf-idol of Beth Aven (v. 5); Assyria (v. 6); Ephraim (v. 6); “ashamed of its wooden idols” (v. 6); “the high places” (v. 8); “Did not war overtake the evil doers in Gibeah?” (v. 9); “as Shalman devastated Beth Arbel on the day of battle” (v. 14). What was a calf-idol? Where was Beth Aven, or Assyria, or Ephraim located? How do we determine the meaning behind historical features that are so far removed in time?

Another time span that must be considered in interpreting the Bible involves the gaps that existed—more or less in various places—between the time the Bible events occurred and the time when those events were actually written down in the texts we now possess. Since the chronology in Genesis goes all the way to the death of the patriarch Joseph, earlier sections like Genesis 12–25 probably were written long after their main character, Abraham, died. We may date the ministry of the prophet Amos to the mid-eighth century B.C., but it is very likely that his words were collected into the biblical book known by his name by someone else at a later date. Though Jesus’ ministry probably spanned the years A.D. 27–30, our Gospels were not written until at least several decades later.

As the gap between the ancient and modern worlds involves decisive shifts, so the decades (or centuries) between the events themselves and their recording in the biblical texts may entail changes in social, cultural, political, and religious perspectives. Such changes may have affected how both Jews and Christians preserved and recorded their religious heritage. Certainly, both the Jewish and Christian believers cared deeply about preserving and transmitting information accurately. The reports about ancient peoples’ abilities to memorize and transmit traditional materials faithfully stands well-documented.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the authors’ unique perspectives would influence what they felt was important, what deserved emphasis, or what might be omitted. In this process the writers would consider their readers and the effects they hoped to produce in them.

Certainly, some of the biblical authors were eyewitnesses and wrote strictly out of their own experiences. Others incorporated additional sources into their own accounts. Still others had little or no personal contact at all with the people and

¹⁷The rabbis’ ability to memorize the Torah—sometimes including both the oral and the written forms—is one of the most striking examples. Two classic studies show that oral traditions could remain very constant: H. Riesefeld, *The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of Form Criticism* (London: Mowbray, 1957); and B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961). See also C. L. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 25–31, for recent NT-related studies and their conclusions.

events about which they wrote.¹⁸ Once we recognize that many of the biblical writers employed or edited preexisting materials (and sometimes, several renditions alongside each other), we must evaluate the roles and motives of these editors. So, for example, if we are aware that Matthew hoped to persuade Jews in his locale not to repeat the mistake of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, we have a better understanding of his constant use of OT quotes and allusions. His message to that particular audience shouts: Jesus is the Messiah, and you must acknowledge him. The books of the Bible are literary pieces, not transcripts or merely scissors-and-paste collections put together naively, haphazardly, or even chronologically.

Cultural Distance

Another challenge of distance that must be considered is the *cultural* distance that separates us from the world of the biblical texts: a world that was basically agrarian, made up of landowners and tenant farmers; machinery that was primitive by our standards; and methods of travel that were slow and wearying. On the pages of the Bible we encounter customs, beliefs, and practices that make little sense to us. Why would people in the ancient world anoint priests and kings, and also sick people, with oil? What is the sandal custom for the redemption and transfer of property mentioned in Ruth 4:6–8? What was the point of the levitical purity laws or the many other seemingly pointless requirements? For example, Lev 19:19 seems to rule out most of the garments we wear today: “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.” What about those polyester and wool blends? And why are tattoos forbidden in Lev 19:28?

In addition, our understanding of ancient customs might be so colored by what we think they mean that we miss their significance. For example, what does “head covering” mean in 1 Cor 11:4–16? Are we to understand this in terms of a hat? It is possible that after reading some translations we may instinctively assume that Paul refers to veils, so we envision the veil that Middle Eastern Muslim women wear today. Yet hats or veils may not be in view at all. We may need to research further to properly understand the subject and its significance. Likewise, a western concern for cleanliness might not help (it might even hinder) our understanding of the Pharisees' practice of ceremonial washing (Mk 7:3–5). We must be cautious in determining the significance of the customs and concepts of the biblical world that are foreign to us. We cannot simply pick up the Bible and read it like a newspaper.

We must not let the grid of our cultural values and priorities inadvertently affect our interpretation and cause us to establish a meaning that may not be in the

¹⁸Luke admits this last category in his introduction to the third Gospel (Lk 1:1–4). There he informs Theophilus that he “carefully investigated everything from the beginning.” In our estimation, the “we” sections in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) indicate that Luke participated with Paul in some of the incidents recorded there. If we adopt the commonly accepted explanation of the origin of the gospels, we must conclude that when writing their Gospels both Luke and Matthew employed several sources. See R. H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) for a sane appraisal of this issue.

text at all.¹⁹ For example, in the West individualism so pervades our thinking that even in the church we encounter interpretations that focus on individuals and never think about testing whether the text may actually have more corporate intentions.²⁰ For instance, some readers conclude that in 1 Cor 3:16–17 Paul's reference to God's temple indicates instructions to individual Christians. Hence they explore how Christians can build proper qualities in their personal lives. They read individualism into the passage despite clear references in the context that Paul is referring to the corporate Body of Christ as a temple in which God's Spirit dwells. Individual Christians form one temple—on a local or world-wide level—not many individual ones. In the metaphor, Paul cooperates in building the church (3:10). As in this instance, a cultural value has inadvertently produced an interpretation that is not inherent in the text at all.

Geographical Distance

Another challenge to correct Bible interpretation is *geographical* distance. Unless we have had the opportunity to visit the places mentioned in the Bible, we lack an element that would aid our understanding of certain events. Of course, even if we could visit all the accessible sites (and many Christians have), few of them retain the look (and none the culture) they had in biblical times. In other words, we have difficulty picturing why the NT speaks of people going “up” to Jerusalem from Caesarea (Acts 21:12) or “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho (Lk 10:30) unless we know the differences in elevation. Perhaps less trivial, though in many parts of the world we dig graves “down” into the earth, in Palestine graves were often dug into limestone outcroppings (or existing caves were used and were sealed with a stone). And the phrase, “he was gathered to his people/fathers” (Gen 49:29, 33; 2 Kgs 22:20), may have originated from the practice of collecting the bones of the deceased after the flesh had decomposed and putting them in a location with those of the ancestors.

Distance of Language

The task of biblical interpretation is further challenged with the distance of a *language* gap between the biblical world and our own. The writers of the Bible wrote in the languages of their day—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—languages that are inaccessible to most people today. Even those who speak modern Hebrew or Greek have an incomplete knowledge of the ancient languages. We are also relatively

¹⁹For a handy introduction to the cultural values of the U.S. in the latter decades of the twentieth century, see R. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

²⁰For further insight on corporate elements in the Bible see, e.g., E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (London: SPCK, 1955); B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), esp. 51–70; R. Shedd, *Man in Community* (London: Epworth, 1958); H. W. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964); and W. W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

unfamiliar with the literary conventions of the ancient authors. We depend upon trained biblical scholars to translate the biblical languages and their literary devices into our native tongues, but their work is necessarily interpretive. Note, for example, the difference in translations of 1 Cor 7:1 in a variety of versions. The NIV renders the final clause, "It is good for a man not to marry." Compare this with the KJV/RSV, "It is good (or well) for a man not to touch a woman"; Phillips, "It is a good principle for a man to have no physical contact with women"; and NEB, "it is a good thing for a man to have nothing to do with women." Finally, in a footnote the NIV suggests what is probably the most likely meaning: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." Since these versions diverge so markedly, how are we to understand what Paul really meant? The distances between the various biblical worlds and our own require objective historical study if we are to understand those worlds and what people wrote in the Bible.

Eternal Relevance—The Divine Factor

Though the Bible originates through human agents, in the most human circumstances of life, it is first and foremost God's word to his people; it has an "eternal relevance."²¹ While we have demonstrated the humanness of the Bible and have emphasized that it must be treated in many ways like other books, this does not diminish in any way its quality as a divine book. We assert that critical methods of interpretation alone will never do complete justice to Scripture. The Bible is not a divine book in the sense that God dictated a series of propositions out of heaven for people simply to receive intact and obey. Historically, Christians affirm that God inspired human authors to compose the Scriptures as a means to convey his truth, albeit through the matrix of human circumstances and events and through diverse kinds of literature. Historical and rational methods of interpretation have a proper place in unfolding this human dimension; however, they can take us only so far in the interpretive process.

No doubt the mere mention of historical and rational methods of interpretation raises questions in the minds of many sincere Christians. They may feel with some justification that the scholars and their historical-critical methods have done great damage to a high view of the Bible and to the faith of countless people. They may view scholarship as a subtle threat or even as a hostile enemy. At best, they perceive the work of such higher critics as largely irrelevant to the faith of believers and the mission of the Church in the world. No doubt many academics contribute to this perception, for they do their work with no sense of responsibility to the faithful who believe that the Bible is God's Word. Some even make it their mission to dispel religious myths and to show that the Bible is merely a human book that records the religious beliefs and aspirations of a disparate array of ancient Jewish and Christian peoples.

²¹G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 19.

However, the fact that some scholars employ critical methods in what many Christians perceive as destructive ways should not drive us to adopt extreme biases against such methods. The culprit (if there is one) is not historical or rational methods; rather, it is the *presuppositions* of those who use them. Believers, we assert, must not ignore the insights that accurate and precise critical methods bring, for Christians are committed to the truth. Biases that distort meaning have no place in our work. Admittedly, some scholars have biases that do not allow for supernatural occurrences. They adopt commitments to rationalism and naturalism that make no allowance for a God who interacts with his creation and with his people. But believers face a danger of going to the opposite extreme and refusing to acknowledge any scholarly achievements. We should welcome valid historical and rational methods when they reduce the chances for unwarranted biases. Believers can benefit from the results of scholars' work, but their faith does not depend upon that work.²²

As thoughtful Christian interpreters we want to approach exegesis differently than do scholars whose allegiances reside only within the realm of the academic. The academic study of religion has its own agenda: to employ historical and literary critical methods appropriate to the study of ancient texts in order to understand the biblical text. Coupled with that comes the assumption (for many) that, apart from the value believing Christians assign to them, biblical texts must be treated the same as any ancient texts. This may well lead the scholar to call into question the historical reliability of biblical statements concerning OT figures and events or Jesus and NT events. Many of the concerns of confessing Christians who read and study the Bible simply do not fit that academic agenda. This does not mean that secular scholars work more objectively than Christians who are hopelessly biased in their interpretation; it simply means the former do their work on different terms.

When the methods of scholars in the academy uncover what is true, believers are committed to welcome and incorporate these findings into their own interpretations.²³ Their other conjectures and conclusions we deem unacceptable, for interpretation must go beyond simply accounting for historical and literary dimensions of the text; it must seek the meaning of the text and what God says through it to his people. Though we never will condone believing what is untrue, we refuse to accept that rationalistic scholarship alone can determine truth in the Bible.

²²Of course, if in its pursuit of truth scholars were to prove Christianity false, then the faith would be at stake. For example, if in some Palestinian tomb archaeologists were to discover what could be conclusively shown to be Jesus' bones, then the Christian faith would be pointless (as Paul argues in 1 Cor 15:17-19). Faith in a lie is not faith but incredulity and stupidity.

²³Admittedly, a key question arises: how do we determine what is true? Surely a scholarly consensus contributes to assurances that results are true or correct. When accepted historical or literary methods display results that honest and thoughtful scholars acknowledge, we can have confidence that they are true. But we must remain aware of the influence of presuppositions (discussed more fully later). In other words, when some scholars say that the miracles attributed to Elijah in 1 Kgs 17-18 can only be myths or legends, we must protest; or when form critics conclude that Jesus could never have said the words that Matthew attributes to his lips in 28:19-20, because they reflect the Church's later concerns and thus could only have been formulated in subsequent decades. Given our presuppositions, genuine history can include miracles. Genuine prophecy of future events can occur. But to others with rationalistic commitments, miracles cannot be accorded the status of true events.

The Goal of Hermeneutics

We would be misguided if we limited hermeneutics to the factors and issues that concern our understanding of the ancient text, for, except perhaps in the religion departments in some academic institutions, people do not usually seek to understand the Bible as a mere intellectual exercise. Certainly, most people will agree that the biblical authors never intended their writings to be objects of study. Nor do historians who aspire to understand the causes or the results of the ancient Punic Wars attempt to apply what they discover to their personal lives.²⁴ However, Christian believers study the Bible precisely because they believe it does have something to say to their lives. Indeed, we intend to argue that one cannot thoroughly understand the Bible's message simply through the exercise of historical and grammatical methods that disclose the original meaning of a text. We insist that the goal of hermeneutics must include detecting how the Scriptures can impact readers today. This means that true interpretation of the Bible can never be merely an exercise in ancient history. We can't really understand what a text meant without sensing something of its impact on our lives. Indeed, to truly understand what a text meant to its original recipients requires that we apprehend something of that original impact ourselves.

At the same time, if we admit that "applying" the Bible is a primary reason people read or study it, then we must answer a crucial question: how do we know *what* to apply and how do we apply it? In other words, if Christians believe that the Bible is God's Word to all people (our discussion of this presupposition will be presented later), then to say to ourselves or those we teach, "The Bible says . . ." carries the implication that this is what God says. And if the Almighty God of the universe said it, we must believe it and do it or reject his will to our own peril. This is no inconsequential matter. It becomes absolutely critical to understand as well as we possibly can what God means by what he says in the Bible. We must understand correctly so we can act correctly. There is no benefit to following—even with great and earnest sincerity—a mistaken point of view.

Because proper hermeneutics helps us understand God's will, it is crucial to faithful application. Satan tried to convince Jesus to misapply Scriptures in one of the temptations (Lk 4:9–12). Quoting from Psa 91:11–12, he urged Jesus to apply the Scriptures literally and throw himself down from the Temple mount with the assurance that God's Word promised divine protection. In response, Jesus accused Satan of bad hermeneutics. Jesus showed that Satan did not understand the full context of God's promise but needed to understand Psa 91 in light of the principle of not putting God to the test (see Deut 6:16). Neither extraordinary faith nor great sincerity will necessarily save a person who jumps from a tall building to a tragic death. Psalm 91 promised God's protection when unexpected or accidental harm threatened (and even then not *always!*), not in the instance of self-inflicted foolishness. Since Satan misconstrued the intention of Psa 91, the application of a bad interpretation would have had unfortunate—even deadly—results. Thus, since we desire to obey his will, we need to understand how to interpret the Scriptures, which reveal his will, correctly.

²⁴Of course, later strategists may indeed study the tactics of previous military generals and apply useful principles of warfare.

Conclusion

Hermeneutics is essential for a valid interpretation of the Bible. Instead of piously insisting that we will simply allow God to speak to us from his word, we contend that to insure we hear God's voice rather than our culture's voice or our own biases, we need to interpret the Scriptures in a systematic and careful fashion. We need to practice proper hermeneutics. Why?

1. *To discern God's message.* If we are to understand God's truth for ourselves (and to teach or preach it to others), we must discover precisely what God intended to communicate. A careful system of hermeneutics provides the means for the interpreter to arrive at the text's intention, to understand what God intended to communicate. Some conservative Christians abuse the Bible by their "proof-texting." They use the Bible like a telephone book of texts to be cited by chapter and verse to prove their viewpoint. This can lead to many distortions that could be avoided through the use of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics safeguards the Scriptures against misuse by people who, deliberately or not, distort the Bible for their own ends. Proper hermeneutics provides the conceptual framework for interpreting correctly by means of accurate exegesis.²⁵ Exegesis puts into practice one's theory of interpretation. Thus good hermeneutics will generate good exegetical methods.

2. *To avoid or dispel misconceptions or erroneous perspectives and conclusions about the Bible.* A general practice of good hermeneutics theoretically would reduce divisions among Christians, though given human finitude and sinfulness in addition to the varying temperaments and cultural values of people, it would be unrealistic to think all division could be eliminated. Ideally, correct interpretation would undermine erroneous teachings that people use to support aberrant behavior. One reads all too often in our newspapers of sincere and well-meaning parents who withhold medical intervention for their children because with the best of motives they believe they should trust God for healing. Though we do not deny God's ability to heal today nor his invitation to pray for what we need, we believe that a correct interpretation of the relevant biblical texts mandates prayer for healing *and* medical intervention. God can use a variety of means to effect healing.

3. *To be able to apply the Bible's message to our lives.* God has chosen to reveal his truth through the medium of written language, and this message is both univocal and analogical. As Carnell puts it, "terms may be used in one of three ways: with but one meaning (univocally), with different meanings (equivocally), and with a proportional meaning—partly the same, partly different (analogically)."²⁶ In other words, in places the Bible speaks to us univocally. That is, though its message was written to ancients, many features remain the same—human existence, the realities

²⁵From the Greek word *exēgeomai*, exegesis means to "lead out" the meaning of a text or passage. Here we agree with G. R. Osborne (*The Hermeneutical Spiral* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991]) who says, "hermeneutics is the overall term, while exegesis and 'contextualization' (the crosscultural communication of a text's significance for today) are the two aspects of that larger task" (6).

²⁶E. J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 144. Univocal meaning is single, having only one sense. We learn by analogy when we make inferences from what we learn or know in one sphere and apply it to another sphere.

of angels, demons, God, and Jesus as God's Son, to name a few. As Paul notes concerning truth in the Scriptures, certain factual affirmations about past events always remain true (1 Cor 15:3–5). These statements are univocal, having the same meaning for Paul as for us, though we may apply that single meaning in a variety of ways.

At the same time the Bible conveys truth to us analogically in its didactic sections, poetry, apocalypses, and narratives though they were uttered or written to people long ago. We learn by analogy when we discover that truth in the Bible applies to life and situations in the modern world. Jesus told his followers, "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14). Since people in Bible times and people today both have an understanding of how a light functions to give light to everyone in the house (whether by means of candles, lamps, torches, or electric or battery-operated lights), we understand the analogy. We learn that Jesus wants his followers to "brighten up" their world, which Jesus elaborates to mean, among other things, doing good deeds (5:16).

Today we can only read about God's actions and those of his people in the past, but because there exist parallels and commonalities between the worlds of the ancients and ours, we can comprehend the analogies and learn from them. Our task is more difficult in places where an author or speaker does not clearly spell out the lesson to be learned or the nature of the analogy. For example, what precisely should we learn from the story of Joseph's life and his exploits in Egypt? Or from the inspiring narratives about David's friendship with Jonathan? What are the points of analogy between Israel's circumstances and ours? What does God expect us to learn from psalms written by an ancient king to express his frustrations or joys in life? The basic goal of this book is to help readers discover God's message to Christians today from the teachings and stories "back then."²⁷

²⁷Indeed, Paul informs his Roman readers, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4).

CHAPTER TWO

The History of Interpretation

As will soon become apparent, we believe one must interpret Bible passages in their original historical context—a view that descends from a long line of intellectual ancestors, both Jewish and Christian, who have sought to interpret the Bible properly. A brief survey of the history of Bible interpretation is beneficial in several ways. First, it introduces key issues that are pertinent to Bible interpretation, which, in turn, prepares the student to understand the approach to these issues that we present.

Second, it sensitizes readers to the opportunities and pitfalls involved in trying to contextualize Bible teachings in the present. A critical assessment of the major interpretive methods practiced throughout history challenges readers to develop a personal approach to Bible interpretation that maximizes the opportunities and minimizes the pitfalls. Finally, a knowledge of the history of interpretation cultivates an attitude of humility toward the interpretive process. Certainly we want to avoid the methods that history has judged as mistaken or faulty. At the same time, the history illustrates how complex the process is and how inappropriate is arrogance in the pursuit of it.¹

Jewish Interpretation

The Bible's first interpreters were those who first possessed its writings—ancient Israelites who studied and edited what later became the Hebrew Scriptures.

¹With a few exceptions, our survey limits itself to the history of interpretation by Western Christianity or, after the Reformation, primarily to Protestant interpretation.